You're Goin A Go Where You Look

by Rosestem

Summary

After he finds out about Jack's death, Ennis spends six months in a whiskey bottle. Then he gets a message from Jack in a dream, and Ennis's life starts changing. He has a hard time keeping up sometimes.
A Surprise

CHAPTER 1 – A Surprise

Alma Jr. P.O.V.

April 21, 1984

I’m driving back to Riverton from my daddy’s trailer in Signal, and I’m singing along to “We’ve Got Tonight” on the radio.

I can’t carry a tune, I know that, but I’m just so happy. I drove out there to invite Daddy to my wedding, not hoping for much. But he said yes, he would come – he’d quit his job if he had to – and he even asked if my fiancé Curt loves me! It was charming, really, but his eyes were sadder than I’ve ever seen them.

And Daddy agreed to walk me down the aisle, didn’t even take him a second to say yes. He said, “I’d be honored darlin. Not Monroe?”

And I made a big eyeroll and said, “He’s not my daddy!” Then I noticed that had put a little smile on his face, more like a twitch of his lips and a brightening in his eyes. He asked what he should wear. I told him Curt’s daddy is renting a black suit from Lomax’s, not a tux, but he can wear anything he wants. “I mean that,” I said. What do I care if he shows up in jeans and an old shirt? As long as he’s there.

Daddy looked older – years older, I thought, but I hadn’t seen him in quite a while. He looked like he’d lost weight too, his chest caved in more than usual, and where did the crows’ feet and the lines around his mouth come from? And the gray in his hair? I can still see the Clint Eastwood or Robert Redford in him, I just wish he’d take better care of himself.

Of course I didn’t say anything about the months since I’ve seen him. Daddy has his own ways of hiding. Anyway, you have to be very careful about asking him anything about himself, and I could tell it was not the time.

When I was leaving, I did hug him and say, “I missed you Daddy,” and he said, barely a mumble, “Me too Darlin,” and mussed my hair.

I decided I’m not going to let him disappear like that again.

Daddy doesn’t say much, but he’s not boring. He’s got all kinds of stories in his head, and once in a while he’ll let you in on one of them if you’re quiet enough to listen. He can be really funny, even though Francine doesn’t get him at all and I know my mama didn’t either. He’s like a gem hiding under a rock that most people don’t bother to lift up and look at.

For a while after the divorce, me and Francine actually spent more time with Daddy than when they were married. When he settled down after the Thanksgiving fiasco – he’d hurt Ma and made them realize they could never be friends, as she told it – he had us over to his cabin for one weekend a month. We would ride his horses, go to movies and cook together from the Joy of Cooking because he didn’t care what kind of mess we made in his kitchen, and anyway, we usually cleaned up and set him up with leftovers for a week. At night sometimes, even if it was cold out, we would make popcorn and sit behind his house and watch the sun set over the mountains to the west, with the wind the only sound. I loved those times; Francie couldn’t stand the quiet and would
go back inside to watch TV. That’s when he might tell a story or two – maybe a ghost story or something about him and his brother’s escapades – in his low rumbly voice.

I can see why Mama and Daddy didn’t make it. He hated living in town; she hated that he didn’t make more money. He had a temper; she was more passive-aggressive. He took us places but he never wanted to go anywhere with her. Monroe and Mama never have the loud fights, the slamming around or the creepy quiet my parents had. Now, when Mama goes into a rage or a sulk, Monroe makes the effort to calm her down, or waits it out.

And he did offer to cater the wedding. I thought that was sweet, and I said “yes” and thanked him.

But then Mama tried to ruin the moment by saying that Monroe should be the one to walk me up the aisle and give me away. I saw Monroe trying to signal her with a little zip-mouth motion. When I said I wanted Daddy to do it, Mama started arguing something about Monroe putting a roof over our heads. But he intervened with, “Please, Alma, let her be.” And then Mama came back with: “Well, your daddy probably won’t show up anyways.” Zing. 

Oh yes he will.

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So I walk into Curt’s Mom’s kitchen and I can’t help blurting out, “Daddy’s coming!”

Curt is at the table drinking beer, his ma at the counter cutting apples for pie, and the kitchen smells like beef stew. She’s a great cook.

Curt gives me a big smile. “I finally get to meet the man!” he says and comes over to give me a hug. He’s big and good-looking, four years older than me. He works in the oil fields up near Gillette – 14 days on, seven days off, and when he’s home he treats me like a queen.

“You haven’t met the daddy yet either?” his ma, Ellen asks. “Why don’t we have him over here for dinner so me and Gill can meet him too?”

I have to think for a second. I’m about to say, “I dunno, he’s a real loner,” but I change my mind. “I’ll see if I can’t talk him into it.”

Ellen says next Sunday works for them. But how am I going to convince him? I was so happy to find him at home in his rickety trailer today, home AND sober, but I can’t make any promises about next week.

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The truth is, before today, I’d barely seen him since last September, when he skipped my birthday and went into hibernation. Our weekends together had been slowing down anyway since he moved into the trailer a few years ago, between Francine and me being busy with our own lives and him always getting called into work at one job or the other.

He sent me a birthday card with a $20 bill, not like him at all because he usually was very careful picking out gifts, then he stopped calling or answering his phone. Then his phone was disconnected. No wonder he didn’t know anything about Curt.

Of course I was busy with my job and with Curt, not to mention miffed, and I didn’t make too much of an effort to re-connect with Daddy at first.

Francine said she didn’t miss him and we should just leave him alone, but on Thanksgiving, I got
her to drive to his trailer with me to bring him leftovers that Ma let us take. He opened the door only halfway, bloodshot eyes, words slurring. “Uh, not up for a visit today, huh?” I asked if he was OK and he said he was, just not feeling so well. After he took the food and closed the door, Francine rolled her eyes and said under her breath, “Whiskey’ll do that.”

On Christmas, we got there at 4 p.m. with gifts of cookies and pie we had made, and the new work gloves and workman’s shirts we give him every year, but he wasn’t home, so we left everything in a bag by the door, and we never found out if he got it or not.

On Daddy’s birthday in January, we stopped by and dropped off a card for him with a gift certificate to Corral West and a note to call us. He didn’t, but a few weeks later, he sent Francine a birthday card with $20 stuck in it.

We came by another time to let him know about Francine’s play, but he wasn’t home, so we left a note. He never showed up. I got so worried I drove out to Stoutamire’s ranch one Saturday and nosed around in the barn and the horse pasture, not seeing him or anyone else. I knocked on the door of the house and spoke with Mrs. Stoutamire herself, a nice lady who acted as if my visit was a perfectly normal thing and assured me that Daddy was still alive and showing up for work every day. I asked her to please pass a message along, but still … nothing.

Today, I finally got the timing right – late Saturday afternoon and there he was gluing numbers to his mailbox and not yet drowned in beer or whiskey. I don’t think he’d even had one drink. I’ll try the same time next week.

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Now Curt’s ma is asking me if Daddy ever remarried, and I tell her no, he may not be the marrying kind. She says she doesn’t know where to seat him, and asks if any other relatives on his side are likely to come. I have to explain that his parents died when he was little, and my aunt and uncle won’t be able to come. I’d called Aunt Bridget, but she said my cousin’s baby is due around that time, and Uncle K.E. is temporarily AWOL. Anyway, I haven’t seen any of them since Ma and Daddy split up.

“Hmm, well you need to start thinkin about seatin arrangements an’ a receivin line an’ such,” Ellen says. “I know it can be hard when the parents are divorced. We had the same thing with Caroline’s Jimmy’s parents last year. Maybe your daddy could sit at our table with Gill and me.”

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April 28

The next Saturday afternoon, I buy a rotisserie chicken, a canned ham, potato salad, coleslaw, Pepsi, brownies, celery, carrots, bananas and apples – I’m pretty sure that’s the only produce my daddy will eat – at Monroe’s store and drive my 1978 red Dodge Colt out to his trailer. I find him outside again, this time washing the windows with paper towels and Windex.

He walks over and says, “Hey now,” as I drive up.

I get out and hug him.

“I see you’ve come on hard times,” he says, looking over at the car.

I laugh and he kisses the top of my head.

“Trailer lookin good,” I say.
“Might as well be able to see out the windows, huh?” he says.

He asks what’s in the bags, and I tell him dinner, and he starts with the “You shouldn’t haves,” but I tell him I gotta eat too, so no trouble at all. That shuts him up.

Inside, he helps me put the groceries away, and I put the chicken in the oven. He reheats coffee in a saucepan and pours us each a mug. “Everything OK?” he asks. The inside of the trailer looks a little neater: Kitchen clean, no dishes in the sink. Seeing him up closer, I notice he looks way better than he did last week.

“Just fine daddy,” I say, and I can’t help smiling. “Lookin good in here too.” I don’t mention that the coffee tastes like sludge.

He sits down on the kitchen chair opposite where I’m sitting on his bed, same as last week.

Then he stands up abruptly, walks over and opens his closet door halfway and pulls out the blue sweater I’d left. “I guess you come for this?” he asks, handing it to me.

“No, but I’m glad you have it. Didn’t know where I left it.”

He sits back down and half-smiles. “I guess you don’t need no occasion to come over and see your daddy?”

“Well no, but I do have another invitation,” I say. “I want you to meet Curt and his folks before the big day, and they’re inviting you to dinner.”

First, his eyes cloud over with doubt and then he looks down. Oh God, I’ve gone too far. Don’t let him change his mind about the whole thing. But then he brings his head back up and looks me in the eye. “Mm-hmm, and when was you thinkin this to take place?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Whoa now, the weddin’s not ’til June, huh?”

“It’s barely a month away!” I say. “Well?”

“You know I’ll do it for you darlin.”

I kiss him on the cheek, happy that he seems to be turning the corner on the funk he’s been in, and proud to be able to share my daddy with my new family. I decide we’ll leave the wedding details until later, just enjoy our time together for the first time in I can’t remember. It’s unseasonably warm out, so we sit outside in folding chairs to eat our little picnic, facing west.

“Can you tell me a story, Daddy?” I ask after we’ve finished up and put our plates on the grass.

And he spins me a ridiculous yarn about the ghosts of cows who died in a wicked blizzard and then haunted the ranch owners for generations – lots of gory details, dragged out – fires and ranch accidents and bad years – until a great-grandson falls in love with and marries a girl who looks like a cow, even though everyone in town says she was the ugliest thing they’ve ever seen. But in his eyes she’s gorgeous they have the most beautiful children anyone has ever seen, and the ghosts are gone, and they all live happily ever after.

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April 29
I have to suck in my breath the next day when Curt’s ma answers the doorbell and walks Daddy into the kitchen. He’s fresh shaven, hair clean, combed and slicked back, wearing what looks like a brand new shirt with a bolo tie and newer jeans. He looks good.

I introduce him to Curt and his daddy Gill.

“I know you must be hopin Junior’s marryin into good folks, and I can tell you she is,” Gill says. “We just love her ta pieces.”

“She’s a good girl,” Daddy says, his mouth turning up in a little smile, and he looks at me and winks.

Next, Francine’s knocking at the door and I let her in and she runs over to Daddy for a hug. “Daddy!” she says, always dramatic. “Darlin!” he says, and swoops her up. It’s the first time he’s seen her in months, and Daddy’s always more huggy with her, because that’s how she is.

“Daddy, come see my new car!” she says. She just bought herself a cobalt blue Colt – 1977 – with money from her part-time job at Monroe’s store. Later, when I overhear her and Daddy making plans to ride horses next Sunday, and she asks him if he has any shirts that need buttons sewn back on, I realize that what I’ve been hoping for is for real: He’s coming back to life. And maybe Francie is finally growing up a little.

The evening goes well. Daddy drinks two beers – not that I’m counting, mind you – and doesn’t seem too uncomfortable, talking ranch and horse and truck and hay baler stuff with Gill, who’s a mechanic at a farm equipment dealership and grew up on a ranch himself.

I’d asked Ellen not to bring up the receiving line and seating arrangements tonight, because I want Daddy to get to some kind of comfort level with Curt’s family before being bombarded with requests. I want to talk to him about all that when it’s just him and me.

Daddy stays until just after dessert and coffee, and then excuses himself, saying he’s got an early day ahead. It’s no lie, I know. He wakes up before dawn every day. I walk out with him and ask if we can get together during the week – I’ll drive to Signal after my shift one night – and he says how about if he takes me out for a drink instead, and we settle on Tuesday night. He’ll pick me up after work.

In the kitchen, after Francine leaves and while Curt and Gill are watching a baseball game in the front room, Ellen and I get to talking.

“Good lookin, nice man like that, an’ he never remarried? He seein anyone?” Ellen prods me.

“Not anymore,” I say. The hot little waitress Cassie who couldn’t quite put a sparkle in Daddy’s eyes is long gone, and I’m sure he hasn’t taken up with anyone else since.

“Then we’ll sit him at our table with us,” Ellen says. “We’ll have Caroline and Jimmy, and the grandparents. I’ll put Julie’s ma at our table too, if she’s not bringin a date,” she adds with a wink, referring to Jeannie “Queenie” Ausman, my maid of honor’s ma, who just got divorced maybe a year ago.

But I know that Queenie is hot to trot, and Daddy would see the set-up for what it is, and I don’t want him feeling any more uncomfortable than he’ll already be. I know how women take to him, with no encouragement at all. She’s surely not his type.

“She’ll probably want to bring someone,” I say.
“Oh sure,” Ellen says. “I’ll find someone else. Maybe one of my aunts.”

I like Curt’s ma. Me and Curt are paying for everything except the food for the wedding, but a little help with planning doesn’t hurt. My ma has not taken the slightest interest, beyond her push to have Monroe walk me down the aisle. I know Ma thinks I’m too young, even though she was 18 when she got married AND never finished high school. I wonder if she doesn’t resent losing a babysitter. Ellen just planned her daughter Caroline’s wedding last year, and she knows a lot about it, and she knows when to lay off too.

We talk for a while longer about flowers and a photographer and a DJ and dancing, and we get some good ideas going. Then we get to the ceremony. We’re going to have traditional vows and Francine is going to sing “O Perfect Love.”

“Your daddy’ll walk you up the aisle, won’t he?” Ellen asks.

“Sure enough,” I say. I can’t help smiling.

“And what about the receivin line? You want to have your ma and Monroe first, then you and Curt, then me and Gill, and your daddy after that?”

Well, she thinks of everything, and everything she thinks of sounds like it’s going to make Daddy cringe.

And then she really nails it: “Are you goin a whirl your daddy around the dance floor for the father/daughter dance while me an’ Curt do the mother/son thing?”

I can’t help snorting a little laugh. “Well, I’ll run that one by him too,” I say, remembering Cassie dragging Daddy up to dance to “Melissa” at Kelley’s Bar, him following along with his shoulders slumped, not even bothering to put his cigarette out first. The sad image gives me another little chuckle in spite of myself.

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**Tuesday, May 1**

I’m finishing up my shift at the Knife’n’Fork when my daddy walks in. The hostess is already off, so I greet him myself.

“Hey Daddy, we’re about to close up, but I can still get you something if you’re hungry,” I say as he gives me a quick one-arm hug and kisses the top of my head.

“How about a cup a coffee now, and when you get off I take you for a drink?” he asks.

I sit him down and bring him a coffee, then finish up with my two other tables.

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He takes me to the Black’n’Blue Eagle, an older guys’ dive bar across from the post office. At least it’s quiet, and I bet that’s what he’s thinking too.

“Good news is, Stoutamire give me the day off when I tol’ him what it was for,” he says once our drinks arrive – beer for him, white wine for me.

“That’s great, Daddy!”

He looks down at his beer. “Now I don’t want you to think I’m gettin cold feet or nothin,” he says.
“But Mrs. Stoutamire got me goin with all this stuff what a daddy’s supposed to do when his daughter gets married.”

I’m impressed that he’s already thinking about such things.

“Well, I’m going to mention a few things, and you gotta know you can say no to every one of them, OK Daddy?” I say.

“Mm,” he grumbles.

I tell him the ceremony starts at 4:30 and we’ll meet in the lobby at 4:15. He’ll walk me up the aisle and then sit behind Mama and Monroe and the boys, in his own row, if he’s OK with that.

“Hmm. What else?” he says, and I can see his guard going up, but I keep on.

“You want to bring anyone, like a date?” I have to ask, get it out of the way.

He hesitates. “No, I …”

“That’s OK Daddy.” I rush on. “We’re going to have pictures and then a receiving line when people walk out of the church to the hall. You don’t have to be in no pictures with Ma.”

His face screws up. “What’s a receivin line?”

“We’re going to line up with all the parents so people can shake our hands and say congratulations.”

He’s got his face scrunched up. “All formal like that?”

“That’s what they had at Curt’s sister’s wedding last year and it was real nice,” I tell him. “Like I said, you don’t have to do it, but I’d sure be proud for people to see my daddy up there.”

He purses his lips.

“You put me last in that line, huh,” he says. “Maybe people be sick a shakin’ hands by the time they get to me.”

Curt’s ma is brilliant.

“One more thing, Daddy.” This is the tough one. “Me and Curt get the first dance. Then it’s the father/daughter, mother/son dance, then the opposite parents cut in, so it’s like a half a song of me and you dancing together. What do you think?”

A shy smile lights his face, and he cocks his head toward me, eyebrow up. “You seen me dancin, Junior? Whadda you think, huh?”

“We’ll make it a nice slow one,” I say. “We’ll practice. I’d be proud to dance with you.”

“Hmm,” he grunts. “I guess I cain’t say no to my little girl.”

He orders another beer and glass of wine.

“So you an’ Curt, you stayin in Riverton?” he asks.

“I hope so,” I say. “We’re going to rent near his parents’ and try and save for a house.”
“I’ll help you out,” he says. When I object, saying he doesn’t have to, he says, “Your daddy ain’t in the poorhouse you know.”

I have to change the subject before I say another word about that damn trailer.

“When we get back from the honeymoon, and we’re all moved in, I want to have you over for supper regular, especially when Curt’s away,” I say. “Like every Friday or something.”

“Now Darlin, you don’t need a take care a your old man,” he says, not getting it. “I’m doin just fine.”

“I know, Daddy.” I say. “I want your company.” I’m looking him right in the eye, and I see a flush of pleasure and embarrassment come over his face.

“Well … that’ll be all right, I guess.”

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May 30

Wednesday before the wedding, my ma and I are packing candy almonds into little mesh bags for party favors. I’m sitting on the floor and she’s on the couch and everything is piled on the coffee table.

I turn on the TV, and it’s Phil Donahue. The topic is gay and bisexual men who married and had kids and then realized it wasn’t working out and they wanted something else. It’s interesting enough – me and Julie know some gay guys from school, and one of them had a girlfriend for a long time before he switched. Phil has a gay man, his ex-wife, a psychologist and someone from an organization for gay people’s rights. I never knew there was something like that.

Suddenly, I notice my ma has stopped counting almonds, and I hear her sniffing. When I look over, she’s holding her face and sobbing quietly, shoulders shaking.

I ask her if she’s OK, and she nods but doesn’t stop crying, and she’s wiping her nose with her hand, so I get the Kleenex from the side table and sit next to her on the couch.

I put my arm around her. “Ma? Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?” I ask.

She wipes her nose, gets ahold of herself and says, “It’s nothing,” shaking her head. She gets up quickly and whooshes into the kitchen to wash her hands and splash water on her face, and then she’s back to the almonds. I sit back down.

The psychologist is saying it’s not a disease, and people can’t help being the way they are, and they don’t choose to be homosexual any more than straight people choose to be straight. The ex-wife says she doesn’t blame her gay ex-husband anymore, but she was devastated when he left her for a man. Phil Donahue says something like “We need a more tolerant society, so people aren’t forced into living a lie,” and that sets Ma off again, worse than before.

And then it dawns on me. This is about Daddy. Her and Daddy. Oh my God. Nothing I had ever put together before, but in just a few seconds, it’s all adding up in my head.

I sit down next to her again. “Please Ma,” I say. “This is about Daddy, isn’t it?”

She looks kind of horrified, and then kind of like she’s feeling sorry for me, and she chokes out, “Let’s watch the rest, then talk.”
But there’s only a few minutes of the show left, and then I turn off the TV and get her into the kitchen for a cup of tea. Then she tells me, making me swear never to tell anyone and especially never to talk to my daddy about it. “It would kill him if he found out that you know.” I tell her my word is good, and it is.

“Your daddy fell in love with a man before we ever got married,” she says. “An’ it never stopped. An’ he couldn’t be the kind a husband I wanted, or even the kind he wanted to be. An’ he couldn’t change, I’m seein that now. That’s why we couldn’t stay together. It wasn’t about him always workin shitty jobs, an’ it sure wasn’t about Monroe.”

I ask her if the man was Jack Twist, and she nods.

“I forgot you met him that one time,” she says. “You never forgot that, did you?”

I was only about 10 or 11, but it was such a weird thing, this guy from Texas with big blue eyes and the biggest smile I ever saw, showing up in my Daddy’s driveway, them hugging and exchanging a few words, and then him driving away. Me and Francie tried to get Daddy to tell us more about this Jack Twist, but he’d only say he was an old friend stoppin by to say “Hi” on the way back from his folks’ place. Daddy knew a few people in town to tip his hat to, but I’ve never seen him hug anyone not in our family.

“I thought I was all cried out,” my ma is saying. “But watchin that Phil Donahue, it all came back. We were both so miserable. Your daddy was this sweet innocent boy when I met him, didn’t say much of course, an’ then Jack Twist came back into his life, an’ your daddy seemed to change. I thought he was goin against nature, an’ he was a sinner, an’ everything was his fault or there was something wrong with me. But now, listenin to them on the TV, I’m comin to think that maybe marryin me was against your father’s nature, an’ the whole thing was doomed, an’ it wasn’t even his fault. We were both in so much pain, an’ we both tried so hard to make it what it wasn’t.”

Wow.

“Daddy told you about all that?” I ask.

And she says, “Of course not. Sweetie! You know your daddy. No, I just knew. An’ I brought it up the one time – you remember that Thanksgiving he stormed out? I knew for a long time before that.”

Of course I remember that Thanksgiving.

“Do you regret everything?” I ask. “Even me and Francine?”

“Oh no!” She grabs me in a hug. “We both wanted you girls an’ I’ll speak for your Daddy too an’ say you’re the one thing we’re not sorry for.”

“I bet you both did the best you could,” I say, and I rub her back. Never thought I’d be comforting my ma. “You know, Francie and me turned out just fine, even if you and Daddy didn’t make it.”

She smiles. “You’re good girls. You know he loves you?”

“Yeah, Mama.”

“An’ I do too, an’ yeah, we did try to do the best we could.”

“I know, Mama,” I say. We hug, and I don’t ask her any more questions. I wonder if Daddy wanted to make a life with Jack Twist after the divorce. I figure Jack must be married himself and have his
own life in Texas. And of course men can’t do that anyways, even if Julie’s friends Todd and Brian are trying to. How sad for Daddy. He sure didn’t fit with that waitress.

My ma makes me promise again not to tell anyone about Daddy, not even Francine, and never to bring it up with him. I ask her if Monroe knows, and she says, “Of course.”

Later I remember that sometimes, when Daddy was late picking us up or dropping us off and Ma would bitch about it, Monroe would say, “Alma, let it be. If you come between the girls and their daddy, you’ll live to regret it.”

Sounds like Ma is coming to terms now with how it was with Daddy, and she won’t raise a scene at the wedding. Francie and me are old enough that we can make up our own minds – not that I’ll tell her, her with her big mouth.

I’m still my Daddy’s girl and I would never do anything to hurt him. I think I love him now more than ever. Maybe the sadness that comes on him is because he can’t be with the one he loves. But why not, if they’re careful? And I wonder, should I tell Curt about Daddy before or after the wedding?
The Dream

Ennis P.O.V.

Saturday, April 21

Junior is long gone, so I slink back into the trailer and put her sweater away in the closet. I let the door open a little more and look at my memorial to Jack – those damn shirts and a postcard of Brokeback.

“Yeah, Daddy, he loves me,” Junior’d said, eyes dreamy with it. I can just picture her swipin one a Curt’s stinky shirts when he goes off on one of his roughneckin stints – then lyin in bed holdin it, breathin it, daydreamin.

I’d never a do such a thing, but I can see how Jack might a held onto my shirt, folded it in his own, not even washin it – all full a hope an’ dreams. Now my heart is flutterin like a butterfly, an’ I can feel my eyes stin gin with tears. I’m alone here, so I don’t need to pretend it’s smoke or some foolishness.

Then I say it, out loud. “Jack, I swear,” even though I don’t hardly know what I’m swearin to. We never made no promises to each other.

Nearly a year since I last seen him, an’ I wish so bad things had gone better. I come to know a lot since then. Like what I shoulda said. “Jack, don’t go quittin on me. I’m nothin without you. Nowhere. Hell, you’re the only reason I’ve hung on to this shitty life a mine as long as I have. You’re all I got. C’mon, Jack.”

I would a told him he was more than some high-altitude fuck to me, a lot more. An’ all the awful words I did say, not thinkin straight, an’ Jack just sayin like he always did, “It’s all right. It’s all right. Damn you Ennis.”

An’ then we tried to leave things the way we usually do, only this time it was me tryin a catch him in a kiss, me holdin the hug longest. He left it at, “You’ll let me know about August.”

Well, you cain’t go back an’ fix things, an’ no point even thinkin about it. I know two ways not to think: work your ass off an’ drink whiskey.

I close the closet door an’ that bottle a Old Rose I bought Thursday is callin out to me from the high cupboard. When Junior pulled up, I’d just gotten up from a few hours a sleep after a 19-hour shift pullin calves – a few breaches – an’ I was goin a get somethin to eat an’ start in on the whiskey after I put the damn numbers on the mailbox. Old ones kept fallin off.

It’s strange, but somethin stops me from reachin up for that bottle, almost like I’m goin a turn around an’ bump into someone. It creeps me out, like there’s a ghost in here or somethin. An’ I don’t even believe in ghosts.

I grab a beer outta the fridge an’ step outside the trailer an’ sit at the picnic table. It’s almost 6 an’ the night chill is settin in, the way I like it. I’m hungry, but I sit an’ watch until the sun slides over the mountains. I’m just goin a let the thoughts come for once.

What keeps comin back to me is, why Jack, why not me? Jack woulda been so much better suited to be the survivor, if there had to be one. Shit, wasn’t he already pert near over this thing between us, startin to get on with his own life – fuckin around with Mexicans, an’ that ranch foreman an’
all? Only I cain’t help thinkin that’s just bullshit, just me tryin a blame him some more for something that’s my own damn fault. And there’s that space again: What I know and what I try an’ believe.

Thing is, shouldas and couldas and what-ifs are so fuckin useless, like pouring whiskey down your throat. How many times have I taken that .38 from the drawer, wantin to finish the job that whiskey an’ cigarettes’ll take years to do? And it’s all about the shouldas and wouldas.

Tonight, the idea of offin myself scares the crap outta me. What, an’ let Monroe walk Junior up the aisle?

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Sept. 24, 1983– Lightning Flat

Jack’s folks knew, no doubt. His ma, she must be an angel she was so nice, makin me wonder if her take on the Bible is different from the fire’n’brimstone folks always goin on about abominations.

The old man, well that’s another story. Makes me sick to think Jack had to live with that, an’ he’d still come home ever’ year to help out an’ take the old man’s shit.

I didn’t spit back; I was brought up better’n that, bless my ma. I looked the old bastard square in the eye. Then he had to bring up that ranch bastard – of course it wasn’t someone’s wife, what kinda fool was I to believe that anyways? Something about that wife sounded off as soon as Jack said it, right after I told him about Cassie.

Jesus, I can hardly remember a time me an’ Jack had a regular conversation, instead a sayin one thing an’ meanin another. “I miss you so much I can hardly stand it”? What foolishness, but I knew goddamn well what he was sayin an’ I pretended not to hear it, ‘cause then I’d have to say the same thing back, an’ I wouldn’t do that.

The old man wouldn’t give me the ashes, but Lureen’d already pissed on Jack’s wishes anyways. And maybe they don’t know it, but Jack was a spark or a flame, not some cold dirty ashes. He never got nothin he wanted in his life – partly my fault, I know – so why should he now?

Drivin back home and damn if that Willie Nelson song “You Were Always on my Mind” didn’t come on the radio just after I’d turned off the interstate. I looked over at the passenger seat, an’ there were the shirts. I’d taken ‘em outta the grocery bag. I had to pull over ‘cause the tears were finally comin, a whole day after that call to Lureen. My throat clamped up, my eyes burned, tears squirted right outta my eyes and my whole body hurt. I don’t remember cryin like that since eighth grade when the principal an’ a sheriff’s deputy come knockin on Miss Reindorff’s classroom door lookin for me.

Not just missin’ Jack, I was cryin ‘cause a what I knew now for sure. About me. I didn’t go up into the mountains time after time just for a fuck.

I needed whiskey, an’ I didn’t keep the stuff at home back then, so I stopped at Lonesome Lefty’s Bar in Signal.

I took a seat at the bar and slammed back a few whiskey shots and beer chasers, don’t know how many. When I got up to leave, I lost my footin gettin off the bar stool, an’ pert near fell over I guess. Some asshole further down the bar passed a remark somethin to the effect of, “Would you look how fucked up that guy is?” Well, not too fucked up to land a punch to his left jaw. He threw
one back that got me in the eye before other guys stepped in to break it up. I ended up sleepin’ in my truck ‘cause even I knew I was too shitfaced to drive.

I was supposed to pick up the girls the next morning, celebrate Junior’s birthday, but I sure didn’t want ‘em fussin over the shiner I got. I shoulda called them at least, I know that.

I stopped back at home for a shower and somethin to eat and to hang up them shirts. I couldn’t get away from the feelin that I was goin’ a cry a lot more if I just hung around, so I drove to a roadhouse halfway to Rawlins where I wouldn’t know anyone, and spent most of the afternoon drinkin beer.

Not what I was expectin, but there was a table a three young ladies, loud an’ drunk – kinda weird on a Sunday afternoon, an’ I saw ‘em lookin at me, gigglin. Then one a them, couldn’t a been a day over 25 – tight-ass jeans, short hair like a boy, big sparkly eyes – come up an’ sat next to me at the bar, asked if I came here often, asked me about the black eye. Pretty soon she was drivin me to her place – a trailer not much bigger’n mine with a rundown swing set in the yard an’ jammed up with kids’ toys all over the floor. She was hot like Cassie but with a flat chest. We was goin at it, nearly undressed when I got the notion to ask if she was usin birth control of any kind, an’ she said no, but it wasn’t her time a month to get pregnant. For Christsake.

Well, she was cute enough an’ my dick was still hard even after that, so I brought her down on the bed an’ said, “See here, you like this, don’t you?” an’ pulled down her panties an’ licked her tits an’ worked her slow with my hand. I liked the sounds she made, always liked that. Then I pressed her head down to suck my cock, an’ I closed my eyes an’ thought about bein someplace else altogether, with someone else. She didn’t say a word, did a good enough job of it, an’ made me coffee an’ macaroni and cheese from a box afterwards. Then she said she had to go pick her kids up from her ma’s house. She drove me back to my truck an’ gave me her phone number on a matchbook, sayin somethin like, “I really like you. Let’s go on a real date next time, OK?” I felt awful, fished out a $10 bill “for the gas” – which she took – an’ I headed for home feelin worse’n I had the night before. She really liked me, what horseshit. Hell, I don’t even like me.

On the way back to Signal, the shame set in – a girl barely older than my girls, miserable life an’ I have to add on to it, tryin to prove what to myself? I can still do a woman? I knew that, an’ the thing is I don’t even want it.

I made a few decisions on that drive home. No more bars. No more women. And I was surely not fit for my daughters’ company.

So I worked an’ drank, an’ drank an’ worked. I didn’t miss a day at the ranch. I took on a job at the Feed’n’Seed in Lander to fill in my days off an’ some nights too, but the nights I wasn’t workin’ I just drank myself to sleep. I bought my Old Rose from three different stores so as not to raise suspicions. When I got a Saturday off, I’d start drinkin at noon. I ate out a cans an’ frozen boxes, an’ lost some pounds, down to the last notch of my belt. I unplugged the phone and didn’t pay the bill.

I thought about Jack every day an’ ever night.

Nights when I didn’t pour myself a whiskey, sleep wouldn’t come, even though I was bone-tired. Then dreams would jolt me back awake – sheets wet, or pillow, dependin. The dreams were all Jack Twist, some good times an’ some bad nightmares – my own daddy swingin a tire iron, Jack’s face bloody, body tore up, lyin in a ditch, me wipin away blood with my shirt sleeve.

The girls made an effort to see me, but I kept to myself, not wantin a drag them into my problems. I took the week off in November like I’d planned, thought I might go up on Brokeback an’ bring
Jack’s lighter I’d taken by mistake last time, make a campfire in his honor. But the snow started early an’ I drank instead, musta scared the crap outta the girls when they come over on Thanksgiving. I worked Christmas Day an’ forgot to send ‘em a present.

Child care payments ended in January when Francine turned 18 – just about 10 years an’ I never missed a payment, not a one, even if it came to wearin jean with holes in ‘em, eatin nothin but peanut butter sandwiches, drivin a truck that had no business bein on the road, or bein’ evicted from my last rental house, how I ended up in this ratty old trailer.

I turned 40 the same day Francine turned 18, no Jack to tease me about it ‘cause my birthday was a few months before his. My girls left me a nice card an’ present, an’ I felt bad but I didn’t want ‘em to see me like this – the weight I lost an’ dark circles under my eyes that even Stoutamire mentioned. I just didn’t want ‘em worryin.

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After the sun sets, I go back in an’ grab the whiskey from the cupboard and dump the whole thing down the sink an’ I have to chuckle to myself. There’s a big difference between drinkin to have fun and drinkin to forget about all the fun you ever had. Me an’ Jack, we did have us some fun.

I re-reheat the mornin’s coffee an’ scramble a couple a eggs for dinner an’ make toast to go with it.

Then I take a seat in my recliner, one I bought used when Alma an’ me lived in that little apartment over the Laundromat. I’m thinkin about what it’s goin a be like dealin with her an’ her family an’ a whole churchful of people, but I know I gotta do it for Junior.

That night for the first time, I dream about Jack the way I last seen him, with that godforsaken mustache an’ a bright purple shirt, tight jeans. He’s standin right here in the trailer with his arms crossed.

“Friend, ya gotta get up offa yer pockets,” he says.

I’m sittin on a kitchen chair. “I cain’t do it without you, Bud,” I say.

“Ya couldn’t do it with me neither, Ennis,” he says. “Get outta this fuckin trailer and live your life. C’mon cowboy.” An’ he’s holding his hand out to help me outta the chair …

I wake up drenched in sweat, heart poundin like to have a coronary.

I get up an’ splash water on my face. I know it was a dream, but I cain’t help thinkin about Jack’s words: “Live your life.” Life? What life?

It's true, I got my girls – Junior, quiet like me, tall roan-haired beauty, an’ Francine, a little firecracker about her mama’s height with long honey-colored hair – I love ‘em to pieces an’ I’m the one’s been holding them at a distance. Hell, Junior much as told me she still has time for her old man.

I got my job – work I like an’ still at the same ranch after four years, a fuckin miracle.

I got my family – well, my brother an’ sister got their own lives an’ don’t live anywhere nearby. Still, they’re blood, all I got left.

Don’t have friends, no one I’d want to go out for a beer with. I mean, I’ll go if guys from the ranch are goin, but I’m not much for talkin’, so most people take me for stupid or unfriendly. An’ then I’ll go an’ say the wrong thing, an’ then they’ll know it – I am stupid. I got no fuckin idea how to
be a friend.

Strictly speakin, Jack was the only friend I ever had an’ so much more’n that too. Jack got me talkin an’ he listened to what I had to say. He’d talk my ear off an’ that never bothered me. But Jack was Jack. I never met anyone else like him, never will.

I open the closet door again, take the hanger off the hook and hold the shirts to me. I close my eyes an’ pretty soon I’m rockin back and forth.

“Jack I swear,” I say again. I’ll live my life. I will. Things is goin a be different, Jack. An’ I can almost hear him whisperin, “It’s all right. It’s all right.”

I’ll do whatever Junior needs me to do for the wedding. I’ll see if I cain’t spend some more time with Francine, if she wants to. Stop drinkin whiskey. Stop hidin. Be a daddy, if they still want one. Get ahold a my brother an’ sister, see how they’re doin like I should a done at Christmas.

Jack won’t never come back, ever, but if I’m goin a stick around, there’s some broken things I can try an’ fix.

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Friday, June 1

The day before Junior’s wedding, and I haven’t tasted whiskey in a month. My insides are calmer. Whenever I think a Jack, I let the memories come, don’t always feel like I gotta drown ‘em.

I can think about the good times, put those thoughts in my head. Like, wasn’t Jack the best-lookin son of a bitch I ever laid eyes on? Eyes prettier than any girl I ever seen? Best ass ever? See, I can have those thoughts an’ not drop dead. I can even think, I done him wrong an’ if there’s a god out there somewhere, please forgive me. Not for fallin for a man, but for not treatin him right. An’ I don’t even know where all this is comin from after all them months with the whiskey.

Anyways, supper with the new in-laws, ridin with Francine, havin Junior and Curt over to the trailer for a barbecue – all this come to pass, an’ I lived through it. I even put a few pounds back on, won’t need to drill a new hole in my belt.

Jack still comes into my dreams – mostly the good ones where I pull him down into the dirt near the campfire and rip his shirt off, buttons flyin, or we sit together watchin the sun set over a lake, or roll around in a meadow a wild flowers, or cook eggs an’ potatoes for breakfast.

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Today I’m out with Stoutamire pickin up irrigation supplies. The calves have all dropped an’ it’s time to get on with the summer. In the truck on the way back, the old man starts in with a speech I’ve heard I don’t know how many times before.

“Del Mar, you been a good worker, best damn wrangler I ever had,” he says. “You know the whole operation, an’ you’re always ready to pitch in.” Blah blah blah. All of a sudden I feel a hammer poundin my temples, an’ my head is explodin.

“You’re a good role model, you know, reliable, an’ you got patience dealin with the younger guys …”

Here we go again, I’m thinkin, an’ he has to tell me the day before my little girl is getting married. I’m not really listenin to him, watchin the sky – looks like the rain’s goin a hold off long enough
for Junior to say her vows anyways. I’m thinkin what, he’s gotta let go of a few guys, he’s sellin off the stock, bein run off by the son-of-a-bitch bankers, losin the ranch? Him an’ how many other ranchers? How am I goin a find another job? Whatever. Least I have that fuck-you money I been savin for the truck …

And he’s goin on and on “… you know I never filled the foreman’s job after Kemnitz dropped dead last year …” – shit, I could finish his sentences for him, save him some breath.

“… An’ you been real steady for the last year or so, workin too hard if anything. Dave’s graduatin in a few weeks and he’s movin to Denver for a job, not comin back here, an’ he says he never will. I’m not gettin any younger. I need to slow down a bit …” Christ, why all the talk? Would he just spit it out?

But then he’s changin’ direction an my whole world is shiftin. “So I wanna set you up as foreman in charge of ranch operations – hirin, schedulin, plannin. Everything except the bookkeepin – Jannelle will still do that. Most a the work you could do in your sleep, but I want you to take some classes at U-W Extension, learn more about new ways a doin things, like the Land Management wants. So what do you say, Del Mar?”

Say? I’m wonderin if I heard him right. I never even got as far as lead ranch hand. Stoutamire hired me as to train the horses, but of course I work with the stock an’ everything else. Stiv Gunderson is the lead hand, has been since I got here.

“Why not Stiv?” I ask. It’s not that I don’t want the promotion. I’m just wonderin if he overlooked somethin.

“Stiv don’t see the big picture,” the old man says. “Maybe he needs a few more years, or maybe he’ll never see it. You see it. I feel like I could take a month or two off an’ leave you in charge, an’ come back to ever’thin the way it’s supposed to be.”

My mouth must be gapin open now, ‘cause he’s lookin at me odd. A promotion? Foreman? Well, ole Kemnitz was a son of a bitch if I ever met one, an’ I didn’t shed a tear when he died of a heart attack right in the middle a calvin season last year. That’s why the old man had been so steamed about me insistin on takin that week off last May with a few heifers yet to calve, why he said I couldn’t have the week in August, ’cause we’d be a man down … what got Jack so pissed …

The old man is still lookin at me odd.

“Ennis?”

“I mean, a promotion?” I ask.

“Yes, foreman. More responsibility. Big raise in pay. Move onto the ranch.”

Then I’m thinkin, me steppin foot in a classroom after 25 years? Don’t he know that I never made it past freshman year a high school?

“Well?” the old man asks. “You need to think about it?” Of course I don’t.

“I mean, I never graduated high school,” I say. I don’t want a get off on a bad foot, him thinkin I’m what I’m not.

“So what?” he says, an’ slaps me on the back. “Neither did I. Extension classes ain’t like goin to college. You sound like you’re tryin to talk me out of this.”
“No Sir,” I say. “I just …”

Truth is, for all he can be a hardass, the old man is decent and he’s been pretty good to me. I get along good with the hands. The ranch seems to be doin fine – 912 calves this spring, 22 horses between the workin stock an’ the ones we’re raisin’ to sell.

“I gotta spell it out for you, don’t I? You get the old foreman’s cottage, no rent, but Kemnitz had the place pretty run down, so you’ll have some work to do on it. You’ll meet with me an’ Jannelle every Monday morning, startin this comin week.”

Jannelle, she’s his second wife an’ bookkeeper an’ cook an’ supervisor a the bunkhouse. She’s probably 20, 25 years younger’n him. They had a boy together, the one off at college, an’ the old man’s got three or four daughters from the first wife who died, hardly ever come around. I like Jannelle ‘cause she’s always nice to me, calls me “Mr. Del Mar.”

I get to thinkin about old Kemnitz an’ all the other asshole foremen an’ ranch owners I’ve worked for over the years, an’ a few good bosses I’ve had too, an’ I know I can do it. An’ I’m thinkin what it would be like to put some real money in the bank an’ not to have to worry every single fuckin day about my truck breakin down.

“I’ll give it a try, huh?” I say. “Thank you.”

“Now you know this means no takin off anytime you want,” Stoutamire says. “You get every other Saturday afternoon off and the whole day Sunday, at least until you get a new wrangler in place, a week off in June and one in November like usual, an’ another week when you can fit it in. An’ a health plan. Jannelle’s goin a talk to you ‘bout that. I’ll still be workin every day, but I’m goin a start layin off some a the heavier stuff and start relyin on you more and more.”

I’m tempted to tell the old man I got no reason to take time off anywhere anymore, but I hold it, say only, “Well, I’m proud a be your new foreman, Mr. Stoutamire, real proud. Thank you.”

When I’m drivin my truck home that night, I get real thirsty for whiskey to celebrate. But no. Not with my little girl gettin married tomorrow.
My Little Girl, Gettin Married

Chapter 3

Saturday, June 2

I drive into Signal for a haircut, an’ I make the mistake a tellin the barber I’m goin a my daughter’s weddin, so he goes into high gear an’ trims my sideburns an’ slicks my hair back an’ sprays it into a puff. Now I look like some kind a Hollywood cowboy.

Back at the trailer, I get my hands wet an’ try an’ tamp down the hair. It’s sticky, but at least it’s lyin flatter. I fix myself a ham sandwich for lunch. I have to be at the church by 4:15, 15 minutes early ‘cause I’m part a the wedding party. No way would I be late.

Thinkin about seein’ Alma Sr. again makes me want a vomit. She won’t say nothin, not at Junior’s weddin, I’m pretty sure. She shamed me that Thanksgiving Day, bringin up Jack Twist in Monroe’s house, girls in the next room, sayin all kinds a filthy stuff an’ I had to shut her up, I just had to. But I shamed myself worse ‘cause a man ain’t supposed a lay a hand on a woman like I did, never. My mama must a rolled over in her grave.

After that, I didn’t see the girls for a few months, then we arranged one weekend a month just like it said in the divorce decree. I’d take ‘em to ride my horses, or out to the movies, or out for dinner. Before I got run outta the rental house ‘cause I missed a few months a rent, an’ had to move to the trailer, I used a have ‘em overnight or for a whole weekend.

I seen Alma on the odd occasion around Riverton, but not too often ‘cause I live closer to Lander and I can do most a my errands there or in Signal. One day last year, I took Cassie to the Knife’n’Fork, and there was Alma, Monroe an’ their two boys sittin’ at a table. Alma got halfway outta her seat an’ yelled “Hey Ennis” an’ waved, but I just grabbed Cassie an’ wheeled us both around and back out the door, took her to a fancy place all the way in Casper where she wanted a go anyways.

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I look at myself in the mirror. White shirt, no pleats, the “gently used” black suit I ended up buyin’ from the tuxedo shop, thinkin Francie’s time cain’t be too far off – a bolo tie that was my daddy’s, an’ my new hat an’ black boots I bought at Corral West just last week. I know I’m nothin to look at, but I’m thinkin, at least I won’t shame my girls. It’s the most I ever paid for a get-up. At my own weddin, I wore a suit I borrowed from Don Wroe, the old foreman at the Elwood Hi-Top.

Curt, Gill and Curt’s friends are standin outside the church smokin an’ jokin, an’ other guests are goin in. I walk over to the guys an’ light a smoke, tip my hat an’ nod to Alma’s mother an’ aunt as they pass. Then along come Monroe with the two boys. “Monroe,” I say an’ give him a nod. “Hey there, Ennis,” he says. I got nothin against him.

Alma’s sister Jeannie steps outside an’ tells Curt, Gill an’ the ushers to get on up the aisle an’ take their positions. “You come into the church lobby and wait for the girls,” she tells me.


Next come the two Almas, Sr. an’ Jr., an’ I’m glad I came, glad I could be here for my little girl.
She’s wearin a veil an’ a fluffy white gown, an’ a huge smile. I give her a kiss on the cheek.

Alma Sr. is standin there in a darker pink more grown-up dress an’ she’s still pretty even with bits a gray in her hair an’ a few lines around her eyes. But she’s all business. “Put on your jacket, Ennis. You’ll take her arm an’ you two’ll be the last to walk up, after the bridesmaids. Walk slow. I mean it. I’m goin to my seat now.”

Fine with me.

My ears an’ my face are burnin as we walk up the aisle, even though I know folks are here to see Junior, not her old man. I walk her up to where Curt an’ the preacher are standin, an’ take my seat behind Alma’s family.

While I’m watchin the “I do’s,” a memory comes – me 20 years ago feelin scared an’ horny when I kissed Alma Sr. after we took our vows in this same Methodist church. She’d held out, an’ I hadn’t pushed, so that night was our first time – all heavy breathin and squishy tits and that wet place, blood on the sheets, her tellin me to slow down, go gentler. She was a virgin; me – well, she was my first woman anyways. Now the minister is readin something from the Bible ‘bout what love is an’ what it isn’t an’ I’m thinkin about Jack on his knees rubbin his face on my crotch an’ then undoin my fly. Not what you’re supposed to be thinkin about in church, an I’m hopin I didn’t let out a smile when I shouldn’t a done.

The whole picture thing is awkward, an’ I do end up in a few pictures with Alma Sr. Then there’s the receivin line. I shake hands an’ nod at people, an’ Ellen introduces me to some a them as “Alma’s daddy, Ennis.” I’m happy enough that no one expects me to say much.

Finally that’s over an’ I walk to the parking lot for a smoke, then over to the hall, headin straight for the bar for a Bud.

I drop a card on the gift table with a $250 check in it. That’s bound to surprise Junior, but I can afford it an’ still have some money set aside for the new truck, especially with the raise I’m gettin an’ no more rent to pay, an’ I want a do it for her.

I’m told I’ll be sittin with Curt’s family. They’re at a front table right next to the table with Alma Sr. an’ her family. Francine’s at the head table with the weddin party. No one from my side a the family, what’s left of it. I need to call ‘em soon as I get a phone …

I’m watchin that table an’ when there’s only two empty seats left, I walk over an’ take a seat next to Curt’s sister. Curt’s ma makes the introductions. They’re good people an’ I’m glad a that for Junior’s sake. Soon another guy comes over an’ pulls out the chair on my other side, and Curt’s ma says he’s Chuck Ausman, daddy of the maid of honor Julie – Junior’s best friend who I’d just met for the first time.

I take a peak at the guy who pulls out the chair next to me. He looks to be a few inches shorter’n me an’ wiry, an’ he’s got black hair in some kind a pompadour, not too high, but shit, does he think he’s Elvis Presley? There’s something about him I cain’t explain, an’ it’s got my heart poundin. I’m stuck, can’t get a “hello” or “pleased a meet you” out a my mouth.

Chuck says “Hi” to the table in general, then sits, turns to me an’ says, “Well howdy.” What’s that, some kind a cowboy talk? I’m wonderin if he’s mockin me, an’ I’m not even wearin my hat. But I give him a little nod to be polite.

Gill – Curt’s father – is askin Chuck something and gettin a conversation started, which I’m not followin, keepin my eyes locked on the flowers in the middle a the table. Then they’re servin salad,
an’ Chuck turns to me, an’ asks in a voice not meant for the whole table, “Del Mar, didn’t you used to work at the Bar-Eight up near Worland?”

That wakes me up. I look him square in the face for the first time, an’ whoa now. Light blue eyes, almost gray. Nose maybe broken a few too many times, thin lips. Strong jaw, like they say. Looks good, not perfect, an’ that’s not something I should even be thinkin about a guy anyways. I don’t think I recognize him.

“Uh, musta been me,” I say, keepin my voice down. Damn those eyes. “Long time ago, huh.”

Before the summer on Brokeback.

“You’re the younger of the Del Mar brothers, right? The quiet one?” Chuck asks. His eyes and mouth look like he’s half-way smilin’, or up to something, or mockin me.

“’s right,” I say. He won’t stop lookin at me, so I just look at my plate.

“Younger but taller as I remember, right? You want some salad dressing?” an’ he holds out the dish, an’ I somehow get out a “sure,” but I’m feelin like I’m losin control a my senses. His hand brushes against mine for a second, an’ it’s like a damn electrical current. I almost drop the bowl a dressin. I feel my face goin red. Fuck, I’m never goin a make it through this.

“That was my uncle’s ranch,” Chuck says, and now I remember, the nephew, a few years older’n me, maybe K.E.’s age. He went by Charlie back then.

“I worked up there a few summers when I was in high school,” he’s sayin. “Had the time a my life. What are you doing with yourself now?” I feel my defenses comin up – the Bar Eight was fun? It was a fuckin job, my livelihood.

Uh, I’m out at Stoutamire’s cow’n’calf outfit near Signal,” I say. “Foreman.” I had to add that, don’t know why.

Chuck’s eyes get bigger. “You’re doing good for yourself, Ennis.” Is he mockin me? “I’m working for the BLM now,” he goes on. “Rangeland management. I’ve been out to Stoutamire’s a few times lately, but I don’t think I’ve seen you.”

He’s starin at me an’ the way he said that, seems like how a man might flirt with a woman. No, I must be losin my mind.

“Just got the promotion yesterday,” I say.

He holds up his beer bottle. “Congratulations.” We clink bottles.

“You know Julie, right?” he asks.

“Just met her.”

“Oh! She and Junior have been best friends since we moved in around the block from the Monroes maybe eight years ago. I knew both of your girls in the 4-H, knew them as Monroes, not Del Mars.”

“Uh, their mother an’ me been split goin on 10 years,” I say, not that it’s any a his business.

He leans into me an’ I back up a bit. “I remember you from the ranch,” he says. “You were real good with horses, even though you were just a kid. I’ll never forget it. You remember my buddy
Johnny?"

“Cain’t say I do,” I say.


“That guy?” Now it all comes back – Johnny, the kid with the big greased pompadour who played guitar an’ sang an’ swiveled his hips like Elvis. This Chuck or Charlie was his sidekick. They got me drunk my first time, I must a been 15.

“Never seen a guy could sing like that,” I say. The room is loud with people talkin, an’ now I have to lean in to talk to him. “I remember you two. Clowns. Us’ta spend ever’thing you made on beer an’ rodeoin an’ tomcattin around the county fair. You got me drunk a few times. Bad influences.” Ohmygod, my mouth is runnin over. Fuck, I must sound like a teenage girl.

He’s starin at me while I’m talkin, an’ his smile gets bigger. “I remember you getting on a saddle bronc one time at the Friday night rodeo,” he says. “You barely spurred him, and then you jumped off, didn’t wait for him to buck you. And then you said, ‘My job is to tame horses, not rile ‘em up.’ You remember that?”

Now I’m almost whisperin, ‘cause I don’t want the table to hear this. “You fuckers laughed at me. Remember that?”

Chuck laughs and gives me a little punch in the arm – more electricity – an’ I’m kinda laughin too. “It was funny, and you were too serious, way beyond your years,” he says.

I look around the table, but everyone else is in their own conversations.

“Maybe so,” I say, an’ I don’t tell him that me nor K.E. had parents or high school to go home to after the summer, an’ goofin off or squanderin summer wages could mean nothin’ to eat an’ no roof over our heads. We’d both learned that the hard way our first winter on our own.

Now dinner is bein served, an’ I’m startin to get nervous about what’s goin’ a happen after, me dancin with Junior. Chuck tells the table I’m his long-lost friend, how we met at the Bar Eight. Then he’s off in a conversation with Gill about Worland an’ his uncle’s ranch, an’ I can finally relax a little. Words don’t never come easy to me anyways, so why don’t I just shut the hell up?

I stay quiet an’ try not to watch Chuck. I do notice his left hand – no ring, a trick Cassie told me about. An’ I’m wonderin’ what happened to Julie’s mother, an’ why such a nice-lookin and friendly guy don’t have a date neither. Like it’s any a my business.

The DJ gets up an’ introduces the wedding party, then the parents and grandparents at the front tables, an’ everyone stands up when their names are called. I’m hopin they’ll forget about me ‘cause Junior didn’t tell me about this one, but when the guy says, “Alma Junior’s father, Ennis Del Mar,” I go ahead an’ stand an’ nod, an’ I don’t drop dead.

Then the lights go dim an’ the DJ announces the first dance. I’m feelin ever’ bit the proud father watchin my princess and her prince glide around to “We’ve Only Just Begun,” but I know what’s comin next. “Now it’s Mrs. Alma Stroebler and her dad, and Curtis and his mom,” the DJ announces.

I get up an’ walk over to Junior, take her hand an’ we dance to “Through The Years,” just like we practiced at my trailer with her cassette tape.

“You’re a beautiful bride, I’m real proud a ya Darlin’,” I say into her ear. She squeezes my hand an’
stretches up to kiss my cheek. I feel like I’m about to burst, I love her so much just now.

Then she says, “Daddy, Curt and I were talking. Why don’t you come live with us after we get back from our honeymoon? That trailer …”

I feel blood rushin to my face, an’ I nearly trip over my feet. “No, Girl,” I say slowly. Sure, they’re bein generous but the hell if I’m some charity case, an’ it shames me to think she’d see it that way. “It’s mighty sweet a you,” I say, “but your old man is gettin on just fine. Anyway, I got me a promotion an’ I’ll be movin onto the ranch soon. Nice little cottage.”

She freezes for just a second, then gets movin again. “That’s good, Daddy, real good,” she says, an’ she pulls back to look at me. “You’ll let me an’ Francie fix it up? Please?”

“Sure enough,” I say.

“And you’ll have a decent kitchen, so I can come over and cook for you sometimes when Curt’s away?”

That again. I don’t need help feedin myself. “Hey now …” I say, but the DJ is callin’, “Now Alma’s mom and Curtis’s dad will cut in,” an’ Junior squeezes my hand an’ Gill’s right there ready for her.

I stop by the table to chug the rest a my beer. I’m headin outside for a smoke.

“You leaving?” Chuck asks.

“Goin for a smoke,” I say.

“Can I join you?” I look at him an’ don’t say nothing at first, which he takes for a yes. Not too strange, right? Guys goin’ out for a smoke together?

It’s a warm night, real warm for early June. I light up a Marlboro, but Chuck’s not pullin out a cigarette, so I hold my pack open to him. He takes one an’ puts it in his mouth like he’s waitin for a light, so I go ahead an’ hold the lighter for him.

We’re just standin’ there smokin’ for a minute, an’ how my eyes end up down there I don’t know, but he’s wearin black pants that fit snug, an’ damn if there’s not a bulge. I keep my eyes movin down at his shoes, shiny black an’ comin to a point. No one wears shoes like that anymore – at least I got something else to think about than that bulge.

“You done good, Cowboy,” Chuck says. “Junior must have been pleased.” I don’t know if I like bein called Cowboy.

“So I guess I can bolt soon, huh?” I say, an’ there I go talkin before thinkin. What’s wrong with me?

“I can see you don’t like the big crowd,” Chuck says.

“Not much,” I say, but how’d he know that? His eyes are steady on me.

“Hey, I usually shoot pool at the Black’n’Blue Eagle on Saturday nights,” he says, an’ now I really think I’m seein some kind a mischief in his eyes, maybe a little twinkle from the sun about to set. “I’m gonna stick around here for a bit; you want to meet up there later?”

Shit, the bar’ll probably be crowded too, but at least it won’t be Alma an’ her family.
Well hell, guys shoot pool together all the time, right? I was pretty good with the cue stick in my day. K.E. used a take bets on me.

“Yeah sure,” I say.

Back inside, we get fresh beers an’ sit back down for a second before Chuck’s daughter Julie stops by an’ asks him to dance. I watch him walkin up to the dance floor. He’s got a bit a swagger.

Just then Alma Sr. plops herself down in Chuck’s seat. “Howya doin, Ennis?”

Oh boy.

“Doin good,” I say. Best to be nice, act like everything’s OK. “Ya look good Alma.”

“Thank you,” she says, smilin. “This is a big day for both of us.”

“Uh-huh,” I say, thinkin the conversation must be over by now. But she goes on.

“Hey, your sister called this morning an’ said Tanya had her baby yesterday, so she’s a grandma. A baby girl. Makes you a great uncle. Congratulations.”

“Well, thanks,” I say. “Junior said Bridget couldn’t come. I guess K.E. went AWOL again.”

Alma rolls her eyes. “He’ll never stop, will he? You still don’t have a phone?”

“Uh, I’ll be movin in a few weeks an’ I’ll get one.”

“Movin where?” she asks, suspicious.

“Onto the ranch,” I say. I’m not tellin her about the promotion, not sure why.

“Well, the girls’ll be happy to be able to phone you again. You know about Francine’s new boyfriend?”

No, I don’t, an’ since when is Alma so chatty?

“She hasn’t said nothin.”

“Just as well. He’s a bronc rider and a Catholic. He’s off rodeoin right now.”

I cain’t resist askin, “So what’s worse, Alma, ridin broncs or bein a Catholic?” My mama was Catholic until my daddy got ahold of her, but Alma’s got pretty strong views on such things.

Her eyebrows fly up, eyes big. “The Catholics have their own way a doin things, an’ you know those rodeo guys.”

Sure enough. “You met this boyfriend?” I ask.

“Not yet. So you’re really doin OK?”

“Yeah … you?” We haven’t talked this long since the day she asked for a divorce, an’ maybe not even then.

“Well, I gotta tell ya, these boys take a lot more out of me than the girls ever did.”

“Yeah well. How’s Monroe?”
“He’s doin real good, opening another store over in Casper so he’s hardly ever home. But I’m useta that, ain’t I?”

An’ there she goes. I don’t get why she’s still sore anyways, with her new family sittin a few feet away. I notice she’s put on some weight, an’ I can’t help notice her boobs are bigger too, not even lookin there … surely she wouldn’t be havin another baby, must be 39 years old by now?

“Listen, Ennis,” she says, almost whisperin. “Do you think you and me could get together for a coffee sometime soon? There’s something I wanna talk to you about.”

What the fuck? “I guess,” I say. “Whaddya want a talk about?”

“Clear some things up. Nothing bad, I promise. Next Saturday morning? Meet at Ivy’s in Lander?” It’s a red-and-white checkered tablecloth kind a place, not bad for a meatloaf supper on payday.

“I can’t make it before 11,” I say, ‘cause foreman or not, I got five hours a chores Saturday morning. An’ I’m wonderin if any good can come of this mystery meetin.

But Alma says 11 is fine, tells me to “take care” and goes back to her table.

I finish my beer an’ I’m halfway on my feet, ready to go for another cigarette, when a woman about my age walks up.

“Hey, father of the bride. Wanna dance?” She’s pretty, but a bit worse for the wear, sequined cowgirl look, too much makeup, hair too big, way too much cleavage.

“I was about to …,” I start to say, but there’s Alma Sr. at the next table watchin me. The woman sits down and pulls me on the sleeve to sit me down too. “I’m Queenie Ausman – Julie’s ma, Chuck’s ex?” We shake hands. Where do they get these names anyways?


Just then, “Every Breath You Take” starts up, and Queenie’s standin an’ grabbin my arm. “We’re on.”

We pass by Chuck goin back to our table. I’m hopin there won’t be hell to pay for me dancin with the guy’s ex-wife.

“Every move you make, I’ll be watching you,” the song goes. Queenie closes the space between us an’ she’s pressin her titties into the middle a my stomach. I look over an’ see that Alma an’ Chuck are both watchin’ the dance floor.

“So what do you do, Ennis?” Queenie asks.

“Well, this week I was castratin calves,” I say, just before rememberin that tryin to gross a woman out to get her to leave me alone don’t really work. “Whadda you do?”

“I work at Western Bank, been there for 15 years,” she says. “So you own a ranch?”

Oh, well fuck this. “I work on one.” Maybe that’ll run her off.

But she gets right to the point, takin me by surprise. “You wanna go out for a drink or dinner some time? Next weekend?”

“No,” I say. “Uh, I cain’t get no time off after this.” Thinkin on my feet for once.
“Well they can’t work you all the time.” I don’t bother to respond.

We go on dancin in silence, OK by me, until the song ends and some disco song comes on, an’ I step back.

“I’ll give you my number and you call me, you hear?” she says.

I mumble something an’ keep walkin toward the bar for one more beer. But she catches me on my way back to the table and slips a folded piece a paper into my hand, which I shove into my pocket, barely lookin at her.

When I’m about to sit down, Francine grabs my arm. “C’mon Daddy! Dance!” Well, she’s my daughter, so I make a damn fool of myself, hopin people are too busy doin their own dancin to notice. At the end of the song – something about girls wanna have fun, perfect for her – she hugs me.

Before I get back to the table, Alma’s sister Jeannie walks up to Chuck an’ they go dance. She lost her husband couple a years ago, bad accident.

I finish my beer, say goodbye to Ellen an’ Gill, find Junior an’ Francine an’ kiss ‘em goodbye.

I get in my truck pretty sure that I won’t stop by the Black’n’Blue Eagle, but I keep goin over it in my head an’ it’s like my truck makes the decision for me, makes the turn into the parking lot almost on its own.

I sit at a small table along the wall. Shit! I left my jacket at the church hall, no need for it in the heat, an’ I’m hopin Chuck’ll grab it an’ bring it along.

“You’re lookin mighty good,” the waitress says with a wink before she takes my order for a Bud. I don’t come here much, but I’ve seen her before.

“My little girl got married today,” I say, still on a high.

“Well, ya done her proud.”

I can’t help it, gotta crack a smile at that.

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I’m still on my first beer when Chuck strolls over with my jacket over one arm an’ two bottles a beer in his hands. An’ there’s that swagger.

“Hey, I just put in dibs for a pool table, but it doesn’t look good for tonight ‘cause the felt tore on one table,” he says. “Can we take a rain check for next Saturday?”

Well, I doubt that, but I say, “I guess.”

“So what’s up with you and Queenie?” he asks. “I saw her give you a note – her phone number?”

I got no interest in Queenie, none.

“I already lost it,” I say – not quite true, but it might as well be. I down my beer and get up to leave. No pool table, I need to get the fuck outta here.

“You’re not leaving? C’mon Ennis, I bought you a beer.” Chuck’s eyes are laughin and he’s got that look – either a smirk or somethin up his sleeve. “At least have a beer with me.”
I sit back down.

“I just remembered on the way over here,” he says, an’ he’s takin a cigarette outta my pack an’ pickin up my lighter. “You sang with us in the bunkhouse a few times when you had enough to drink. You had a nice, gravelly voice. Didn’t you sing some Hank Williams? You still sing?”

Only with Jack, but I don’t say it. “Nah,” I say. “An’ how come you an’ that buddy a yours was givin me whiskey anyways? You know I was only, what, 14, 15?”

“We …,” he says, for once havin trouble spittin words out. “We wanted to hear you sing.”

“Bullshit,” I say.

“No, I’m serious,” he says. “You know, I’ve got a band now; we play all that old rockabilly stuff.”

“Huh,” I say. I can picture Chuck up on stage. In the get-up he’s wearin.

He says, “You should come hear us some time.” Then he looks up an’ says, “Hi” to two men headin toward our table.

“Ennis, this is Hank and Tom, two guys I went to school with.” I give ‘em a nod.

“This here is Ennis Del Mar, my long lost friend,” Chuck says. “We haven’t seen each other in 25 years or so. Just met up again tonight at his daughter’s wedding.”

“Oh yeah, where’d you two know each other from?” one of the men asks, lookin at me strange.

I’m tryin a think up a way to answer that, but Chuck says, “My uncle’s ranch up near Worland. We’re catching up on old times.”

Because the table is small, with one side up against the wall, there’s no room for the two of ‘em to sit, thank god, so they say, “OK, see you around,” an’ take off.

“Didn’t your brother used to get all weepy when he drank?” Chuck asks when they’re gone.

That makes me chuckle. “Still does. Goes into a rage about somethin or other, then he starts blubberin like a baby.” Why am I tellin him about K.E.? I never talk about my family.

“You used to get in a lot of fights, didn’t you?” Chuck says. “You’d take anyone on.”

“I guess,” I say.

Chuck takes a swig, then suddenly the grin is gone an’ he’s all serious.

“Shit, Ennis, your parents died when you were a kid, didn’t they? I forgot. Jesus Christ, I’m so sorry.”

I take a deep breath. “S’OK,” I say. Not for the first time tonight, I feel something warm inside a me.

Then he gets back to talkin about himself. He says him and Johnny worked at the Bar Eight two summers in a row, when they were 16 and 17, and the next year they worked on a dude ranch near Jackson.

“We were the Singin’ Cowboys,” he says. “The city slickers loved it.”
“That was your job?” I ask.

“That and saddling up horses and giving riding lessons,” he says. “That’s what they paid us for. I worked on the dude ranches a few more years after that.”

We order another round an’ he tells a few funny stories about the city folk at the dude ranch, which kind a reminds me a Jack’s old rodeo stories. I don’t mind hearin him talk. I finish my Bud and stand up to leave.

“Gotta go,” I say.

“Back here next Saturday? Around 8?” Chuck asks. I hear him OK, but I’m already steppin away from the table so I keep goin and don’t answer. I honestly don’t think I’ll be back next week, or ever. There’s somethin happenin here that cain’t be happenin.

I climb into my truck, put in the key an’ pound the heel a my hand on the steering wheel so hard it hurts, then drive off in a cloud a dust.

Long as I can remember, I kept my eyes an’ my thoughts off a other men. Well, except Jack of course. I won’t look at the ranch hands with their shirts off an’ jeans hangin low on their hips on the hottest days, won’t even look too long at the cowboy pictures in Western Horseman, the one magazine I take.

There is that Bobby Ewing on “Dallas,” but no one needs to know about that.

An’ now here’s this Chuck, and suddenly I’m a teenage girl, feelings all over the place – queer feelings.

I get home an’ realize I forgot my damn jacket at the bar.
Monday, June 4, 1984

“You gotta hire yourself a new horse trainer an’ step away from that part a the job,” Stoutamire is sayin.

My first day as foreman, sittin in the office off Stoutamire’s kitchen at my first Monday mornin meetin with him an’ Jannelle. We just got through a hour-long once-over on ranch operations, an’ my head is spinnin. Stoutamire sees me holdin the feed charts an’ other paperwork far away as I can reach, an’ he gets me some old readin glasses a his. Amazin how much they help.

How do you go about hirin someone anyways, I’m thinkin? I feel like I’m suffocatin even though they’ve got the air conditioner goin. I’m not the one for this job, I’m just not. I want a say, I’ll take care a the horses, find yourself a new foreman. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! What was the old man thinkin anyways?

Don’t want a look stupid, so I don’t ask where I’m goin a find a new wrangler. Thank god, Stoutamire’s on it, an’ he says, “I got someone in mind. Doug Thomas’s nephew.” Doug’s ranch is across the road.

Stoutamire says the boy just got outta prison. Something about assault with intent, beat up his stepfather pretty bad.

“Doug says he’d hire the boy himself, but his wife won’t have it,” the old man says. “You call Doug an’ bring the boy in for an interview.”

“All right then,” I say. “I’d like to see his ways with the horses.”

“Good. Spend some time with him, an’ if you like ‘im, hire ‘im. Doug got me convinced he won’t be no trouble.”

Stoutamire hands me Doug’s number, an’ I’m about to call when Jannelle answers a knock at the door. An’ there’s Chuck Ausman with my jacket in his hand. I feel heat comin to my neck an’ face.

“Ausman,” the old man says, showin him in. “Did we have an appointment I forgot?”

“No, I brought this for Ennis.” Huge smile. I step over to take the jacket an’ say thanks. My face must be beet red.

“You two know each other?” Stoutamire asks, an’ Chuck tells the story of the Bar Eight and the wedding.

Jannelle says that’s so nice, an’ asks if he wants a coffee. Chuck says no, he was just on his way to work in Lander an’ thought he’d drop off the jacket. Then he says to me, “See you Saturday?” An’ I say “Mmm,” which to me means, “I’ll think about it.”

I see Stoutamire lookin at me kinda odd, so I try to fix it, sayin, “He likes to shoot pool on Saturdays nights.”

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Wednesday, June 6
Stoutamire comes over to my new office off the feed barn for the interview. I’d already shown Tex around the ranch an’ watched him with the 2- an’ 3-year-old colts. He’s a quiet one, scrawny with shaggy hair an’ a black eye turned yellow. Knows his way around horses.

Lookin at his application, I see the boy’s real name is Theodore an’ he’s 24. Checked yes for criminal record an’ “some high school” for education. Wrote that he’s worked at ranches in Texas an’ in Cody since 1972. Hell, only 12 when he started? For his current job, he put “rodeo.”

Tex gives mostly one-word answers, barely lookin up. When the old man tells him the salary – a nice step up from ranch hand pay around here – he catches my eye for a second an’ smiles.

“You rodeo?” I ask him when Stoutamire runs out a questions.

“Well, I been hangin around since I … since March,” he says. I can see his hands are frettin. “Muckin out stalls mostly. Sellin beer. I did get up on a bronc last week, where I got this.” He points to the black eye.

Stoutamire says he won’t put up with no-show days or any other kind a bad work habits, an’ wrangler is expected to do other work around the ranch when needed. Tex says he done ranch work all his life an’ he’s a hard worker.

“My pa and I cowboyed around from when I was 12 ‘til he died three years ago an’ I come up here to stay with my ma in Cody. That’s when I got into trouble.”

“Sorry about your dad,” I say. “You got any questions for us?”

He asks if he can shower in the bunkhouse an’ eat with the hands, an’ Stoutamire says of course, he can stay in the bunkhouse if he wants. Tex says no, he just wants to shower an’ eat.

I have to ask, “You livin outta your truck boy?”

He says, “I been stayin at a motel a couple times a week,” an looks like he wants to disappear.

It’s 6 now, so we walk over to the mess hall in Stoutamire’s basement an’ introduce Tex. The youngsters are chatterin away as usual, an’ Tex don’t say a word, but he wolfs down his chili an’ cornbread. He’s all hat, peakin out only now an’ then.

There’s something about this boy I like, cain’t say what it is. On the way back to his truck, I tell him he can stay at my trailer when I move to the cottage, take over the rent.

“I doubt I can get that kind a money anytime soon,” he says. “I’m gonna owe everything I earn, for the first few months anyways.”

“You help me fix up the cottage, I can give you a break on that,” I say.

He looks surprised. “Why would you do that for me?”

“Well,” I say. “I started out with nothin’ myself, an’ I didn’t catch too many breaks.”

“I’m mighty grateful, Mr. Del Mar.” He shakes my hand again.

He’s drivin off an’ it occurs to me, he reminds me a myself at a younger age. I hope to god this kid works out, my first hire.
Saturday, June 9

It’s been a long week, gettin used to my job an’ startin work on the cottage, takin advantage a the late sunset.

Alma Sr.’s already at a booth with a mug a coffee when I walk into Ivy’s at 10:50.

“So what’s this about?” I ask her once I have my own coffee in front a me.

“I think you should know that Junior knows your secret,” she says. Wham. Right to the point.

“What secret’s that?” I ask, as if I don’t know. I must be turnin all shades a red. My fists are clenchin up without me tellin ‘em to.

“About you an’ Jack Twist,” she says, but her voice is soft an’ she’s not lookin angry like she did that time at Thanksgiving.

“God damn it, Alma,” I say, keepin it down ‘cause I sure don’t want a create a scene. “What did you tell her?”

I thought I’d put an end to this kind a talk from Alma, an’ now she gone told Junior?

“Calm down, Ennis.” Alma’s voice is gentle like she’s talkin to a little kid. “It’s OK. An’ please don’t deny it. I seen you an’ Jack that day at the bottom of the steps. I’ve known about you for a long, long time.”

Alma had seen. That day when Jack come to get me, a mind-fuck of a sight in the parking lot, an’ I forgot where we were for a few seconds ‘cause I couldn’t keep my hands off him, I wanted to eat him whole.

“And you never mentioned a word a this?” I say. “Even when you come to me for a divorce?”

“I had plenty enough reasons to leave you, never mind Jack Twist,” she says. “An’ anyways, you didn’t even argue back, like sayin you loved me an’ couldn’t we work it out. It was like you was already gone. I wasn’t about to humiliate myself completely.” Her eyes are fillin with tears that are about to fall, an’ I hate seein a woman cry. I give her a napkin, but she just grips it in her hand.

“But Ennis, it’s OK, really,” she says, tryin to smile. “Everything happened the way it was supposed to, I guess.”

“Sorry,” I say. Don’t know how I could ever make it right. “An’ thank you for not keepin the girls from me.”

“Well, you can thank Bill for that,” she says. “Even when they met Jack Twist at your house the one time, an’ I was fumin, Bill just said you’re their father an’ you got a right to spend time with ‘em. I asked a lot a questions whenever they come home from seein you, but I couldn’t find fault in how you behaved around ‘em.”

I want a jump in my truck an’ drive far as I can, outta Wyoming even. Gotta hold it together.

“So what about Junior?” I ask.

Alma tells me some long story about watchin’ Phil Donahue with Junior an’ what happened after, Junior askin if Francine an’ her were mistakes. Glad to hear Alma agrees with me on that one, an’ she told Junior as much. The marriage might a been a mistake, the girls weren’t.
“Ennis, she’s alright with you an’ Jack, an’ I am too. Really,” Alma says.

“When did all this occur, with Junior?” I ask.

“Just a few days before the wedding.”

So Junior knew when I walked her up the aisle an’ she knew when we was dancin’ together an’ she asked me to come live with her an’ Curt? An’ she didn’t call me a sick pervert or a faggot, or anything at all except “Daddy.” I feel a lump in my throat, so I drink up my coffee.

Alma says, “The other thing I want to tell you is, I forgive you. I have a good life with Monroe, he loves me, an’ I love him, an’ I come to understand you done the best you could. I’m not blamin’ you no more.”

“You forgive me,” I say. “So I guess I need to actually come out an’ say I’m sorry, huh? I am, Alma. I wasn’t a good husband to you. You deserved a lot better’n what you got.”

More tears come to her eyes, and this time they start fallin’. It’s hard to see her cry an’ I’m the cause. I give her a few more napkins.

“Remember the day I asked for the divorce, an’ I told you I wanted a be with Bill Monroe ‘cause he loved me an’ he could keep a roof over our head?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I say, but I don’t remember that part of it. All I remember was tellin’ her I was surprised we lasted as long as we did, an’ that only made her madder. Her runnin’ right into Monroe’s arms never bothered me. Thing that got me was losin’ the girls, the family I’d always wanted, the feelin’ of home.

“Watchin’ that Phil Donahue with Junior, I started to wonder, what if you’d come to me an’ said you loved Jack Twist an’ you wanted a be with him? Before or after we got married? You couldn’t, of course not.” She sniffs and the tears start up again.

Me tellin’ anyone I loved Jack, she’s right. Not even him.

“The way you two was kissin’ that time?” she goes on. “You never kissed me like that, Ennis. An’ then you kept goin’ on them fishin’ trips with him. I seen it as some kind a sin or sickness, but maybe I was wrong. Still, what you done was cheatin’ an’ that hurt like hell. You still go fishin’ with him, Ennis?”

“He’s dead,” I say. There’s a crack in my voice that I wish wasn’t there.

She looks shocked. “How long? Was that why you started up with that waitress?”

Now she’s steppin’ way over a line she’s already crossed.

“Alma, I cain’t get into all a that with you.”

She opens her mouth an’ then closes it an’ she says, “Well, I’m sorry he died, Ennis. I really am. He cain’t been much older’n you. Can I ask of what?”

“An’ accident,” I say – leave it at that. I have to swallow, an’ I feel my own eyes tearin’ up. Shit.

She reaches her hand across the table, an’ I give her my hand an’ we touch for a few seconds. My heart is poundin’.

The waitress comes by and refills our coffee. “Nothin’ to eat? You sure?”
Alma looks at me an’ says, “No, we’re almost done here.”

After the waitress is gone, I ask, maybe too rough, “You got more to say?”

“I do.” She’s calm again. “I want to apologize for that Thanksgiving. I sat there at supper watchin’ you an’ the girls, an’ wishin’ so bad we could a all stayed together. An’ then when you said you’d been burned? I just lost it. You the one burned me, Ennis. I wanted to hurt you, get back at you.”

I’d never hurt her when we was married, but that night I’d grabbed her arm an’ wrenched it. That wasn’t the first nor the last time I acted foolishly, thinkin’ that if you could stop someone’s words from comin out, you could make the thoughts behind ‘em go away too.

“All,” I say. “I did hurt you, more ways’n one, an’ I’m the one needs to apologize. You cain’t know how many times I wished things was different between us.”

“I think I can,” she says with a sad little smile. “I wished it too. An’ even though I didn’t know … about you before we got married, I was guilty of somethin myself – fallin’ in love with a ranch hand an’ hoping to make him a city boy.”

I have to laugh. “That wasn’t never goin a happen.”

“I know,” she says. “An’ the other things I wanted to change wasn’t goin a happen neither, an’ now I know why. An’ you know Ennis? It’s not the worst thing in the world. Ten years I was married to you, now 10 I been married to Bill. I come to love him very much. You’re still in the girls’ life, an’ that’s a good thing. I’m almost to where I can say no regrets.”

“Me too,” I say, an’ I mean it. None a this was her fault. She’s an amazin woman, I gotta say. It’s like we both growed up some in just the last hour.

She says she’s gotta get goin, pick up the boys at Little League.

“You keep in touch Ennis. Let me know when you get that phone.”

*****

When I get back to the ranch, Tex tells me him an’ Stiv are goin a the Buckhorn Bar in Lander for supper an’ a beer later, an’ do I want a come along. Stoutamire’d told me to get to know ‘em better, so I say yes. Good reason not to go to the Black an’ Blue Eagle.

Stiv’s a chatterbox an’ he has lots a stories, so me an’ Tex only have to put in a few grunts an’ nods here an’ there. After we eat, we stop by Lonesome Lefty’s in Signal to shoot pool. I don’t tell ‘em, but I want a brush up my skills before I see Chuck again.

’Cause it is goin a happen, no doubt. I’m bidin my time, but truth is, I cain’t stop thinkin about him. It’s a whole can a worms that I thought would a closed when Jack died. An’ it’s makin me crazy.

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Saturday, June 16

Junior stops by the ranch at 9 in the morning to tell me she’s back, an’ invites me to supper that night in her new rental house. Curt’s back to work.

The house is nice enough, front door fresh-painted blue. Junior says it’s not ready for a housewarmin just yet. She’s goin a plant flowers in front an’ get some living room furniture first.
She roasts a chicken for me an’ Francine, an’ she tells us all about Denver an’ seein the Grateful Dead in a outdoor concert an’ goin a some hot springs.

“You thought Cheyenne was too big, Daddy, wait ‘til you see Denver!” Not likely I ever will, but I don’t say it.

Francine tells us about her prom the night before. I’m gatherin that she’d gone with her old boyfriend, not the rodeo guy.

“Francie – tell him about Regent,” Junior says, an’ Francine gives her a look.

“There’s not much to talk about,” she says. “We met at Monroe’s store an’ I went to a party at his mom’s farm, an’ he took me for ice cream twice after work. He’s away every weekend, so that doesn’t make for much of a boyfriend.”

“But you like him,” Junior says.

“Maybe I do,” Francine says, an’ she changes the subject to when can she come to the cottage to take measurements for curtains. I tell her I can pick up curtains at the Goodwill, but she won’t be talked out of it, so I tell her Tuesday would be good.

When Francine’s gone an’ I’m helpin Junior with the cleanup, she acts like everything’s normal – fine by me.

I leave just before 8 an’ stop by the Black’n’Blue Eagle. I want a order whiskey, but I stick with beer – I down two of ‘em, no sign a Chuck. If I’m not imaginin things, that same waitress from the night a the wedding is makin eyes an’ givin me extra smiles. I act like I’m not seein it. I don’t give her nothin in return except a decent tip.

Chuck never shows, just as well.

*****

We didn’t have to take the herd far for summer pasture ‘cause Stoutamire got leases on BLM land higher up just behind the ranch, used a belong to a good friend a Stoutamire’s. That must a been why Chuck’d been out here talkin a Stoutamire.

The old man’s been showin me the ropes – mostly paperwork stuff I never had to do before. The ranch hands are no problem. I’m so much older’n ‘em, it’s not too hard to step up. I got a good 10 years on Stiv too.

I been stayin at the ranch ‘till past sundown to work on the foreman’s house with Tex, an’ it’s comin along good. Kemnitz left it in rough shape, looks like he was pretty much doin nothin but drinkin his last couple a years. Kitchen needs a new floor, there’s roof repairs, a little plumbin an’ electrical work an’ lots a cleanin. Me an’ Tex work good together. He talks even less than me.

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Saturday, June 23

I gotta say the cottage is a beauty, best place I ever lived – not countin my folks’ place, but I might be thinkin that just because a how clean my ma kept it. An’ just because she was there, an’ Bridget.

My dad always said, “If you got nothin, you don’t need nothin,” an’ that’s how I see it too, but last week my girls drug me to the J.C. Penney store over in Riverton an’ talked me into things I could a
bought a lot cheaper at the Goodwill.

I’m leavin most a my old furniture in the trailer for Tex, so I ordered myself a new bed twice the size a my old cot, an’ a sofa an’ matchin chair. I kept my old recliner even though the girls wanted to burn it.

Today, the girls are here takin Murphy’s Oil Soap to the old wooden table an’ chairs an’ side tables and an’ shelves that Kemnitz left, then polishin everything with Pledge and gettin ‘em to a nice shine. Junior tells me the old red-enameled gas stove is a antique worth good money. I’m just glad it works.

Curt and Gill are helpin me lay gravel for a parkin space next to the cottage. Tex stops by after his shift and I give him the keys to the trailer. “She’s all yours,” I say, an’ he’s mighty thankful.

Junior an’ Francine go into town an’ come back with groceries to make lunch. In the afternoon, they put in their girly touches – cushions an’ curtains that Francie sewed, graduation photos an’ one from Junior’s wedding all in frames, even a little vase they filled with wildflowers from around the ranch. They wouldn’t let me pay for any of it, said it’s my Father’s Day present. They’re so happy they’re almost jumpin up an’ down, an’ I’m thinkin I got the best girls in the world ‘cause sometimes I can please ‘em just by shuttin up an’ not doin a thing.

They head back to Riverton ‘cause Junior’s gotta work an’ Francine finally has a real date with the rodeo boy. Curt and Gill help me finish up with the gutters, then talk me into a trip to the Buckhorn Bar to celebrate my new livin’ quarters an’ my new job.

*****

I can almost relax with these two. We eat burgers an’ talk about ranchin and horses an’ tractors. Curt tells some funny stories about the characters he works with up in Gillette. Then out a nowhere, Chuck Ausman walks in. He’s wearin a white shirt, tight black jeans an’ those pointy black boots.

He makes a beeline right to our table. “Hey guys.”

I’m tryin a say something, but I choke a little on my beer while the other two are sayin’ “Hi,” an’ I end up sayin nothin. What’s he doing over here in Lander anyways?

“C’mon, siddown,” Gill says, an’ Chuck sits in the chair between me an’ Curt.

“I was just catching up on paperwork at the office,” Chuck says, but that don’t sound quite right to me, an’ anyways the Buckhorn Bar’s on the other side a town from the BLM office, not on the way back to Riverton, no matter which way you go.

Gill mentions how him an’ Curt was helpin me move in, an’ Chuck holds up his beer bottle for a toast and says, “Now this is a guy who deserved a promotion. Stoutamire told me he works his butt off and I’ve seen what he does with horses, pure magic.”

“Don’t be sayin that,” I say, but he goes right on, tellin Curt an’ Gill about the so-called miracle of him runnin into me after all them years. I guess he knew Gill from high school.

“Stoutamire’s one a the few ranchers still makin money from what I hear,” Gill says. “But he’s lookin his age. Kids goin a take over anytime soon?”

He’s lookin at me, so I gotta answer. “Not from what I can tell. Boy just graduated U-W and he’s movin to Denver to work. The girls is all married an’ moved somewhere else a while back.”
Sad, so many ranches, the kids move away and never want to come back,” Gill says.

“Ranch economy is tough,” Chuck says. “Cattle prices drop and it drags everyone down – not as many people buying horses or farm machinery either.”

I’m relaxin a bit, so I order another round. Curt starts talkin about the work he does – turns out he’s a roustabout not a roughneck, an’ he explains the difference. It all sounds dangerous, an’ I worry about Junior, try not to look at Chuck.

When I’m done my beer I get up to go, say my thank yous to Curt and Gill for the help, an’ give Chuck a nod. First I need a make a stop in the men’s room. When I get to my truck, there’s Chuck, leanin on the back a his truck parked right next to mine, with his arms crossed an’ legs apart, remindin me a Jack some way.

“My invite to shoot pool is still on,” Chuck says. I shouldn’t notice such things, but his eyes are sparklin in the moonlight.

“Not tonight,” I say. “Sorry, I meant to …”

“I’m just glad I ran into you,” he says. “I thought it might be another 25 years before I’d see you again.”

“Next week,” I say. “Eight o’clock, Black’n’Blue Eagle?”

He says “yeah” an’ I scramble into my truck fast as I can an’ tear out a the parking lot.

Back home for my first night at the foreman’s cottage, I go to the bigger bedroom, where we put my bed, an’ open a box marked “clothes” an’ take out Jack’s an my shirts, still one inside the other, an’ the postcard. I get my toolkit from the kitchen. I open the closet door – there’s already a hook, so I put the shirts on a hanger an’ then hang ‘em up. I get a thumbtack from the toolkit, position the postcard an’ push the tack through.

I stand back. A memory comes to me – a day on one of our trips in the later years when Jack an’ me rode out to a lake an’ set up camp, grilled steaks an’ then sat drinkin good whiskey he’d brought. Watchin the sun set an’ Jack counted the colors – red, orange, pink, lavender. It was warm out for a change, an’ Jack pulled out a new harmonica an’ played “Streets of Laredo” an’ “Mama Don’t Let Your Babies Grow up to be Cowboys” an’ a few other songs, me singin along an’ the coyotes howlin their harmonies.

After a while, we quieted down an’ sat there in the last few minutes a sun over the mountains, an’ Jack scooted closer to me. “Ennis, how would it be if I was the one on top for a change?”

It was such a nice night, hardly any wind, must a been 75 degrees even with the sun gone. “Sure,” I said, puttin my arm around him an’ pullin him in closer. “How come you never asked before?”

“I dunno … I’m askin now, an’ did you just say yes, Ennis?”

“Guess so.”

“Yippee!” he yelled, then he was pushin me back an’ climbin on me, rippin my clothes off. He stopped to lay out a wool blanket. I let him run the show, closed my eyes an’ just enjoyed it. Pretty soon he was flippin me over onto my knees, lickin all over my neck an’ down my back an’ then pullin my thighs apart an’ lickin right into my asshole. I wanted a say stop that now, but I’d never felt anything like it. Then he got a tube a some kind a ointment outta his jeans pocket an’ rubbed it all over my asshole. He stuck in one finger, then two, real gentle. My dick was rock hard an’ I tried
to touch it but he swatted my hand away, like I’d done to him so many times.

He mounted me an’ rubbed his dick along my crack, steady motion. I must a let out a sound, ‘cause he said, “You OK Ennis?”

I just said, “Mmm.” Then he shoved in with a big groan. Not as painful as I would a thought, probly ‘cause a the ointment an’ the fingers. Fast or slow, for every thrust he’d let out a loud grunt, an’ that turned me on as much as anything. I started pushin back, gettin in the rhythm, findin the magic spot he’d told me about. I tried to grab my dick again, but he wasn’t havin’ it. Pretty soon, he grabbed it himself, gave a few pumps’ an’ then said, “Now, Ennis, now!” an’ we both exploded. One a the best orgasms I ever had.

I must a fell right to sleep. When I woke up, we was both still lyin there outside, but it was gettin too cold to stay like that. He was awake, just lookin at me an’ shiverin. We got up an’ went into the tent under the covers an’ warmed each other up.

“That was K-Y jelly,” Jack whispered in my ear. “Better’n cookin oil. You could use it on me if you want.”

“What about the lickin, Jack?” I said. “You think you’d like that?”

“If you wouldn’t mind tryin it.”

“You want a be the one on top again?”

“Not tonight,” he said. “Not every time. Ever’ once in a while.”

After that, we used K-Y. I never asked how he found out about the K-Y or the lickin, tried not to think about it. I learned to slow down my moves, stopped attacking him like an animal every time. He only fucked me a few times. I never asked for it, didn’t know how it would sound, but I never said no either.

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Sunday June 24

After morning chores, I sit down and’ call Bridget an’ K.E. – K.E. first, ‘cause he’s more of a chore – never know what to expect from him.

He’s on his third wife an’ he’s got five kids – a girl an’ boy just older’n Junior and Francine from his first marriage, none from the second, an’ girl-boy twins an’ another boy from the third, in Montana. My girls haven’t got together with the Wyoming cousins since the divorce. None of us ever met the Montana family.

K.E.’s wife answers the phone. I can’t remember her name. She says K.E.’s not there, he’s moved out an’ livin in Billings, an’ she gives me the number.

I dial the new number an’ a woman answers, says he’s home, but I have to wait quite a while for him to come on the phone.

“Ennis! Son of a bitch! What the hell happened to you?” he says when he finally gets picks up.

I tell him I just got a new phone, sorry about Christmas.

“You got my number from Patti, no doubt,” he says. “She tell you she kicked me out?
Tell ya what, I caused a near-scandal in our church, strayin where I shouldn’t a been.”

He says he’s rentin a room, can’t afford no apartment, all the child support he’s payin.
He asks about my girls an’ tells me his kids are doin’ good. He’s about to pick ‘em up for a Sunday afternoon visit. I know from Bridget he hasn’t seen his older kids in quite a few years.

I give him my new number an’ call Bridget. She’s still married to Peter, a nice enough guy who used a work the oil fields. Now he’s at a factory job in Cheyenne. They have a girl, a pair a twin boys and a younger boy about Francine’s age. I don’t hardly know the kids, except what Bridget tells me.

“Well hello, Grandma,” I say when she answers.

“Ennis! Baby!” She’s the only person in the world can call me “Baby” an’ get away with it. Well, the only person still in this world.

She says the oldest had been livin with a guy four years and all of a sudden, shotgun weddin and now she has the cutest little granddaughter, Emily.

She asks about Junior an’ Francine, then tells me Peter’s doin’ good, just turned 50 for Christsake. The twins Alby an’ Andy are moved out on their own, still sowin their wild oats, an’ Marty’s goin a be a freshman at the U-W, only one with a head on his shoulders.

“How you doin anyways?” she asks. “I tried ta call you on Christmas.”

“Yeah, well.” I’m not goin into all that with her.

“You OK little brother?”

“Hmm,” I say, but I know she won’t let it go.

“Not an answer,” she says. “Why was your phone not workin an’ why didn’t you call on Christmas?”

I tell her I’m all right now, tell her about the promotion.

“Foreman! Good for you!” She sounds so excited she might drop the phone.

“Mmm,” I say.

“You seein anyone?”

“This one an’ that one,” I lie.

She says maybe this is the year she’ll come an’ visit, an’ I say maybe I’ll go visit her. We say it every year.

Last time Bridget visited, Alma had just kicked me outta the apartment, an’ I was movin into the old line cabin on the Holmes Bros. ranch near Riverton. She’d stayed three days, slept on a stinky sofa that came with the house. She helped me clean an’ get furniture from the Goodwill and tried like hell to cheer me up. We took the girls to see “Charlotte’s Web” and then out for supper to the Knife’n’Fork. They never forgot it.

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Thursday, June 28
I’m at Riverton High School for Francine’s graduation. I didn’t make it to Junior’s last year ‘cause I was with the stock at summer pasture up in the Tetons.

Junior’s sittin with me, an’ up closer to the stage there’s Alma, Monroe an’ their two boys. Junior tells me they’re celebratin over at Monroe’s house tonight, maybe I’d want a join them. So she must know Alma an’ me talked. I say no thanks. Don’t think I can look Bill Monroe in the eye, but I don’t say that.

She looks pained, then says, “You come over to our house Sunday, Daddy. We’ll have a nice supper and cake for Francie. Just her, you, me an’ Curt.”

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Saturday, June 30

After I’m done workin with the horses, I take a shower, shave, an’ drive over to the Black’n’Blue Eagle Tavern, gettin there just about 8 o’clock.

I sit down at a corner table an’ the same waitress comes over, but before takin my order, she asks about my married daughter, says her youngest boy is about to get married.

“Nah, really?” I ask, tryin a be pleasant. She’s not as young as Cassie, but she has nice big boobs an’ she’s perky, livelier’n Alma.

“I’m Alice O’Bryan,” she says, holdin out her hand for a shake. I’m tellin her my name, an’ right then Chuck strolls in.

I order a couple a Buds.

Chuck says, “Ennis, I’m so glad you came,” an’ shakes my hand. His face is one big smile. I must be smilin too. It’s not often I hear that.

He gets up to put in dibs for a pool table. After a minute, Alice comes back with the beers.

“Ennis, you married?” she asks, just as Chuck’s sittin back down.

“Uh, not no more,” I say.

“I didn’t see no ring,” she says with a wink. I cain’t help sneakin a peek at her hands, but her left hand’s under the tray.

“You got just the one girl?”

“I got another one a year younger, just graduated high school,” I say, an’ she smiles.

“You’ll be dressin up for another wedding soon enough.” Then she’s back on her rounds.

“We’re up after those two,” Chuck says, noddin to the pool table.

“That’s good,” I say.

“That waitress likes you.” I can tell by his eyes he’s teasin me. “She’s never smiled at me like that. Never asked if I was married or anything else.”

“Huh,” I say.
“Weren’t you seein a gal from the Wolf Ears Tavern in Signal?” he asks.

An’ how would he know? I say, “I was, Chuck, but how in the hell did you know about that, huh?”

“Relax, Ennis,” he says. “You forget our girls are best friends?” He tells me that a while back, he heard Junior tellin Julie about her daddy datin a waitress from the Wolf Ears, much younger, and she didn’t want no stepmother just a few years older than her, and then Julie said real loud “me neither” an’ that made Chuck laugh.

I can’t help laughin a little too, an’ I’m startin to relax. He tells me about a buddy a his, 42 an’ married a 20-year-old, but couldn’t keep her home. Chuck’s a bullshitter like Jack, an’ I figure I could listen to him for a long time an’ never get bored.

Chuck knows a lot a people here, an’ he’s sayin “Hi” to this one an’ that one, an’ introducing me to a few sayin how we worked on a ranch together an’ so on. He don’t invite ‘em to join our game, an’ I’m happy enough for that.

Even though I get whooped at the pool table, I have a good time, not sayin much, but Chuck don’t seem to mind. He likes to talk, but he knows how to leave quiet spaces too.

I’m tryin hard not to look at him bendin over to make a shot or leanin on his cue or pushin hair off his forehead, ‘cause what if he sees me lookin’? Just after he sinks the 8-ball, I’m gettin ready to leave, but he talks me into another game, an’ he wins that one too.

“You wanna redeem yourself next week?” he asks.

“Fuckin right,” I say, “but how ‘bout Lonesome Lefty’s in Signal?” Where I’m hopin he won’t know so many people. He says OK.

Back at the cottage, I have to let off the pressure so I jerk off an’ it’s not until afterwards that I realize I’d been thinkin about Chuck’s tight jeans an’ pointy boots, first time since I first met Jack that it’s been anyone but him.
Night Moves

Saturday July 7

We’re at Lonesome Lefty’s tonight shootin pool, an’ I’m winnin.

I sunk a solid on the break an’ then two more, then one more my next turn to Chuck’s none.

Before takin his shot, Chuck asks me if I want to play poker with him an’ his buddies on Friday night. I say no, I can never remember the rules, which ain’t really true – I sometimes play with the ranch hands, an’ the girls an’ me played penny poker enough times – I just cain’t picture me with a bunch a guys I don’t know.

He looks at me with his head cocked to one side an’ says, “You played just fine at the Bar Eight, Ennis. You took $20 from me, and $20 was real money back then. Don’t pretend you forgot.” I just look at him, an’ then we both laugh an’ no more mention a poker.

Then he starts tellin me about a Friday night poker game he got into “in college,” earned himself quite a sum a money for a while an’ then one night a drunk guy accused him of cheatin an’ busted his nose.

He went to college?

So what’s he doin hangin around with me? I feel like a fuckin idiot, what was I thinkin? He’s no Jack, not by a long shot. Jack an’ me come from the same place, opposite ends a Wyoming, even if he ended up with a lot more’n me.

Chuck here, he’s a college man. What, is he feelin sorry for me? I don’t need that.

I’d been thinkin something different, an’ it’s just as well, I got no business even thinkin it after what happened a Jack.

Chuck scratches again an’ it’s my turn, but my concentration’s gone. Then he sinks one after the other an’ ends up whoopin me. I tell him I’m done, goin a go home.

“Are you OK?” he asks. I’m fine, I tell him.

“Just stay for a beer,” he says. To be polite, I’m sure. This is what he’s like. He’s a nice guy. He’s bein friendly to someone he used a know, nothing special. I’m feelin like such a fool.

I say no, I gotta be up early for … but I cain’t think a any reason, so I just stop there.

“I’m gonna be away camping with the 4-H next weekend, so maybe the Saturday after that?” he says. “We could meet back at the Black’n’Blue Eagle?”

“That’s a ways from now,” I say, like maybe something better’ll come up. Truth is no, I ain’t goin back. Mighty nice a him to ask though. Nice guy, like I said.

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Monday July 9

So it’s been over a month I’m a foreman. I’m gettin down the routine. Every morning – breakfast with the ranch hands at 6. Monday morning meeting at 6:30. Tuesday morning meet with Tex.
Way too much paperwork in my little office off the feed barn, but most a my time is still spent outside doin’ real work.

I’m in my office when Stoutamire’s son Dave comes by with his buddy Andrew. They don’t look like they’re dressed for ranch work.

“So you’re the new boss, Ennis,” Dave says, an’ he shakes my hand. “My pa picked a good one. You remember my friend Andrew?”

“Mmm,” I say. Andrew worked at the ranch last summer, an’ Dave every summer since I been here. “You boys ain’t lookin for work are you?”

“Nah, we’re taking a month off before we move to Denver,” Dave says. “We’re going up into the Laramies for a few days, do some fishing. Wondering if we could borrow some gear? My dad said you go fishing a lot and you might have a tent and equipment and cooking gear?”

That hits like a punch. Last time I went up in the mountains was the last time I seen Jack.

“Not your old man’s cabin?” I ask him. Stoutamire’s got a cabin near Whiskey Mountain where he goes fishin an’ huntin from time to time.

“Nah, we wanna rough it,” Dave says.

“Got my stuff stowed over in the basement of the cottage,” I say. “Let’s go take a look.” I haven’t touched it in over a year.

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Sunday July 15

Today I’m ridin in the far pastures with Francine, listenin to an earful of talk about her rodeo boyfriend, name a Regent La Rocque.

“That’s a hell of a show business name,” I say.

“It’s his real name,” she says. “His daddy was French.”

“Was?”

“Yeah, his daddy died and he was raised by his ma and aunt mostly.” She says he’s a local boy, she met him when he was shoppin with his mama at Monroe’s store an’ it was love at first sight, for her anyways.

“They have a farm near Riverton and they raise chickens and honey bees,” she says. “And his ma makes jams and pies that they sell at the farmer’s market in town. Their farm is called Sweet Acres.”

I tell her I’ll buy some a her cherry jam when I’m at the market next.

“It costs probably three times more than what you’d pay for Smucker’s,” she says. I say it probably tastes a sight better too, an’ she agrees.

She tells me Regent’s studying agriculture at the U-W, goin into his senior year. He’s a year older than Junior.

I tell her to be careful, you never know what he’ll get up to out there on the rodeo circuit.
“Dad-dy!” she says. “It’s not like we’re going steady! We’ve been on one real date. He’s hardly ever around on weekends anyway.”

“But you like him,” I say.

She says, “I do. A lot.”

*****

After me an’ Francine take off the saddles an’ brush the horses an’ say goodbye, I walk back to the cottage for a sandwich an’ a shower. I’ll be headin over to Junior and Curt’s for supper – their official housewarming – but meanwhile I open a beer and turn on the baseball game.

I’m thinkin about Chuck again, but what’s the point. Too many changes all at once. New job, new house, Junior married with her own place. Alma talkin a me about Jack. Junior knowin about all that.

I don’t need one more thing to think about, I don’t.

There’s a knock on the door – Dave and Andrew, back from their camping trip, lookin and smellin a lot more like ranch hands than when they left.

Dave says they had a great time, an’ he’s holdin up a bucket a fish. “The fish were jumping this morning so we brought you some trout.”

So, they really did fish.

“Sounds good,” I say “I’ll take ‘em over to my girl’s to cook.”

They put the fish in a plastic bag in the fridge, then I help them unload the gear.

“See any bears?” I ask.

“No bears,” Dave says, “but the coyotes didn’t stop howling all night.”

“That was just one night,” Andrew says, quiet. First time he’s opened his mouth an’ he takes a quick look over at Dave.

“Musta been the full moon,” I say. Thursday night, I’d been on my porch for an hour or so in its light, listenin to coyotes myself, thinkin about Jack.

After the boys leave, I open the closet door an’ think about Jack some more, wish like hell I could still cross days off the calendar waitin a see him again.

*****

“I brought ya some fish, Darlin,” I tell Junior.

“You got ‘em where?” she asks. “You been fishin Daddy?”

“Stoutamire’s kid caught ‘em.”

Francine’s at the table with Julie Ausman cuttin the ends off a strawberries. She says, “You ever go fishing anymore Daddy?”

“No, I …” I start to say. I see Junior lookin over at Francine.
I’m goin a cook ‘em up real nice, Daddy,” Junior says.

Curt’s parents come by with salt for a gift, an’ Curt opens a bottle a champagne to toast him an’ Junior’s first home together. I brought potted tomatoes an’ herbs I got from the farmers’ market, an’ I tell Junior I’ll help her plant ‘em out back.

Curt cooks the steak an’ fish on the barbecue, an’ we eat outside on a picnic table an’ lawn chairs. It’s a big group, an’ I don’t have much to say. Francine an’ Ellen both try to get me talkin. I say a few things, not really up for conversation.

When we’re done eatin, Junior an’ me take the plates into the kitchen, put ‘em on the counter an’ I ruffle Junior’s hair, always soft an’ clean. “Thanks for invitin me, huh,” I say. “I had a nice time.”

I see worry come into her face an’ she says, “Can I pack up your strawberry shortcake to take home Daddy?” I decide to stay a while longer, have the cake an’ whipped cream with the rest of ‘em.

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Saturday, July 21

Next Saturday, I’m headin to Junior’s to help her put in a vegetable garden. First, I stop at the Riverton post office to pick up my mail, an’ there’s a small envelope, return address Lighting Flat, WY.

I wait until I’m back in my truck to open it. It’s a short note on flowery paper, few words.

Dear Ennis,

Jack’s one-year anniversary is July 28. I’m writing to invite you to come up here and help me take some flowers to his grave. I’ll fix you a nice lunch.

Sincerely,
Roberta Twist

I never knew when Jack died, only the date I got the card back with “DECEASED” stamped on it. That was Sept. 24, a date I won’t easily forget ‘cause it’s Junior’s birthday. So Jack had been dead an’ turned to ashes for almost two months by then.

Now I got that picture back in my head, Jack lyin by the side of the road like roadkill, the fuckin son of a bitch rednecks standin around laughin, an if only he’d a been somewhere with me, far away from all that.

Jack’s ma’s handwriting is neat an’ the paper has a little smell to it. She’s a sweet lady, tried a calm me down that one time, touchin my shoulder an’ then brushin my hand with hers when she put the shirts in the bag.

She’d said, “You come and see us again,” an’ I’d thought about it some, but never did call her.

I walk right back into the post office and write on a pre-stamped card, “Dear Mrs. Twist, see you on the 28th. Ennis Del Mar” an’ write the address. I’m hopin the old man won’t be around.

*****

Walkin out a the post office, I run right into Chuck Ausman. Weird how he’s everywhere I go now. “Ennis!” He says it like he’s really happy to see me.
I look over at him, say “Hi” an’ keep goin.

“Hey!” he says. I stop an’ turn, an’ he walks right over to me.

“What?” I ask.

“How are you doin?”

“OK.”

“You don’t seem OK.”

“Just busy,” I say. “Gotta go …” but I don’t get a chance to finish ‘cause he interrupts.

“I’m going to see you tonight, right?”

I don’t know what to say, can’t just come out an’ say that’s OK, you don’t need a hang around with
me.

“You got other plans?” he asks. “A date?”

Still can’t get anything outta my mouth.

“No, you’re busy, right?” he asks. “What, mucking out stalls? Checking fencelines? Sorting
laundry?”

“Something like that,” I say. Can’t help laughin a little.

“If you’re sore ‘cause I keep beating you,” he says, slow an’ drawn out, lots a mischief in his eyes,
“we could throw darts instead.”

An’ he’s got me, that crazy teenage girl, queer part a me. Got me good.

“I’ll make you sorry you ever said that,” I say.

*****

There’s some kind a dart tournament goin on, so we wait for a pool table to open. Same waitress –
Alice – is puttin down our Buds, actin like she don’t have any other customers. She’s poundin me
with questions, not sayin anything to Chuck. “What do you do for a livin?” “You didn’t grow up
around here did you?” I try to be polite, give short answers an’ then turn the questions back on her.

She asks, “So how long were you married Ennis?”

“Mmm … 10 years, how ‘bout you?” I say.

“Twenty years,” she says. “Hy died a couple of years ago.”

I say, “I’m real sorry to hear that Ma’am.”

“Not ma’am. I’m Alice,” she says. “Yeah, it’s been rough. Loved the man, but he was a gambler
an’ he left me with nothin but debts and two boys to finish raisin.”
Finally, the guys at the next table are yellin to get her attention an’ she scoots off.

“You know she’s waitin for you to ask her out, right?” Chuck asks. Always the dancin eyes, the smirky smile.

“Uh,” I say. “Might wait a long time.”

“You still think about that other waitress?” Chuck asks.

I’m wonderin if he’s saying one thing an’ meanin another, like me an’ Jack used a do.

“Sure,” I say. “Her and her white picket fence an’ a whole new family.” Chuck laughs. Cassie’d never asked for any a that, an’ I feel cheap for implyin it.

“What about you?” I turn it back on him. “You seein anyone?”

“Ennis, I’m with you every Saturday night,” he says. “Anyway, I’ve only been free for about a year. I might start looking after Julie moves to Laramie in the fall.”

“Huh,” I say. “She stays with you mostly?”

“Ever since Queenie and I separated three years ago,” he says. “My buddy had just moved to Arizona – that’s a long story – and Julie and I have been house-sitting ever since. Hey, looks like our table is ready.”

I look over at the pool tables, an’ there’s Dave an’ Andrew hangin’ up their cue sticks.

I say “Hey” an’ they say their “Heys” back, then sit at the table Chuck’n me had just left.

I’m kind a watchin them. A girl stops by with a kiss for Dave, an’ sits at the table a while.

Tonight I finally sink the 8-ball.

“Son of a bitch,” Chuck says, not really sore, an’ he punches me in the arm.


“About time,” he says. “Let’s have a beer.” We head for an empty table.

“Hey, you old dudes want to join us?” Dave asks when we pass by him an’ Andrew.

“Who you callin old?” Chuck says. We sit down an’ I make the introductions.

“I know your dad. Good people,” Chuck tells Dave. “You boys workin at the ranch?”

“Not this summer,” Dave says. “We’re here for just a few more days.” Then to me: “My pa says you’re doing a fine job.”

“Huh,” I say.

“You two just graduated from U-W?” Chuck asks. “My alma mater. My little girl’s starting there in the fall.”

“Go Cowboys!” Dave says. “What’s her major?”

“Theater,” he says. “I guess she wants to be an actress. You boys got yourselves jobs in Denver?
What are you gonna be doing?”

“I got my degree in civil engineering and I got a job with a construction company starting next week,” Dave says. “Denver is hopping, building sites everywhere you look.”

“What about you Andrew?” Chuck asks. I see Dave shoot Andrew a look.

“Well, my degree’s in journalism and I’m going to be a reporter at the Rocky Mountain News.”

Chuck makes a toast to them an’ their jobs. I’m thinkin about myself at their age – married, two kids, workin on a road crew, goin nowhere. I get the bad feeling again, wonder if I even belong at this table.

But I go ahead and raise my glass.

*****

That night, the phone rings at at 2 a.m. It’s Stoutamire. “Ennis, there’s a ruckus goin on in the bunkhouse. Stiv is off, so it’s your job. Can you handle it or you want me to come out there too?”

I rub the sleep from my eyes. I tell him I can handle it.

“You just get ‘em settled down and tell ‘em to sleep it off.”

“Got it.”

I pull on my jeans an’ boots an’ a shirt an’ walk double-time back to the bunkhouse behind Stoutamire’s house. As I get closer, I hear music an’ loud voices. I hope to God they don’t have girls in there – that could be real trouble.

When I step through the door, it takes a second for everything to stop. Two are on the floor – they’d been fightin. Another one scrambles to turn the boombox off. None a the college kids are here, so it’s all the younger ones.

I see there’s two broken bottles an’ beer spilled on the table an’ floor.

“You boys know there’s no drinkin in here,” I say. “I don’t think a one a you is 19 yet. I ever see this again an’ I’ll dock everyone’s pay if. Who’s on KP this week?”

A kid named Mikey, who’s Tex’s stable boy, steps forward.

“You’re the crew chief here,” I tell him. “You guys still got any beer left?” I see Zeke kick something under a bed.

“That’s mine; hand it over,” I say. “This place is clean as your mamas’ kitchens when I come back here in the morning or there’s hell to pay. Now git.”

I walk out with my half-case of beer. I’m smilin to myself, rememberin the shenanigans guys like Chuck an’ Johnny an’ K.E. used to get up to.

On my way back to the cottage, I take a detour around the stables, an’ I hear a strange creakin sound. I’m walkin around the building toward the sound when I see Dave’s Ford Ranger, parked at a strange angle, rockin. I’d seen this before, trucks or vans outside a bars, rockin an’ with fogged-up windows.

But Dave’s windows are down, and then I see an’ hear it: A man on top, thrusting hard. Loud
grunts an’ snorts. I stare for a second, then walk back to the cottage fast as I can.

Inside, I sit down on the sofa, breathin hard, heart poundin.

“This happen a other people? What the hell do they do?” I’d asked Jack all those years ago. “It don’t happen in Wyoming,” Jack had said. “And if it does happen, I don’t know what they do, maybe go to Denver.”

Now here are these two boys, college kids, doin it in Wyoming, not up in the middle a nowhere, but right here on Dave’s old man’s ranch. What would Stoutamire do if he found out? What if one a the ranch hands seen ‘em? Could get themselves killed, the stupid fucks.

I go back to bed, but I cain’t sleep, so I make myself some coffee. I’m rememberin the day I met Jack Twist an’ we drank all afternoon, Jack talkin my ear off, an’ both of us sleepin in his truck that night, leanin on opposite doors, me with a sack a clothes for a pillow. I might a got a few minutes a sleep, but mostly I’d sat with my eyes wide open watchin Jack an’ watchin the stars.

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Friday, July 27

I’m meetin up with Junior and Julie at the county fair tonight; Curt’s workin. I thought it was kind a cute when Junior invited me – I tried a get out of it, but she said I had to go an’ meet Francine’s boyfriend.

Walkin around with Junior and Julie makes me think a the times I’d taken the girls to the fair when they was little, an’ a long time before that, when I was a kid an’ I raised stock to show. It’s nice to see young kids still doin that.

I buy the girls ice cream, then we run into Francine an’ a girlfriend a hers. They want me to win ‘em a bear. I’m a pretty good shot so I win one for each a them – huge bears holdin lariats and decked out in chaps, vests and cowboy hats – before the carnie says, “That’s it. He’ll clean me out if he keeps it up.”

I turn around an’ nearly bump into Tex holdin hands with a young lady, maybe half Indian with jet-black hair and dark eyes.

“Mr. Del Mar,” Tex says, big smile, bigger than I’d ever seen. “I’d like you to meet my girl Bernadette. She’s from Cody. This here is my boss I was tellin you about.”

I tip my hat an’ nod, “Pleased a meet you.” The girl opens her arms wide for a hug, a little surprise.

“I’m so happy to meet you,” she says. “Thank you for everything you’re doing for Tex.”

I notice Junior lookin at us.

“Girls, come on over,” I say. “This here is Tex, our new wrangler, and his girl Bernadette from Cody.”

“My moving in with him. Looking for a job at a restaurant.”

Junior says she works at the Knife’n’Fork an’ she’ll find out if they have anything.

****

Francine goes off to find her rodeo cowboy, an’ me, Junior, an’ Julie sit down for a beer and a
corndog. Pretty soon Chuck comes over to our table. He says he’s been on duty workin with the 4-H kids.

The girls are gossipin, an’ Chuck’s jokin with them, an’ I’m mostly quiet. Junior’s starin at me. “What,” I ask her, just my mouth movin, no sound. “Nothing Daddy!” she says out loud. She’s smilin.

I spot Dave and Andrew walking by, an’ I get up an’ tell the table I’ll be right back. They’d been at someone’s cabin in Jackson all week, so I haven’t seen ’em since the night in the truck. I don’t know what I’m goin a say. I think I should say something though.

I ask if I can have a word with them, an we all three step off the main path.

“What’s up?” Dave asks.

It’s gotta be said, so I go ahead. “None a my business, but you boys need a be more careful around the ranch at night, never know who might be up walkin around.”

They both stare. Andrew takes a big gulp of air an’ his hand goes up to cover his mouth.

“Did one of the boys see something?” Dave asks.

“No, uh, I was up takin care a some trouble in the bunkhouse,” I say.

Andrew’s mouth drops open. Dave goes to say something, then stops, then comes out with, “Yeah, well thanks Ennis.”

Back at the table, Chucks says he’s gotta go back to the 4-H. He looks at me an’ says, “See you tomorrow? Lonesome Lefty’s.” I give him a nod.

The girls an’ me make our way over to the rodeo arena. There’s a few ropin events an’ then the saddle bronc competition, an’ Regent La Rocque comes in second. Francine goes down to get him an’ brings him back.

“Daddy, this here is Regent. Regent, my daddy, Ennis Del Mar.”

He’s got the looks to go with the name – calloused hands, dirty face an’ wild, wavy red hair.

He shakes my hand. “Quite a ride there,” I say.

“Thanks,” he says. “Francine says you’re a ranch foreman?”

“Stoutamire’s,” I say. “Cow’n’calf operation out near Signal.”

“Maybe after the season’s over I can call you about some work?”

“You’re not goin back to college?”

“I’m taking the semester off to see how much money I can make rodeoing.”

“Not much work on the ranch after August, but you can call me if you’re lookin for day jobs,” I tell him.

The girls want a stay to see the bull riders, but I gotta go, got a long drive tomorrow.
Saturday, July 28

I’d traded Saturdays with Stiv so I could get on the road early. I’m out by 7, coffee in a thermos, country station on the radio. I figure on a four-hour drive, no more than a couple hours at the house, four more hours back an’ I’ll be home by 5, 6 at the latest. If the truck holds up.

When I pull up to the Twist ranch just before 11, Jack’s ma is out in front by the time I get outta my truck.

“Good to see you again, Ennis,” she says. When I’m close enough, she opens her arms for a hug.

“Uh, how you doin ma’am?” I ask. We walk into the kitchen. John C. Twist is nowhere to be seen.

“Good enough,” she says. “You’ll have some coffee, won’t you?”

I sit down, an’ she brings over two mugs. “John’s in town; he won’t be back until noon,” she says. Every word she speaks is real clear, like she wants to get it right.

“How’s he doin ma’am?”

“Good enough.” She’s tryin to smile.

We sit quiet for a minute, and then she says, “You never remarried, did you? I see you’re not wearing a ring.”

“No ma’am, I didn’t.” I got no idea how much she knows about me, what Jack told her.

“Why don’t you tell me about yourself, Ennis?” she asks. “I know what I heard from Jack over the years, but I don’t feel like I know you, and I’d like to.”

It’s a hot day, a bit cooler inside than out in the sun, an’ I feel my face heatin’ up. Don’t she know enough already?

But I say, “Well, ma’am. I grew up on a ranch down by the Utah line, an’ I’ve worked ranches most a my life.”

She says, “Go on,” so I do. “I got two girls, one just got married. Good girls. Wife and me split about 10 years ago an’ I been single ever since.”

“Your parents died young, is that right?” she asked. So Jack told her everything.

“I guess they was 40 or so,” I say.

“And how old were you, Ennis?”

“12, I guess.” I never talk about this stuff.

“Oh dear,” she says. “I’m so sorry.”

She waits a few seconds, then says, “Well, good to know you. Now I want to tell you what Jack told me about you. Do you mind?”
“No ma’am,” I say. Jack talked about me? Well sure he did. The old man’d said as much. I never talked about Jack to no one.

She goes ahead in that slow way a hers.

“Well, he came home from that summer you two were herding sheep, angry because they had you take the woolies down a month early,” she says. I nod.

“He didn’t talk for a whole day, and you know how unusual that was for him. Then he started telling us about this young man he was up there herding with – he said this fella was a real cowboy, talked to horses, faced down a bear, knew everything there was to know about setting up camp, packing mules and shooting coyotes and elk. His daddy asked him if you rodeo’d, and he said that was the one thing you didn’t do, because you had too much sense. His pa asked him, ‘Why don’t you bring this Del Mar fella up here, help me fix up the place,’ and Jack said, ‘Maybe I will.’ He was with us the whole winter, and your name came up many times. I kept thinking you might show up on our doorstep.”

I cain’t believe I’m hearin this.

“Summer came and he went with the rodeo, and he met his wife down in Texas. He never did bring her or the boy up here, and you know John won’t travel. I talk to Bobby on the phone sometimes and I send him a birthday card every year. He’s 17 now, going into his senior year of high school.”

She stops talkin for a minute, looks out the window. We drink our coffee.

“About a year after Bobby was born, Jack came up here and told us he got back ahold of you and he had a few days’ fishing trip with you. He said he had a mind to move up here with you and get this place back on its feet. John said we’d have to fix up the bunkhouse, and Jack said no to that, you and him would have your own place. John said, ‘No son a mine goin a cozy up with another man right here under my nose’ and Jack said, ‘The way I’m seeing it, that’s about the only way this thing’s going to get done.’ John wasn’t happy about it, but he bit his tongue because he’d be happy enough to get the help.”

She stops again.

“Before he left, I asked him if he’d talked to you about his plans. That’s when he told me that you’d gotten married too and you had two daughters, and you wouldn’t leave them. I said of course you wouldn’t; marriage is sacred, and I’d pray for both of you because God wants men to marry women and have children and stay together.”

She stands up.

“Would you like to help me pick flowers?” she asks, an’ before I answer she’s grabbin gardenin gloves and a pruin tool from the counter. We step outside, around to the other side a the house. An’ here’s a surprise – there’s row a rose bushes like my mama used to have – pink, red, white, peach, yellow, blue, purple. The smell takes me right back to my mama, an’ how my dad used a call her his wild Irish rose.

“What color, do you think?” Jack’s ma asks.

Well, no girly colors, I’m thinkin. White would be a wedding. Red’s for a woman. Yellow? Jack lived in Texas, but he surely was not of Texas. Blue, purple … Jack’s eyes and them shirts he wore.

“Blue an’ purple,” I say.
“Yes,” she says, and sets about cuttin a dozen a them on short stems.

She asks if I’ll take her up to the cemetery in my truck, an’ I say of course. Happy enough the old man’s not comin.

I help her step into the passenger door. I’m drivin an’ I know where I’m goin ‘cause I’d stopped by last time I was here. It still gets me – Jack all alone for eternity in this godforsaken place.

She picks up where she left off.

“For years I prayed for God to make Jack normal. When God finally responded, the message I got back was that he would be normal if he could. So then I just prayed for him to be happy.”

I park the truck.

“That’s quite a god you got there,” I say.

“Same god as anyone else,” she says. “What’s special is God gave me the grace to listen for an answer.” Neither of us is movin to get outta the truck. “He’s got lots of answers.”

She goes on. “Anyway, Jack came back every year to help his pa, and every time, one or the other of them would bring up your name, and Jack would say he’s still working on it. On his last trip, Jack looked so bad, eyes hollow like a ghost, dragging himself around, and I asked him if he was ill. He said, ‘Ennis still won’t see it my way and it’s killin me, Ma.’ He told his pa that maybe he’d bring another friend up here, a ranch foreman from Texas. He never once never mentioned the man’s name.”

That riles me. “Good thing you don’t know his name, ma’am, ‘cause I got a mind to go down there to Texas and shoot the son of a bitch myself. Excuse the language.”

She touches my arm an’ leaves her hand there. She’s lookin me right in the eye, an’ her words come out even slower. “I want you to know, Ennis, I asked Jack if this ranch fella was really going to quit his foreman job to come up here and he said, ‘I dunno, I haven’t brought it up to him yet.’ And I said, ‘Does this mean you’re giving up on Ennis?’ And he said, ‘Ma, Ennis is going with another woman now, but I’ll never give up on him. He’s all I’ve got.’”

She lets go my arm an’ I look away. I had no idea the thing with Cassie bothered Jack. He never said a word. Shit, I was never intendin a marry her.

“I’m not ashamed of my son,” she says. “He didn’t have an easy life, not with a father like John C. Twist, and being the way he was. I know all the reasons you couldn’t just run off with Jack, but I’m glad he had you. You gave him something to hang onto.”

We’re just sittin there, an’ I don’t know what to say. She’s got it all wrong.

“Ma’am, I ain’t nothin,” I say. “We used to joke that Jack was a f--, uh, mess-up, but really that was me. He had a steady job that paid good, a big house, new trucks, a wife that stayed with him. He had all that goin for him.”

She looks at me like I’m a fool. “Aren’t you hearing me boy?” she asks, first time she’s spoken harsh.

“What?”

“None of that mattered,” she says. “You know that, Ennis, don’t you? All he wanted was to be with
you. He would have given up all the other stuff in a second. He would have stood up to his Daddy for you.”

Of course she’s right, an’ me thinkin otherwise is foolin myself.

“I think I mighta known that,” I say. “Thing is, I never knew anyone like Jack. When I first met him … it was like he already knew me.”

She gets a smile on her face, an’ I go on, first time I ever spoken on this, an’ now I cain’t stop. “I was happy to kill an elk for him on Forest Service land, wasn’t even scared. But what he said about us ranchin up together? Scared the piss outta me, ‘scuse me. I told him guys get killed for bein like that, but he didn’t give a damn. I took this ranchin up thing a his for a fairy tale. Me? I didn’t want no one to know about me an’ Jack, didn’t want my girls to hate me, didn’t wanna lose visitin rights, didn’t wanna see one of us killed. Jack put up with a lot from me, but he didn’t have no answers either, not really. He just kept believin, like you said, kept hopin. I saw that, but …”

I’d never spoken so many words in my life. “I couldn’t give him what he wanted, and I’m real sorry for that.”

She puts her hand back on my arm. “You gave him what you could, and he loved you for it, dear,” she says.

I’m feelin tears fill my eyes, can’t look at her. I take my bandana out an’ wipe my eyes. We sit quiet a few minutes, then she says, “C’mon, let’s bring him these flowers.”

*****

We get back to the house just after noon, an’ Jack’s ma sets to makin lunch.

Meanwhile, I go to the bathroom – floorboards bucklin an’ a pail sittin’ under the sink catchin drips from the pipes. I take a walk all around the outside a the house. Fallin down front porch, chunks a roof shingles missing, a window patched with cardboard. I can just imagine the state a the ranch operations.

I hear a loud roar an’ see an old Ford pickup pullin up. Jack’s old man gets out, old bastard who insulted me an’ Jack an’ then spit into a cup. He makes for the house pretendin he don’t see me. But I’m bigger’n that. I walk over to him, take off my hat an’ give him a nod an’ a “Sir,” no handshake. He nods back an’ says, “Del Mar,” and we walk back to the house together.

Jack’s ma puts down egg salad sandwiches, canned peaches an’ lemonade. Once we sit down to eat, Jack’s pa looks at me an’ asks, “What kinda son of a bitch kills an elk off-season on Forest Service land?”

This catches me off-guard, but I’m takin no shit, lookin him right in the eye. “You’re lookin’ at him, sir,” I say, “I done it for Jack.”

The old man shakes his head, but part a his mouth twitches. “You headin right out after lunch?”

“That’s what I was thinkin,” I say, an I wonder if somethin else is comin.

“Tell ya what,” the old man says. “I was hopin maybe you could ride out with me and take a look at a fence givin me some trouble.”

An’ there it is. “Sure enough,” I say, no hesitation.
“Ya know, Jack left us a sum a money, and that’s kept the goddamn bank off my back, but I still can’t get no good help up here,” he says.

So we saddle up two horses that are nearin the end of their days, load up a fence post, board an’ baling wire onto an even older horse, an’ ride slow back to the fenceline. It’s quiet until the old man comes out with, “Jack, I could see it, but you, Del Mar? I wouldn’t figure for queer.”

My head is explodin, but I keep my horse on pace. Think before you talk, I tell myself. Do not lay a hand on this old bastard.

“I’m not goin a stand for that kinda talk, sir,” I say.

The old man looks back at me. “Excuse me?”

“You heard,” I say. He turns back around an’ doesn’t speak another word ‘til we get to the fence.

*****

After we finish with the fence, I mention the bathroom an’ the roof an’ window, an’ the old man says, “Roberta’d be mighty thankful if you’d have a go at the bathroom.”

It’s a long afternoon, with a trip to the hardware store and the lumber yard, a few more glasses a lemonade, not another word from him about Jack.

Jack’s ma asks if I’ll stay for supper an’ I say sure, I’ll finish with the floor after we eat.

At 6, we sit down an’ Jack’s ma says grace. She adds at the end, “And God, bring rest to Jack’s soul.” All three of us say “amen.”

She’s servin ham an’ potato salad an’ beets, delicious just like Jack said his ma’s cookin was. She tells me Jack’s boy’s workin’ on a horse ranch down in Texas for the summer. “He says he might come up here to Wyoming next spring,” she says.

“I wouldn’t mind a meet the boy,” I say.

“I’ll let you know when he’s coming,” she says. I see the old man raise his eyebrows.

After cherry pie for dessert, the old man goes back out, an’ I head to the bathroom to start layin the new floorboards.

After a while Jack’s ma comes over an’ stands in the doorway. “Ennis, I don’t mean to pry, but are you still seeing that woman?”

I turn to look at her. “What?”

“The woman you were with last time Jack came up here?”

“No ma’am.”

“Are you alone then?”

“I try to keep myself busy with my girls an’ … my friends,” I say.

She asks me about the girls – names, how old, what they do. “You bring me a picture of them when you come back,” she says. I don’t argue. I know I’ll be back.
“I’ve got pictures of Jack, if you’d like to see them,” she says. Of course I do.

She leaves for five minutes, then says, “C’mon and take a break.”

I fetch my readin glasses from my truck. We sit on a worn-down couch in the livin room. There’s a corner shelf with old-fashioned dishes like the ones my mama had brought from Chicago, ones we never used.

She opens a baby book with a few black-an’-white photos an’ notes about Jack’s first tooth, first steps, first haircut. The baby pictures seem like everyone else’s.

Then it gets better. Jack in a cowboy hat with vest and chaps and boots, holdin two pistols, musta been 7 or 8. A close up a Jack, hat off, blowin out the candles on his cake when he was about 10. I can almost recognize the Jack I knew.

There are report cards and records a doctor visits tucked into the book. Class photos, Jack with huge smiles, clownin around. Every bit the Jack Twist I knew.

“He dropped out when he was a junior,” his ma says before she closes the book. “He went to work for his daddy, then he was off with the rodeo.”

Next she pulls out a manila envelope with the Lightning Flat address in Jack’s loopy handwritin, an’ takes out a set a fancy wedding photos, all black-an’-white 8 by10s.

“Whoa!” It sneaks outta my mouth.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” Jack’s ma says.

“She is,” I say, but that’s not what I’m lookin at. It’s Jack, smilin his fuckin face off.

“Would you like to have some of these?” she asks.

“I surely would,” I say.

“Well, you get back to work and I’ll put some in an envelope for you.”

It’s 10:30 by the time the new floor is finally laid, way past Jack’s folks’ bedtime for sure.

As I’m gettin ready to leave, the old man says, “Tell you what, Del Mar, you work yer ass off, just like Jack said.” Probly the closest he’ll ever get to “thank you” or “you’re OK,” an’ I wish to god he’d ever said it to Jack.

He asks me if I’d like to come work for him – “can’t pay you much” – an’ I say no thanks, I got a good job an’ my girls down in Riverton. I say I could come back up in a few weeks to fix the roof an’ the front porch, but the old man says, “Would you be able to come back for a few days some time?”

I say that would be November, after the stock ships, an’ he says he’ll have lots a work an’ he’ll pay me.

“No …” I start sayin, but Jack’s ma is handin me my thermos with fresh coffee in it, along with a manila envelope.

“I’m looking forward to having you back,” she says.

I give ‘em my phone number an’ write down theirs on the envelope. Jack’s ma walks out to the
truck with me an’ hugs me again before I get in.

“You’re a good man, Ennis,” she says. “You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

I drive the four hours back to Signal listenin to country radio and hummin along to keep me awake. When I get home, I throw the envelope on the kitchen table, too tired to open it tonight.
Sunday, July 29

I wake up an’ the sun’s shinin through the curtains – 7:30, holy shit. I never sleep this late.

I sit down for my cereal an’ coffee, an’ I open the envelope. Four photos – two 5x7s from Jack’s weddin an’ two 4x6 rodeo shots. The weddin photos are black’n’white, but damn if I can’t see the blue in his eyes.

I find a pair a scissors in a drawer an’ I cut one a the weddin photos in half, droppin Lureen, beautiful as she is, into the trashcan. I take the rest a the pictures back to my room and put ‘em in a drawer.

I lay back on my bed an’ look at Jack propped up on the extra pillow. Eyelashes longer’n any woman I ever seen. He looks happy, but I don’t think it’s the happiest day of his life, not by a long shot. My weddin day sure as hell was not. I cain’t name the best day a my life, but I’m thinkin maybe every day I had with Jack, all except that last one.

I rub myself for a while, just lookin at him, then take off my jeans and have at it, sheets be damned. I’ve never had this before, bein able to look at a picture of him, so much better than just wrin ihn it out. There’ll never be no one like Jack Twist, I’m thinkin for what must be the thousandth time.

*****

Around 9 the phone rings. Junior says her an’ Curt come down with a bad flu, so she’s cancellin supper at her house. I say I hope they’re better soon.

I take each a my horses out for a ride, then talk to Tex about feed schedules. At noon, I’m sittin down with a sandwich when the phone rings again.

“It’s Queenie. You never called, so I’m callin you. How are you Ennis?”

Chuck’s ex. How’d she get my number?

“Real busy,” I say.

“You never called me,” she says, an’ I mumble something in reply.

“I’m calling to see if you’d like to drive over to Casper tonight, have us a nice dinner and some drinks and get to know each other better.”

Oh no. I gotta put a stop to this right fuckin now. I’m searchin for words, an’ I find some.

“Oh, like I said ma’am, I’m real busy these days, sorry.”

“What about next weekend?”

“Oh, lots to do next weekend too.”

“Fine,” she says. She sounds mad. “Maybe I’ll call you another time. You still have my number?”

“Mmm.”
“You take care now.” She hangs up.

Not two minutes later, the phone rings again. Don’t tell me she didn’t get the message.

But it’s Chuck himself, an’ I gotta say it’s good to hear his voice.

“Ennis, where were you last night?” he asks. “I didn’t see you at the Black’n’Blue Eagle, and I called your house and got no answer. I’m just checking if you’re OK.”

“Uh, sure I’m OK, Chuck,” I say, but I’m thinkin’ buddies drink and shoot pool, but do they phone each other?

Chuck don’t say nothin’ for a few seconds an’ I’m wonderin’ if I’m supposed a be tellin’ him where I was.

“Well, how would you like to meet me over there today and rack ‘em up?” he asks. “Or at Lonesome Lefty’s?”

I actually wouldn’t mind the company, but this is fuckin’ with my head, him callin’ me.

“Nah,” I say. “I was drivin’ all day yesterday an’ I don’t feel like gettin’ back in the truck.”

“What if I grab some barbecue from Hawg Heaven, I go over there and we watch the baseball game?” he says, no hesitation. Him comin’ over here?

“You mean today?” I say.

“Yeah, today.”

Well, I was goin’ a watch the game anyways, but Chuck’s truck parked here in the middle of the afternoon? No fuckin’ way. Chuck sittin’ on my couch puttin’ his boots up on the table?

“My TV’s a piece a shit,” I say.

“Well, you said you’d be watchin’ the game anyway,” he says. True enough.

“What about Stoutamire seein’ the Land Management man’s truck parked here on a Sunday, huh?” Not how I meant it to come out.

He gives a little laugh. “Like you and me are cookin’ up some conspiracy against him?” he asks. That’s not what I was worryin’ about, no, but I don’t know how to say it.

After a few seconds, he says, “I’ll take Julie’s car, no problem.”

Now I’m outta excuses, so I tell him to drive on the little side road off the main driveway past the stables, before the main house, an’ he’ll see the cottage.

*****

If it was one a my girls comin’ over, I’d clean up for ‘em for sure. Well, Chuck’s company too, even though he’s a guy, so I go around pickin’ up the stuff lyin’ around, then clean the kitchen an’ bathroom, sweep the kitchen an’ vacuum the livin’ room rug with an old vacuum that came with the place. I even take a shower an’ put on a fresh shirt and clean jeans.

Chuck gets here at 4, but the game isn’t starting ‘till 5, so I show him around the horse pastures, the corral an’ the stables.
“This is a bigger operation than I thought,” he says. “How many horses?”

“It’s Stoutamire’s sideline,” I say. “He keeps 10 or so workin horses, along with my two an’ Tex’s one. We’re raisin colts for the ranch an’ a few to sell, an’ we’re retrainin a few older horses people brought us. Twenty-two altogether, today.”

I show him my horses – Bluebelle, a calm black mare and Spark Plug, a skittish red roan gelding. He says he’s got two himself, full Quarter horses.

“We should go riding up in the mountains sometime on a Sunday,” he says. I don’t know about that, but I don’t raise an objection.

Back in the cottage, I open beers, make popcorn in a frying pan an’ we sit down to watch the game. I’m in my old recliner I brought from the trailer, an’ Chuck’s on the new sofa.

I see him lookin around. “Nice place,” he says.

“Got my girls to thank for that,” I say. “If it was me …”

“They let you keep that piece of shit?” he asks, lookin at the recliner an’ raisin his eyebrows.

“They put up a fight,” I say. “Wanted a burn it.” He laughs.

After the first inning, he asks, “You’re doin OK?” I shrug my shoulders an’ say yeah.

“I missed you last night,” he says.

The butterflies start up in my stomach. What does “I missed you” mean, anyways? I don’t want a tell him about yesterday, an’ I’m not thinkin straight, so I say, “I spoke to Queenie today.” My voice sounds strange, I know it.

“You run into her?” he asks. “How’s she doin? She ask you out?”

“Well, I … no,” I say. “I mean we’re not goin out.”

“I got no hard feelings, if you wanna step out with her,” he says. He’s lookin at me with a strange kinda look.

“She’s not my cuppa tea,” I say.

“Mine neither, as it turns out. We were married 19 years, and for the last five she was fucking the bank manager, and the last two I was living out at the ranch with Julie while she stayed in town. As soon as we split, the banker dumped her. Now she’s going after every guy that stands upright.”

That’s more than he should be tellin me, I hardly know the guy. I must be makin’ a face, ‘cause he says, “What.”

I say, “Not good Chuck. I mean for you, her runnin around like that.” That sounded weird, so I try to apologize. “Didn’t mean to say that. Sorry, none a my business.”

“You can say anything you want Ennis,” he says. “I like it when you talk.”

More butterflies. Why does he say shit like that?

I get us another beer, an’ when I sit back down, he asks point-blank. “So where were you yesterday?”
“Up near the Montana border,” I say, an’ take a deep breath. This talkin about Jack thing ain’t easy. “Buddy a mine, he died an’ I went up there to see his folks. Stayed later’n I thought I would.”

“I’m sorry to hear about that,” he says. “Your buddy, did he die recently?”

“Year ago,” I say.

“You wanna talk about it?”

Someday I might, but not now. “Nope.”

Chuck always knowin what to say leaves it be, starts talkin about the Cubs’ prospects this year. Turns out we’re both Cubs fans. We watch the game for a while ‘till he asks if he can put his feet up. I say of course, but when he’s got his feet on the table, my thinkin gets all crazy, right down into my groin.

I say, “I’m hungry. I’ll get everything ready an’ we can eat in here.”

I take the barbecued ribs an’ coleslaw outta the bag an’ get a few slices a Wonder Bread an’ plates an’ forks an’ knives, an’ put ‘em on the coffee table. He puts his feet down. I take a seat on the couch, as far from Chuck as I can get. After we’re done eatin, I clear the food away an’ go back to my recliner. The Cubs beat the Yankees 5-4. I turn off the TV.

“Hah! We’ll be at the top a the division by next week,” I say, and Chuck helps me clear the empty beer bottles.

So it’s time for him to go, an’ that makes me sad some way. No way to ask him to stay longer.

“See you next week?” he asks as he heads to the door. “In Riverton.”

“Sure enough,” I say. I wish we had something to do other than shootin pool with all his friends hangin around, but I got no idea what an’ no idea how to bring it up.

I close the door behind him, an’ right then I get it. Talkin to this guy is almost like talkin to Jack. He listens like I got somethin to say. Even with the college degree.

I like bein with him, an’ that ought a be enough for me, ‘cause I’m sure he’s not lookin for nothin else, an’ anyways the whole thing scares the piss outta me.

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Saturday Aug. 4

I get to the Black’n’Blue Eagle Tavern before Chuck, an’ I take a table along the wall. Alice is right there with a Bud.

We say our “hi’s” an’ before you know it …

“Ennis, would you wanna take me out for dinner sometime?”

Second woman askin me out in a week? She’s a nice lady, nice looking, old enough not to want no more kids. I know this ain’t what I’m lookin for – I’m not lookin for anything at all, am I? On the other hand, it wouldn’t hurt bein seen out with a woman.

“Mmm,” I say, an’ I kinda nod.
“I work every weekend, but how about tomorrow night?” she says. “We could go to the Grand Hotel or somewhere in Casper.” These are the places women always want a go. I took Cassie to the Grand Hotel a few times – the most high-class place in Riverton. You need to wear a tie to get in.

“I’ll be over at my daughter’s place for supper tomorrow,” I say.

But she’s persistent. “Would you want to swing by an’ pick me up after that, go out for a drink?”

“I can do that,” I say. She writes her address on a napkin.

When Chuck finally walks in the door at 8:20, I’m lookin at his swagger an’ askin myself, not for the first time, why I gotta be like this, even after Jack. Why is it this Chuck Ausman gives me the butterflies, an’ a nice-lookin lady like Alice just don’t do it?

Jack’s ma said to me just last week, “You’re a good man, Ennis. You have nothing to be ashamed of.” Well, there’s shame an’ then there’s what happens to guys like me. She’s right, though, no point hatin myself, an’ there’s nothin for it anyways.

Thing is, I shouldn’t be draggin down someone like Alice neither. An’ even draggin Chuck down into my dirty queer thoughts, but I cain’t fix that.

We finish two games a pool – he wins both – an’ we’re finishin our last beers when he says, “You wanna pack up the horses and go riding tomorrow? I know a good trail on the way to Shoshoni, no one else seems to know about.”

It sounds nice, an’ I got no good excuse at the tip a my tongue, so I say, “Can we make it an early one? I’m over to Junior’s for dinner, and then I’m takin that Alice out for a drink.”

I really didn’t need to tell him that.

“She got ya, did she?” He laughs an’ punches my arm. Zing.

“How about we get on the road by 9?” I ask.

“Sure, we’ll meet at my place,” he says. “It’s on the way.”

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Sunday, Aug. 5

The hills are as green as they’re goin a get, an’ I’d say it’s 80 degrees, sun bright, just the kind a summer day you hope for. Chuck’s real talkative today, tellin me about the 4-H campin trips he goes on an’ his favorite mountain trails. I’m listening but he don’t need me to say much.

When the sun’s at its highest, we find a nice shady place near a stream, set the horses to drink an’ picket ‘em to a tree. There’s a couple a rocks to sit on.

Chuck hands me a ham sandwich an’ opens two beers, warm by now.

“I’m sick of hearing myself talk, Ennis,” he says. “How about you take over for a while?”

Then he clams up, eatin his sandwich an’ lookin over at me a few times. I’m guess I’m supposed to start some kind a conversation.

I ask how Julie is doin, an’ he gives me a short answer, then nothin. So it’s on me.
I tell him Francine wants to go to Montana with her rodeo boy Labor Day weekend, but Alma won’t have it an’ she’s tryin a go around her ma, askin’ me, an’ I don’t wanna get involved.

“You can tell her no, but she might not listen,” Chuck says. “What was that old song? ‘My parents cannot stand him ‘cause he works the rodeos?’” He starts singin.

I know that song, an’ I’m sing along, low, “They say ‘he’s not your kind, he’ll leave you cryin’. I would follow him right down the toughest road to hoe. Someday soon, goin with him, someday soon.”

I’d carried the melody ‘cause Chuck switched to some kinda harmony. I feel like a fool, an’ Chuck’s lookin at me with that smirk.

“You have a great voice,” he says. “You ever perform?”

“Oh hell no,” I say. “You know me, I cain’t hardly even talk.”

His eyes get all soft an’ he says, “You talk just fine, Ennis. Just not enough.”

I gotta look away, think about tellin him that needs sayin, but that ain’t exactly true either. I clear my throat, think of some way to change the subject. “Anyways, the kid – uh, Francine’s boyfriend – got a great show biz name … Regent La Rocque. His real name, no shit.”

“I know Regent from 4-H,” Chuck says. “Raised by two women – his ma was a 4-H leader too.”

“So you think he’s OK for Francine?”

“Sure, he’s a good kid. He’s got a younger brother named Argent, a musician. I guess their old man was French.”

We’re quiet for a while, an’ he’s lookin at me. I look back, maybe a little too long. He won’t look away, so I do.

“I’ll be driving Julie to Laramie in a few weeks to start at U-W,” he says. “See my mom and my older sister too.”

“Smart girl ya got there.”

“She’s been saving money from her job at the Knife’n’Fork, and me and Queenie are helping out.”

“Francine’s startin at Central Wyoming, studyin e-quine science – all about horses,” I say. “Junior never had no interest in college. I wouldn’t want a see either of ‘em move away to college.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m gonna miss Julie,” he says. “I’ve never lived alone. I can only hope she comes back here after.”

“Stoutamire said his boy could a found some kind a engineerin job closer to home, but he’s movin to Denver,” I say.

Chuck hesitates, then asks, “Does he just like the big city, or do you think there’s some other reason?”

“Whaddya mean?” I say. My stomach is knotting up.

“I mean the ranch is still making money and it’s his for the taking,” Chuck says. “He could get a job in town and do really well for himself, take over the ranch when his old man retires. But
instead he’s off to Denver, no intention of coming back? An’ his college buddy moving there with him?”

“What are you sayin?” I ask, but I know.

“I’m saying, you saw them at the Black’n’Blue Eagle?”

“Uh.”

“I’m saying, maybe they’re gay.”

Gay. Not queer, not homo, not faggots. Damn. I know the difference. I try to shrug like I don’t really care, but I ask, “What makes you think so?”

“I dunno, something about the way Dave looked at Andrew when I asked them what they’d be doing in Denver,” Chuck says. “A look.”

“That all it takes?” I ask. “A look?”

“Could have been more than that. I just got a feeling.”

“Stoutamire’d kill him if he found out.”

“You know that for a fact?”

“That’s what my old man would do.”

“Is that what you would do?” Chuck asks.

“If my kid was … ? No,” I say. “A course I just got girls.”

“So what would you do if one of them was a lesbian?”

I hate what ifs; they fuck up your brain an’ take up your time without puttin food on the table. But I guess I’ll play.

“She’d still be my girl,” I say. “I’d probly tell her to be careful an’ buy herself a .38.”

“I’ve known 4-H kids – teenagers – who were probably gay, and that’s what I tell them, minus the .38,” he says.

What the hell? “They tell you about it?” I ask him.

“Sometimes they tell me, sometimes I just get a feeling, sometimes I catch ‘em in the act.”

“You don’t tell ‘em to straighten up an’ get married an’ live a normal life like everyone else?”

“I don’t know if they can do that,” he says. “It’s not like they decided to be gay and then they can just turn around and choose to be straight and get married, not the way I see it.”

I’m lookin at him, tryin a see if he’s shittin me, but I can’t get a read. “So that’s what you tell ‘em?” I say.

“I tell ‘em they should think about going someplace else like Denver or Chicago where they can live a different life and most people are too busy minding their own business to care what they do.”

“Not San Francisco or New York?” I ask, ’cause I’ve heard. “The dens of iniquity?”
“Shit, Ennis, these are Wyoming kids,” he says. “I’m trying to give them realistic alternatives.”

“Well good for you,” I say, not knowin where else to go with it. I never before had a conversation with a man about people being gay that wasn’t jokes or threats or boasts. Except Jack, but we never had that conversation anyway.

“You traveled much Ennis?” Chuck asks.

“Far an’ wide,” I say. “All around Wyoming, an’ I even crossed state lines a couple a times. You?”

“I traveled a lot with Queenie and Julie when we were a family. You know, Disneyland, Hawaii, New York, Florida …”


“I like traveling,” he says. “I like seeing new places.”

“I’m not much for it myself,” I say.

“You should try it some day, get outta Wyoming,” he says.

A minute passes, crickets chirpin an’ the wind blowin lighter than usual.

Chuck gets to his feet. “I guess we better pack up an’ head out,” he says.

Drivin back, Chuck gets back to talkin, mostly about kids he knew in 4-H who rodeo’d. I’m wonderin if the day ever comes when I tell him about Jack. An’ me.

Back at the Flying W, we agree on Lonesome Lefty’s for next week.

I get home in time to shower an’ dress up in a white shirt, bolo tie an’ black jeans.

When I get to Junior’s she tells me I look good an’ asks what’s the occasion? I tell her I’m meetin someone at the Grand Hotel, an’ she looks at me odd but she don’t ask no more questions.

Curt’s home, first time just the three of us sat down together since I had ‘em over to the trailer before they got married, an’ Junior talked about their plans for the weddin and honeymoon.

I’d been thinkin this would be awkward – the three of us – but it’s not so bad. Junior made a nice meal – roast chicken, potatoes, rolls, salad and peach custard pie, an’ we play pinochle after.

With these two, you don’t have to be talkin all the time. Quiet is OK too. An’ they don’t seem to be talkin a secret language between themselves like people do sometimes. I still got no idea what she’s told Curt about me, if anything at all. He acts friendly enough that I doubt he knows.

*****

Alice an’ me sit down at the Grand Hotel. I order a beer an’ she asks for a gin an’ tonic.

“Tell me more about yourself,” she says after the drinks come.

“Ain’t much to tell,” I say. “I work on a ranch, I got my two daughters. An’ that’s about it for me.”

“I know there’s more in there, Ennis,” she says, smilin. Not a bad lookin woman, not at all.
But I need to lay it on the line, not drag her down into my shit.

“Tell you what,” I say. “You’re a real nice lady, nice to look at, just nice. Thing is, I ain’t lookin for nothin. I really ain’t lookin to change my situation.”

I can see her face sag a little, a bit a hope flyin away. Better this than tears later, I figure. “Well, you’re no monkey business, aren’t you?” she says. “I could say I’m not lookin either, that I just want a spend a little time with you, but it would be a lie. I guess I’ve been pretty obvious.”

“Nah, you been nice, and there’s nothin wrong with that,” I say. “I’m just sayin, I’m set up. Not lonely.”

“I get it,” she says. “You’re a nice man, Ennis. You caught my eye and I thought I’d check you out. Tell you the truth, I don’t know what I’m doin either. I might be movin to Idaho with my sister soon.”

Still doesn’t mean I’m goin a take up with her, not even for a night.

“That so,” I say. “I’m hopin all the best for you Alice. I really am.”

She gets it an’ she don’t seem too sore. She’s a talker, so we chat for a while an’ she tells me about her boy’s marriage comin up in a few weeks an’ her already-married son an’ grandson. I tell her a little about my girls. No tears when I drop her off, an’ I can hold my head up, not have to slink around like a beat puppy like after I dumped Cassie.

I get home an’ I’m more tired than I been any day this week from balin hay. Bein with people all day, that’s exhaustin.
The Shit Hits the Fan

Saturday, Aug. 11

I get held up by a visit from the vet for one a the horses we’re trainin, an’ Chuck is already on his second beer when I get to Lonesome Lefty’s nearly 9 o’clock. He smiles when he sees me. “Didn’t know if you’d show up.”

“I said I would,” I say. I tell him about the vet.

Two guys come an’ sit down at our table an’ he introduces them – Drew an’ Gerry is what I heard – an’ tells them the whole story about his long-lost ranch buddy, says we’re catchin up on old times.

One a them starts talkin about baseball. He’s a Yankees fan, havin a bad summer.

I’m thinkin Chuck’ll get goin on the Cubs, but instead he interrupts an’ says, “Ennis and I were just talking about crop rotation and grazing on leased pastures. Like I was saying, Ennis, it’s very important to follow the terms of the BLM lease. Did I ever tell you what happened to Bill Schecht up at the Circle Double-S?”

An’ he winks at me, so I say, “No, Chuck, what happened a him?” like I’m real interested.

Drew or Gerry says, “Chuck, don’t tell me you’re talkin shop on your night out?”

Chuck says, “Ennis here, he’s foreman at Stoutamire’s ranch just down the road. He was just asking me what the Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 has to say about breaking 10-year leases,” an’ he looks at me.

I say, slower’n I need to, “Sure enough. Important stuff to know about.”

Then one a them says to the other, “I can think of better ways to spend a Saturday night,” an’ they’re off.

Me an’ Chuck laugh, an’ he says, “Better than listening to them talk about the Yankees.”

I say, “Chuck, we really goin a talk about leasing rights?”

“Of course not,” he says. “Tell me how it went with Alice.”

“Real nice lady,” I say. “Not my cuppa tea.” I feel my face startin to burn.

Chuck laughs. “You don’t strike me as a tea drinker.” His eyes are twinklin.

“Never touch the stuff,” I say, keepin a straight face as long as I can, but I don’t last an’ I’m laughin too. Jesusfuckinchrist. Are we flirtin?

Chuck’s lips are twitchin. “More the coffee man, Ennis?”

“I drink it black, straight up,” I say. An’ now we’re both laughin hard, don’t even know what we’re laughin about. He goes to talk but he can’t get anythin out, an’ that’s funny too. We’re giggling like girls. I look around, no one is lookin.

Finally the laughin peters out an’ he says, “Have I told you how happy I am that we met up again
after all those years? No one’s made me laugh like that in I don’t know how long."

I just look at him, don’t know what to say. It’s been a long while since I laughed like that either. But I’m feelin something else too, like wantin to grab his face in my hands an’ shove my tongue into his mouth, then turn him around an’ bend him over the table, pull down his jeans an’ slam into his ass.

“Ennis?” he says. “You want to throw darts?”

I win big, always been a good shot, an’ he wants to go for two outta three, but there’s other guys waitin so I say, “Let’s have another beer.”

He starts a story about some foolishness he’d pulled back in high school with Drew an’ Gerry. I’m barely listenin’ ‘cause I wanna invite him over for another baseball game, an’ I’m lookin for the right words.

When we’re done with our beer, he asks if I want another, but I say I got a go.

Then I say it. “Cubs game tomorrow. At 4. You can come over if you want. I’ll feed you.”

He says he’s in, an’ he’ll take Julie’s car.

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Sunday August 12

I’m goin a grill steaks outside, an’ serve ‘em with baked potato an’ green beans. Junior thinks I don’t eat nothin that don’t come from a can or box, an’ I almost wanna call her an’ tell her about my feast, but then she’d ask what’s the occasion.

Chuck gets here at 4, just in time for the game. The Cubs are in first place in the NL-East, an’ they’re playin the Expos.

After a while I get goin’ with the food. When I go to serve it, the coffee table don’t seem good enough, so I set the little kitchen table with cloth napkins the girls got me, first time I used ‘em.

“Delicious,” Chuck says. “You’re a good cook.”

I know I’m blushin. I’m watchin him chewin an’ that gets me goin. Pretty soon I won’t be able to look at him at all anymore.

“How’s the foreman job going?” he asks.

“Good,” I say. If it wasn’t goin good, Chuck’s the last guy I’d tell. “The Texas kid I hired is workin out good. Only thing botherin me is I gotta take a goddamn course at U-W Extension in September.”

“They’re not so bad,” Chuck says. “I teach Extension classes about land management. You’re not worried, are you?”

He teaches college classes? He must a already figured I got no education from the way I talk an’ me workin as a ranch hand all them years.

“I never finished high school,” I say. Shit, never made it past a freshman. I cain’t look him in the face.
“You’re a smart guy,” he says. “You catch on quickly.” Bridget used a say that, tried real hard to keep me in school.

“Anyway, it’s not like regular college,” Chuck goes on. “You’ll do fine. I can help you out if you need it.”

As if I’d ask him for help.

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The Cubs end up beatin the Expos 7-3, an’ I’m thinkin about askin’ Chuck if he wants to stay for another beer, but something stops me.

“Hey, you wanna go riding again next Sunday?” he asks me on his way out.

I say sure.

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Friday August 17

Junior’s comin over here for supper, said she’s goin a cook chicken curry an’ show me how. I told her I never had it, sounds too exotic for my taste, but she said it’s in the “Joy of Cooking” so how strange can it be.

First time we’ll be hangin around alone together since the weddin. An’ she wanted a come over here, not me go into town.

I let the hands go early – 6:30, early for hayin season. We usually go ‘til sunset. The hands are grateful enough to be out early on a Friday.

Junior pulls up just as I’m gettin back to the cottage, an’ a course I need a shower bad, hayseeds all over under my clothes.

She goes out an’ picks wildflowers to put in a vase.

I ask her if she wants a beer, an’ she says sure.

We cut up a chicken an’ set to cookin the chicken curry an’ rice. She’d brought over all the groceries, includin currants an’ almonds. I tell her those sound to me like ingredients for dessert, but she makes me get my readin glasses an’ shows me the recipe.

The chicken needs 40 minutes to cook in the oven, so she sets us up to pit cherries for pie. She brought over the pie crust, tells me she made it herself from scratch.

“Daddy, I’m sorry it took me so long to set up this Friday night thing,” she says. “I’ve been working all the shifts I can get.”

“That’s all right, Darlin,” I say. “Nice a you to come over tonight.”

She tells me she’s goin a take a painting class at Central Wyoming College in the fall, she wants to paint ranch scenes like she saw at a museum in Denver. She always did like to draw an’ color. I tell her I’ll buy one a her paintings to go on the wall in the livin room, an’ she laughs, says she’ll give it to me free. Growin up, my folks had a cowboy goin into the sunset paintin over the couch.

She fills the pie, just in time to take out the curry an’ put the pie in the oven. We eat the rice an’
curry with almonds sprinkled on top, an’ it’s damn good, interestin spices. I tell her so.

“You saw how easy it is,” she says. “You can make it yourself. I’m going to leave the curry powder and currants and almonds here.”

I ask her if she wants another beer, but she says she’ll have a coffee, so I make some fresh. I see that she’s not goin a mention the whole Jack thing, an’ if I don’t we can keep goin like she don’t know.

I hate to bring up such a thing, but I don’t want it hangin between us neither.

“I guess you an’ your ma talked about things before your weddin,” I say when we’re sat back down.

I can see her face getting soft, not at all mad like I might a thought. “Yeah, Daddy.”

“You know I never meant to hurt no one,” I say.

“Of course you didn’t. I mean, it hurt Mama something bad, but I think she’s getting over it. And I’m real sorry to hear about Jack Twist. You two must have known each other a long time.”

So Alma told her everything. “Twenty years,” I say. An’ now I gotta ask: “You talk to Curt about this?"

She squirms a little. “I hope you don’t mind. I didn’t want to start out with secrets.”

I’m not goin a ask how Curt took it. I guess he let me in their house anyways.

The timer rings, an’ Junior gets up to take the pie out of the oven.

“Daddy, I can stay for pie or I can take off if you’re too tired,” she says.

Well, I am workin in the mornin, but it seems like she’s got more she wants to talk about.

“You stay,” I say, an’ I get myself another beer.

“We could sit outside or watch ‘Dallas,’” she says.

“Nah, it’s just reruns now,” I say. “Let’s sit outside.”

It’s just about dark. We sit in quiet for a while, an’ then she gets up an’ brings out pieces a pie. I guess she was done talkin anyways.

The pie is delicious, of course. We sit a while longer, an’ then she says it’s time to go. I help her gather up the stuff she brought, an’ walk her out to her car.

“We’ll do this again soon, Daddy,” she says.

I kiss the top of her head. “For sure, Darlin.”

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Saturday Aug. 18

Chuck is sittin with his buddy Al when I get to the Black’n’Blue Eagle. They’re talkin about their marriages an’ divorces, an’ it’s nothin I want a talk about, so I just drink.
Then Allen asks me, “You married?”

“Divorced,” I say. He’s waitin for me to say more, but no.

Allen turns to Chuck, “So when are you goin a start datin?” an’ that gets my attention.

“I still have Julie at home,” Chuck says.

Allen laughs. “Julie’s old enough now she could handle you gettin on with your life.”

Chuck don’t say nothin for once, an’ he don’t look happy to be havin the conversation.

“Christ, Chuck, the woman would probly have her own place, or there’s motels, an’ you drive a truck, don’tcha? Lots a places to do it.”

Chuck gives a little “Hmm.” Even I can see he’s uncomfortable. I down my beer an’ clear my throat.

“Chuck, can you explain again about them 10-year lease agreements?” I say. “I was readin over Stoutamire’s contract with the Bureau an’ somethin don’t seem quite right.”

“Really, what’s that?” he asks, an’ I say some nonsense about successor clauses an’ leasebacks.

Chuck starts up a long explanation, an’ Allen looks from him to me an’ mumbles something, then gets up an’ walks over to the bar.

“You know that won’t work with any of my buddies who actually ranch,” he says, an’ we laugh.

“C’mon, you think I cain’t tell?” I say. “I seen his hands, they never picked up nothin heavier’n a pencil.”

We play one game a pool an’ Chuck wins, but I don’t wanna stay for two outta three.

“You’re feeling OK?” he asks.

“Just tired,” I say. “I got no sleep last night an’ I worked all day.” No lie. Big supper with Junior an’ pie, an’ I had one a them nightmares about Jack that woke me up at 3 an’ I couldn’t get back to sleep. Me cradlin Jack’s bloody head in my arms after the tire irons, my girls standin around askin’ me what happened.

“See you tomorrow?” Chuck asks, an’ I say sure enough.

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Sunday, August 19

This time, it’s a cold an’ cloudy day for August, an’ we drive north from Riverton to near the Boysen Reservoir.

We ride in near silence for a few hours ‘till we get to a high place an’ set up for lunch.

I brought roast beef sandwiches an’ a thermos a coffee. He gets to talkin about growin up in Riverton – his old man, dead only a year or so now, his ma who lives in Laramie with the sister Martha who’s married to a cop with a couple a kids, an’ his older sister Barb, divorced, one kid, livin in California an’ rarely seen.
“You see your brother much?” he asks.

“It’s been a few years,” I say. “He’s in Montana. Got kids with two different women, an’ now he’s single again. He goes from one thing to another.”

“Any other brothers or sisters?”

“My sis, she lives in Cheyenne, four kids pert’ near grown. Haven’t seen her in quite some time.” I don’t want a talk about my family, so I ask, “Whatever happened to your buddy Johnny? He ever make it to the big time?”

He stares at me, then says, “Ennis? Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

He takes a deep breath and lets it out slow. “You saw us that day, didn’t you?”

I don’t know what he’s talkin about. “At the Bar Eight?”

“Yes. Please don’t pretend you don’t remember.” I never seen him serious like this.

“What is it I’m supposed a be rememberin?”

“Me and Johnny? In the feed barn?”

Oh, shit. “I never seen a thing,” I say. It’s true, whatever he’s thinkin I seen.

“You’re sure?”

“Swear to God.”

He’s quiet for a minute. I hear one a the horses nickerin.

“Maybe it was your brother,” he says. “I thought for sure it was you.” I cain’t believe K.E. would a seen something like what I’m guessin it is, an’ not said or done nothin, but I don’t say it.

“Anyway, I haven’t seen Johnny since the day before I went away to college in Laramie,” he says.

“Mmm,” I say.

“He took off to New York. Never heard from him again.”

The wind suddenly picks up, an’ I’m wonderin if the rain won’t come before nightfall.

Chuck is breathin deep an’ his face is crossed with shadows.

“Can I tell you about this Ennis? I feel like I can trust you.”

My heart is startin to pound loud enough I can hear it. “I know how to keep a secret, if that’s what you’re askin,” I say.

He reaches over for the thermos an’ pours us both another cup, takes a deep breath.

“I’ve only talked about this once before, with a psychologist in Casper,” he says. “You might think different about me after I tell you.”

I look at him. How bad can it be? No worse than me, I’m sure of it. But once he tells me, he won’t
be able to take it back, an’ we won’t be able to go back to where we were.

No way to stop him sayin it either.

“I got no call to think bad about no one,” I say. “Why don’t you just spit it out.”

He’s starin at a crow flyin high over a tree. “The thing is, Johnny and I, we had something going on between us, if you know what I mean.” He turns to look at me.

I nod an’ say “Uh-huh,” but I can feel my heart startin up again. How did we jump from buddies who shoot pool to this so quick?

He’s back lookin at the tree. “Just blow jobs and handjobs. That’s what we were doing in the feed barn. I could swear you saw us.”

“Maybe it was K.E.,” I say, but I’m thinkin K.E. wouldn’t a let it be.

“We got you drunk to find out what you knew,” Chuck says.

“Well, I didn’t know nothin back then neither. So why are you tellin me now?” I ask.

“I want you to know. Are you OK if I tell you more?”

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to.”

“Go on then.”

“Well, Johnny and I were neighbors in Riverton, and we started fooling around when we were 16. We dated girls too. I thought we’d both grow out of it and get married someday. Then Labor Day weekend, our last night in Riverton before we were supposed to leave for U-W, we took these girls out to the drive-in, all four of us on the bench seat of my truck. After we dropped ‘em off, we drove up here near the reservoir, parked the truck and drank whiskey and looked at the stars, and we kissed each other for the first time.”

He looks right at me. I’m tryin to hold his eyes an’ not flinch.

“He told me he loved me,” Chuck says, shaking his head. “He said let’s not to to college, let’s move to New York where we can do whatever we want and no one’ll give a shit.”

He drains his coffee.

“I said no, I’m going to get an education and get married after that. He said, ‘We’re queer, we have no business getting married,’ and I said, ‘Maybe you, not me,’ and he cried. I felt awful, so I just drove him home. Next morning around 7, he came over carrying two suitcases, and said he was going to New York and I could go with him or not. I said, ‘You’ll write to me, won’t you? Come back to visit?’ He didn’t promise anything. Long story short, I drove him the bus station and he got on a bus and never came back.”

“An’ you never heard from him again?” I ask.

“Never. Neither did his parents. I went to U-W and started going out with Queenie – I knew her from high school – and I knocked her up in junior year and we got married. She dropped out of college and moved back in with her parents. After Julie was born, I finished my degree and moved in there too, nicest people you’ll ever meet. But our marriage wasn’t good. Queenie started
stepping out and I couldn’t blame her. It wasn’t until my dad died that I came to my senses, said what am I doing in this marriage, and went to see the shrink in Casper.”

I look at him, never seen him so serious.

“You know what I’m tellin you, right?” he finally asks.

“You still that way? Or did the shrink set you right?”

“No, the shrink said it was OK to be this way, just be careful. So I haven’t told anyone. Well, just one, but he’s far away from here. I wanted to tell you. If you don’t want to hang out with me anymore, I’m just asking you to keep this between us.”

I want a ask him again, why tell me? But I know why. I don’t know how he figured me out, an’ it don’t even matter. I like how he’s not pushin things past where I want a go just now.

“Why shouldn’t we hang out?” I say. “It’s none a my business. If I was a religious man, I’d say only God can judge, you know?”

“Well, thanks. Really,” Chuck says. After a while, he gets up an’ says, “We should get going, huh.”

Then something comes over me, an’ I walk over an’ pull him up into my arms an’ I hug him, a man-hug, I hope. He’s huggin’ back an’ I let him hold on a little longer than I think I should.

I don’t hear the sobs, but I can feel them, an’ I rub his back. I feel that electric current goin through me again.

I’ve seen men cry before – my brother K.E. an’ other drunks, Jack a few times when he thought I was asleep, an’ even guys on ranches when someone come to them with bad enough news. I don’t know what to say.

I pull away first. Chuck’s wipin’ his eyes with his fists. “I don’t know where that came from.”

“It’s all right,” I say.

We’re walkin back to the horses an’ Chuck says, “You’re a good listener Ennis.” Shit, first time anyone’s ever said that.

We’re both quiet on the ride down an’ in the truck.

*****

Back at the Flying W, Chuck says, “Julie’s going camping with some friends next week. You want to skip the bar next Saturday and come over to my house? I’ll make you supper and we can rent a VCR and watch a video.”

I’m hearin something different from what he’s sayin, an’ I’m gettin tingles all over my body. I’m thinkin this is it – the shit has hit the fan, an’ I let it happen. Still got a chance to tell him he’s got it all wrong, nothin personal but I don’t want a be hangin around with no queer.

But that’s bullshit. I tell him OK, see you next week.

*****

When I get home, I walk to my closet and open the door. I’d pinned up one a Jack’s rodeo pictures
a few weeks ago.

“Can I get into this again?” I ask out loud, like I expect a voice to yell “no.” Or maybe, “yes.”

But nothin happens. The shirts an’ the postcard an’ Jack’s beautiful face stay just the way they are.

“I didn’t go lookin for it, Jack,” I say. Hell, I never went lookin for Jack in the first place, but he found me anyways, an’ after all this time a blamin him an’ hatin myself, my thinkin today is, thank god he did.

Even though I feel like a fool, I kiss Jack’s picture.

I know how bad I fucked it up with Jack.

But I’m not 19 no more, not even 39 an’ scared shitless. I know who I am. The worst I thought could happen has already happened, Jack gettin killed, Alma an’ Junior findin out about me.

No. Truth is, what kind a fool wouldn’t be scared, ‘cause the same assholes that killed Earl an’ Jack are still out there, always will be. What I mean is, I ain’t goin a let ‘em run me no more. Whoever is givin me this second chance, god or Jack or someone else, I don’t want to fuck it up again.

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Saturday, August 25

I’m not workin today, so I get ready for a little road trip.

I open my top dresser drawer an’ take out an old paper lunchbag filled with a few things I’ve kept over the years. My mama’s rosary, Jack’s lighter, a braided leather bracelet Junior made in 4-H.

It’s the wedding band I’m lookin for. Funny, I never did hock it, not that it’d be worth much. I put it on an’ drive into Casper. I ain’t goin a buy a new tube a K-Y jelly in Riverton where everyone knows I’m divorced an’ single.

It’s hot as hell today an’ the air conditioner in the truck is long gone, sweat on my face catchin the dust that flies in the window. An’ now there’s George Strait on the radio: “You’ll always be a fire I can't put out.” Why are they always playin these damn songs anyways.
August Heat

Chuck P.O.V.

Saturday August 25

It’s steaming hot, maybe 95 degrees by 3 p.m., air heavy with humidity.

I go into town and rent a VCR player, “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid” and “Giant” at the Video Center, and stop by Monroe’s to pick up groceries. Ennis’s daughter Francine is at the checkout.

*****

Of course I remembered Ennis Del Mar. It was the second summer Johnny and I worked at the Bar Eight. My uncle Dan told me this kid and his brother K.E. had shown up last fall answering an ad for two ranch helpers – the brother said the kid was part of the deal.

Uncle Dan had asked if the kid shouldn’t be in school, but they insisted he was 16. We found out later he was only 14 when he got there – 15 when Johnny and I met him and already taller than his brother, even slouching like he usually did. He worked harder than his brother did too.

Their parents had died in a car accident, and none of us knew what to say about that. K.E. acted like nothing bothered him, until he started drinking, which was a lot, and then he would pick a fight or get angry about something, and then get all weepy about their parents and their old ranch. K.E. made money on the side buying and reselling beer and whiskey for profit, all against the rules.

Ennis was quiet, tall and scrawny. His shirts were too tight and his jeans too short. My uncle told me he gave him a used pair of his own Size 11 boots because Ennis’s toes were sticking out of his old ones, Size 9. He “kept to himself,” as people always describe their neighbors who’ve gone berserk, when TV reporters come around. You could count on one hand the number of words he spoke in a day. To people anyway. He did talk to the horses, and they seemed to listen.

K.E. monitored how much his little brother had to drink – no whiskey. Ennis would nurse a beer for a long time and stay quiet. When K.E. would start with his antics, Ennis would just look away embarrassed or go out to “check on the horses,” who had been bedded down hours earlier. Sometimes he’d sleep in one of the barns.

A couple of times, one of the other ranch hands would goad him into a fight, and then live to regret it. Scrawny as he was, Ennis’s reflexes were quick and he knew how to land a punch to do maximum damage. What got him angry enough to fight was seeing a horse mistreated, or even hearing someone talk about rough handling of any piece of stock.

Johnny said he looked haunted. The one thing he seemed to like was music. He’d hang around and watch when Johnny and I sang and played guitar. Sometimes he’d climb up to his top bunk and pretend to sleep, peeking over once in a while.

Then there was that day in the feed barn. It was July, before haying had started, so the barn was nearly empty. I was standing along the wall where I could see the door, and Johnny was on his knees sucking my dick. The sun was bright like always. I saw someone come in and I tried to pull Johnny’s head away. I swear it was Ennis. He looked around, stopped – I was sure he’d seen us – then turned and walked out.
We started panicking. What if he told my uncle? Or the lead hand? Johnny decided we should buy a bottle of whiskey and get Ennis drunk to find out what he knew. K.E. sometimes went into town and drank at a bar on Saturday night, so we waited.

Ennis didn’t act any different around the ranch or in the bunkhouse. Finally, Saturday night came and we pumped him up with whiskey. He kept quiet, but he laughed out loud at our jokes. We taught him the dirty lyrics to “Strawberry Roan,” and we got him singing Hank Williams and Johnny Cash songs with us too. I remember a few Saturday nights like that, and taking him to the county fair.

We let him in on our poker game, which K.E. had already been kicked out of. If Ennis had seemed simple or slow on first meeting, he proved himself very clever with the cards and the psychological game too.

Johnny decided that if Ennis had seen anything, he wasn’t going to speak up about it. At the end of the summer, we left most of our clothes with my uncle and asked him to give them to Ennis because he had long grown out of everything he had.

The Del Mar brothers worked for my uncle another year or two after that, but I didn’t see them again because I started working dude ranches for my summer job. I thought about them a few times over the years, how sad it was to be out on their own at such a young age.

When I sat down at Junior’s wedding and was introduced to Ennis Del Mar, well, that was a shock. He looked like a grown-up version of the little kid I had known. Clearly still worked on a ranch. All man, all hard angles, big calloused hands, knobby knuckles, grunts, gravelly voice. But his eyes … something amazingly soft in those eyes, if only he would let you see them.

It turned out I still knew how to make him laugh. And make him to smile – just get him talking about his daughters or horses.

When we went outside for a smoke and I saw his face in late-afternoon sun, he looked golden. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to squeeze his biceps, grab his ass, rub my crotch into his. I could feel my dick harden, and I prayed he wouldn’t notice.

But I saw him look down, and I think he did notice, because while we were standing there it occurred to me that maybe, just maybe, his reticence, his temper, his failed marriage and whatever happened with the waitress added up to something.

Seemed unlikely, and the last time I thought a guy might be gay, I learned the hard way that you need a lot more evidence before you even think about acting on it.

The day after Junior’s wedding, I mentioned to Julie how much I enjoyed meeting up with Ennis again. I was surprised when she said, “Junior was so happy he showed up.”

I asked why he wouldn’t show, and Julie said she didn’t know the whole story. “Junior says he’s a loner. He went into hibernation sometime last year. She was real worried about him.”

Then I was even more intrigued.

After the wedding, I took his jacket out to Stoutamire’s, then I didn’t see him for a few weeks. I thought about going back to the ranch on some excuse, but that seemed too obvious and I didn’t want to freak him out in front of his boss.

Julie knew I wanted to see with him again – she must have thought it strange, but she didn’t say anything. One Saturday evening she called from work and told me he was at the Buckhorn Bar in
Lander, so I drove down there. I felt the same chemistry I had at the wedding, even stronger.

I left the bar while Ennis was in the can, and I waited for him at his truck so I could re-issue the invitation to shoot pool. I thought he might punch me, but he surprised me with a “yes,” and then Saturday night pool became a kind of standing date over the last month or so. It’s the highlight of my week.

I took it hard when my old man died in February last year, stopped going out, took time off work and did nothing for almost three weeks. My boss said health insurance would pay for a psychologist, so I went to see one in Casper. In our very first session, I came out to her as gay and she suggested I had never properly grieved for Johnny. She said most psychologists don’t see homosexuality as a disease anymore, and if I wanted someone to try and cure me, it would not be her. She said she saw it as part of a person’s identity.

I worked with her for a few months. She helped me decide to ask for a divorce – Queenie and I had been living separate for two years by then – and start “seeking male company” as she put it, not an easy thing in Wyoming. I drove down to an adult store in Fort Collins she told me about and picked up some magazines. I couldn’t bring myself to answer classified ads, but I found out about some places in Denver. I went and sought male company a few times, one-night stands that felt great (and scary) in the moment, but the next day I’d feel lonelier than ever.

Not the night of the wedding, but a few weeks later, I started to think that maybe Ennis was The One. Besides just looking at him, I love talking to him, getting him to open up, eating with him, drinking with him, watching his responses to things, making him laugh, him making me laugh. I’m 42 and I think I’m falling in love for the first time in my life – head over heels. It’s scary and it’s exhilarating.

I had a hard time getting a read on Ennis. At first, I couldn’t figure out if the man was interested in women or not. Queenie? The waitress? No, no. Then in the past few weeks, I’ve been getting stronger signals that maybe he goes the other way.

First, my not-so-subtle flirting, and he gave it back to me. Then when I spilled my guts to him last week, he didn’t call me names or beat the shit out of me. He even hugged me – I can still feel it. I was totally overwhelmed, having this man’s arms around me after what I’d told him. He’s got to be feeling what I’m feeling.

If I make a move and I’m wrong about him, I can’t imagine what he’d be capable of. He’s going to have to make the first move.

*****

The front door is open to the screen, but Ennis rings the doorbell and stands there, 12-pack of beer hoisted on one hip. He’s fresh-shaven, handsome as always, glistening with sweat – no air conditioning in his truck, he says. He doesn’t dress for the heat; he has on the usual shirt – cuffs rolled up though – jeans and boots. I’m wearing shorts, T-shirt and bare feet.

“At least take your boots off,” I say, and he complies.

He’d never been past the front hallway of the house before, and when he comes all the way in and sees the chrome and leather, his eyes open wide. “Nice place,” he says. “Holy shit. I never seen nothin like this before.”

“It’s not me,” I tell him. “Everything belongs to the guy I’m housesitting for.”
I explain about Kerby Crick, how he inherited the ranch from his dad a few years ago, met a
woman in Phoenix, married her and brought her up here and re-decorated the house for her. But
after one winter, she said she couldn’t stand Wyoming and they moved to Arizona. Crick couldn’t
decide what to do with the house and the Quarter Horse ranch his dad left him, and four years later
he still can’t decide. He had me move into the house, but I don’t have anything to do with the
breeding operation. The Ferrises – a husband and wife team – live in a smaller house at the
property line and they run the ranch, along with two grown sons.

“I’m living here on borrowed time,” I tell Ennis, “but I’m enjoying it in the meantime.”

I open two beers and hand him one, and something catches my eye. He’s wearing a wedding band.
What the fuck?

We walk out to the deck, a little cooler than the kitchen because it’s in shade and there’s a tiny
breeze. The view of the late afternoon sun is spectacular.

“It looks like everyone’s gone for the day,” I say.

We sit down at the glass-topped wicker table. Ennis gets right to the point.

“Uh, Chuck, I got a coupla questions.”

“First, let me ask you something,” I cut in. “What’s with the wedding ring?” It’s driving me crazy.

He looks at his hand, turns red and mumbles something as he pulls it off and stuffs it into his jeans
pocket.

“What?” I ask.

“Huh,” he answers, and that’s that.

I wait a few seconds, then ask, “What was your question?”

“Uh, what we was talkin about up near Boysen?”

I brace myself. “Shoot.”

He looks me in the eye.

“No-one else knows?” His voice is soft.

“Just the shrink.” It’s not quite true, but the other one who knows is Kerby, who won’t say
anything.

Then the shocker: “You think you loved him?” Voice even softer.

“Johnny? I dunno, we were just kids.”

He takes a while to absorb that, then asks, “Anyone else?”

“Anyone else what?”

“Any other … guy?”

“No one important,” I say. “A few one-night stands in Denver. And one inappropriate crush.”
Ennis nods slowly. “Uh-huh. So why tell me?”

I can feel my heart racing and blood rushing to my face, but I try to sound calm. “You’re the first person I’ve met, other than the shrink, who I thought I could trust,” I say.

Ennis cocks his head sideways, eyebrow up. “You can trust me, but how did ya figure that when we ain’t hardly known each other but a coupla months?” The glow of late afternoon on Ennis’s face, the golden highlights in his hair … goddamn, he’s beautiful.

“You could say I’ve known you for 25 years,” I say.

He gives me a sad smile. “Chuck, if I’d a known this about you 25 years ago, I probly would a beat the crap outta you,” he says. “Well, maybe not me, but K.E. for sure. He wouldn’t a put up with it. That’s how we was raised.”

I feel like I’m about to cross a barbed wire fence. “It’s how we were all raised,” I say. “But something changed for you … right?”

Ennis looks at me a long time, eyes sparkling. “I changed …” he says.

I feel myself flush again, and now the heat goes through my body to my groin.

“You know what’s happening here, don’t you?” I ask. “You know I’m falling for you?”

We stare at each other a good while. I see everything in his eyes – anger, hope, then a kind of sheepishness like he’s a little boy asking his mama if she still loves him after he commits some minor naughtiness.

Finally, Ennis gets up slowly, clears his throat, lopes around the table, stands behind me and leans down until his mouth is inches from my ear and says, almost in a whisper, “Let’s go inside.”

I’m frozen, can’t move.

He puts his hands on my shoulders, guiding me up out of the chair and turning me around to face him.

He looks me right in the eye, hands still on my shoulders, no shame. “OK?” he asks.

“OK,” I say.

We walk to the door, Ennis’s palm on my back. Every nerve ending in my body is tingling. I open the screen door and we go in. It must be almost 90 degrees in here.

He closes both doors and locks the inside one, walks to the living room and closes and locks the front door. No moving air and it’s fucking hot in here, more ways than one.

Then he grabs my face and kisses me on the lips, a hard, wet smack, walking me backward until I’m up against the wall. I hope my knees won’t buckle under me.

Ennis slips his tongue into my mouth and leans into me so close I feel our hard-ons touch, and then he grabs my ass and grinds into me. I grab his ass to push in even closer and to keep myself steady.

I have never been kissed like this before, his tongue down my throat, teeth biting my lips. He pulls my T-shirt off, then goes to work on the buttons of his shirt one-handed, the other hand all over my ass, kissing me the whole time. He stops to take his shirt off and I pull his T-shirt over his head.
We’re both sweating, intense heat radiating from his body. He’s back at me with his mouth, all over my neck and back to my mouth, and he shoves his knee between my knees and now we’re grinding on each other’s hips. This is nothing like kissing a girl.

I pull his head off my face and say, “Ennis, I’m going to come in my pants if you keep it up.”

He growls into my ear, “You ever been fucked by a man, Chuck Ausman?” It’s exactly what I want, what I’ve been wanting for all these years, but I hadn’t expected anything like this so soon.

“No, do it,” I say. I’m panting.

He backs away a step. I see the huge bulge pointing left in his jeans. “Where?” he asks. The room beyond the kitchen is pretty comfortable with a big overstuffed leather sofa, so I say, “Back there.”

He keeps his hands on me as we go down the three steps, and then he lets go and walks around closing the drapes. I stand near the sofa waiting. Ennis’s stride is not his usual slouch, but even more low-slung, like a panther stalking prey.

He’s on fire. He grabs me and kisses me some more, big hands all over my ass. Then, in one amazingly quick move, he opens my buckle, button and zipper, and then his own. He pulls off his jeans, so I do the same. No underwear, and he’s hung like horse – big, uncut hardness.

Then we’re kissing again, or should I say devouring each other. Strong salty taste.

“C’mon,” he says, pulling down my briefs, then turning me and pushing me onto the sofa on my knees. He’s behind me, half-standing half-kneeling rubbing himself on me from behind, nibbling on my ear, breathing hard.

He whispers in my ear, “Don’t worry, I’m goin a be real gentle with you.”

He grabs his jeans and takes a tube of some kind of ointment out of a pocket, squeezes a big dab onto his hand. I feel him probing around my hole, spreading the slick wet stuff from the tube. It feels so good. Meanwhile, he’s leaning over and kissing my back and my neck. He puts one finger in, lets me get used to it, then sticks in another one. I’ve tried it myself with fingers, but it was nothing like this. My dick is rock hard.

Then he reaches around and grabs my dick with his wet hand and pumps it a few times, while he’s rubbing the head of his slicked-up dick on my hole.


Then, oh my God. The pain is so intense that I yell, “Jesus! Fuck!” Ennis stops moving and asks, “You want me to stop?”

No, I need him inside. “No! Keep going!” He starts slow, but soon he’s building up speed, gasping and grunting loudly with every thrust.

Even though there’s pain, I’ve never felt this turned on. I reach down to touch my dick, and Ennis gently takes my hand off and puts his own spare hand there and gives it a few pulls. His mouth is wet and hot on my neck and shoulder. When I’m about to come, he puts in it two more thrusts, and yells “Jesus God! Jack!” and explodes inside me, and a second later I’m coming. The intensity is like nothing I’ve ever felt.

But Jack? Maybe I heard wrong.
We both slump down on the sofa, him behind me. We’re wet and spent, sticking to each other and me to the leather sofa. After a minute, Ennis rolls off into a sitting position, and I turn around to face him.


He looks at me. “Aw shit, I hurt you.”


“Sorry,” he says, but his eyes are laughing. “Didn’t mean to be so rough …” and he mutters something about “couldn’t help it … your ass … ”

I grab his hand and kiss it. “This was good, Ennis.”

He looks at me for a second, then jumps up and says, “I’m hungry, huh? Weren’t you goin a cook me somethin?”

Ennis goes upstairs for a shower, and I clean up downstairs, then grill burgers on the deck and put together chips, salad and boiled corn on the cob. He comes back down in just his jeans and undershirt, hot as hell.

He takes a horse magazine from the living room, goes out to his truck for reading glasses, and walks back out to the deck to read. I don’t think I’ve ever before put reading glasses together with sexy, but there he is.

We eat outside as the sun sinks lower in the sky. I try to keep a light conversation going – not a word about what just happened, telling him about a rancher I had to deal with last week. He seems to be crawling into himself, carrying on his side of the conversation with nothing more than grunts. Just as he finishes eating, he washes down his last bite with a swig of beer, then stands up abruptly and says, “Gotta go.”

No, he can’t just run away like that.


His body stiffens and his jaw clenches. “You know I ain’t stayin the night,” he says.

“I rented some movies,” I say.


“Then let’s stay out here and watch the sun set.”

Seems to be OK with him. We clear the table, grab beers, and walk back out to the deck.

I can tell he wants to say something, so I ask, “What is it, Ennis?”

“Oh, none a my business,” he says. “But what about them one-night stands?”

“Three,” I say. “In Denver over the last year.”

“The whole time you was married you didn’t ...?”
“No, I was trying to be normal and I was scared shitless of my old man. I kept hoping the feelings would go away.”

“Didn’t work, huh?”

“Not by a long shot.”

“So how’d these one-night stands come about?”

“I went to a gay bar in Denver and I picked up guys, or they picked me up.”

His face screws up. “What the fuck is a gay bar?”

“C’mon, Ennis, you must’ve heard about gay bars.”

“Yeah, I heard,” he says. “But what the fuck is it?”

I plow ahead. “You walk in, it looks like any other bar, but all the couples are gay. Women with women, men with men. Dancing. Mostly men at this place. Lots of singles.”

“In Denver,” he says, as if he doesn’t believe it.

“Yeah, the one I went to is called Freddie’s,” I say. “They even have a gay rodeo. Serious bull riding.”

Ennis snorts. “Now you’re fuckin with me for sure. How’d you know about this place anyways?”

“A magazine I got from a porn shop in Fort Collins.”

“And you wasn’t scared a guys waitin outside?”

“I didn’t see any.”

“ Took balls to walk in there,” he says. “Don’t think I would a done it.”

“I was just gawking at first,” I say. “Mostly looked like ranch guys, regular guys, some store-bought cowboys, some really fruity-looking fellows. Everyone from kids to a couple of old guys who must’ve been in their 70s.”

Ennis is frowning and shaking his head. “Cain’t picture it.”

So I continue. “First time, I’m sitting at the bar and a guy sits next to me and starts chatting me up, he’s got creased jeans and he’s treating me like a hick, so I kinda shut down and he moves on. Then a guy my age comes along. No talk at all, he just motions me into men’s room, into a stall and he doesn’t kiss, just wants … Ennis?” A storm cloud has come over his face and he’s clenching his fists “You want to hear this?”

“Chuck,” he says, “If you’re with me now, you don’t let another guy lay a fuckin hand on you, you hear?” His voice is low, almost a growl.

If I’m with him now? “You want me to shut up?” I ask.

“Nah, finish tellin me what happened.”

“So, he just wanted me to suck his dick,” I say. “Nothing in it for me.”
“And you did?”
“Well, yeah.”
“An’ who else?”
“A younger guy. We were talking and then we danced and he kissed me, right there in the bar.”

Ennis is shaking his head. “Dancin.”
“I like dancing,” I say. “Anyway, we ended up at my motel and I drove him back to the bar later to get his car.”

“And you …”

“He blew me and he blew his own wad in his jeans. Very nervous kid.”

He lets out a laugh. “An’ who else?”

“Last time, another younger guy, we gave each other blow jobs in the men’s room.”

“You ever see any a these guys again?”

“No.”

“Plannin to go back?” His voice is very low.

“No,” I say. Not if I don’t have to, anyway, but I don’t say that. “What about you?”

“Me? I never been to no gay bar. Never been to Denver.”

“But you’ve been with guys before, right?” He had to have been; he handled me like he knew exactly what he was doing.

Long pause. “One.”

One? “You wanna talk about it?” I ask.

He shakes his head, purses his lips and I know there’s no going there now, and I can tell he’s going to bolt any second, and I don’t want him to.

“It’s OK, Ennis,” I say. He doesn’t move. I pull my chair around the table so we’re sitting knee-to-knee. This thing is powerful, I have to say.

He turns his head to face me. “I really didn’t think I’d get back into this again,” he says. “You know, we gotta be real fuckin careful.”

“Of course,” I say.

“No, seriously, I knew two guys got killed for it,” he says. “One 30 years ago, one just last year. No joke, we gotta watch ourselves.”

Just last year, and his buddy from near the Montana border died last year? I wonder … shit.

“I know,” I say. “It’s just between you and me.”

“An’ you’re not tellin no one, an’ I don’t have to worry about you tomcattin around Denver?”
“No.” Not if I’m with you now …

He’s quiet for a while, then says, “Chuck, ya gotta tell me if there’s somethin when you look at me makes you say, ‘Oh yeah, he’s one a them guys.’”

And now I see the fear in his eyes, and in the twilight he looks 15 again, scared, vulnerable – never mind the crows’ feet, sun-worn skin, graying hair, any sign of age.

“No Ennis,” I say, no hesitation. “Jesus Christ, look at you. You come off like Clint Eastwood. How the fuck would anyone know?”

“How did you know?”

“I didn’t know, asshole. You made the first move.”

“After you chased me down, you son of a bitch,” he says, but he’s relaxing. “Even at Junior’s wedding, you was makin’ eyes at me. Don’t deny it.” The tone is teasing now.

“I was making eyes at you?” I say with a chuckle.

“And tonight, you’re what, fallin’ for me? For Christ’sake, Chuck, don’t say shit like that.”

“If I hadn’t gone after you, we’d never …” I say, not knowing how to finish that sentence. “That’s true, right? You never would have …”

“You could be wrong about that,” he says.

“You could have fucked me that night at the wedding,” I say.

He looks at me. “The night of the weddin,” he says. “Behind the church hall?”

“Standing up.”

Now we’re both laughing, and he says, “You’re a crazy son-of-a-bitch, know that?”

“I’m just glad it turned out the way it did,” I say. “We got to know each other better before …”

I grab his hand. He turns his face to me.

“There’s air conditioning in my room,” I say.

“Why didn’t you say that before?” he says. “You wanna …?”

We go back in and up the stairs. In the doorway to the room, he stops and eyes the king-sized bed and says, “I ain’t never seen a bed that big.”

I’m half-expecting him to pick me up and throw me onto the bed. But he’s hesitant, so I take his hand and lead him over. He’s docile, as if in a dream state. A whole different Ennis. We lie down and kiss for a long time, no rutting.

I’m rubbing him with my hand through his jeans – he’s hard again, no problem – then I’m taking them off and he’s not moving, just watching me. I kiss down his chest and stomach and start licking and sucking his dick.

He runs his fingers through my hair and moans. I take my time – Queenie was in too much of a hurry when she did this for me, and the bar pick-ups were no better. I can’t even remember this
with Johnny, except that it was fast and furious.

I’m going at it slowly, and he’s moaning, getting in the rhythm, moving his hips up and down, grunting. I can feel his tension building, and soon he’s calling out “Oh, fuck, Jesus!” Good, no Jack this time.

I swallow the cum – a weird sensation – and Ennis pushes me onto my back and now he’s kissing me and touching me with his big calloused hands. He’s playing with my nipples, cupping his hand around my butt, and then he’s touching my cock and it’s been hard for a long time, but now it dances in his hand.

He slicks me up with lube and goes at it slowly with his hand, playing with the foreskin, playing with the rhythm. Of course I could do all this for myself, but this is sweet torture and I love the way he’s looking at me. Finally he whispers in my ear, “Come on, give it to me,” then kisses me hard and squeezes and jacks me just right so that I’m gushing all over his hand and everywhere else.

We lie there for a few minutes, and then I’m up leaning on my elbow just looking at him, up and down, and my breath catches.

“What,” he says.

“You have a great body,” I say.

He gives his head a quick shake and his eyes get narrow. “Chuck, I mean it, you stop that, huh?” he says. “I ain’t no woman. I don’t need a hear shit like that.” Within seconds he’s on his feet, pulling his jeans and T-shirt back on.

“I need a smoke,” he says, and he beelines it out of the room and down the stairs.

He’s already put on his boots and lit his cigarette by the time I get downstairs. I’d been afraid he would leave without saying goodbye.

He’s still not saying anything, so I say, “What are you up to tomorrow?”

He hesitates. “Busy all day, then I’m goin a Junior’s for supper.” He looks kind of sheepish.

“What about Friday?” I ask. “I’m going down to Laramie for the weekend to help Julie get settled, but we’re not leaving until Saturday morning.”

“What are you sayin, a date?” he asks. “I don’t think we should hang out in bars together no more, huh?”

“That’s OK,” I say. “I could go over to your place.”

He mumbles something about Junior, then says, “You take Julie’s car, right? Don’t get there before 7. I’ll cook for you.”

Then he puts on his hat, grabs me for a hug, kisses me on the neck, and he’s gone. I put my hand up to where the kiss landed and I watch Ennis get into his truck and drive away. And I swoon, metaphorically anyway, like I’m the girl from one of Julie’s Jane Austen novels.

I remember about the sofa in the family room, so I fill a pail with warm water and Murphy’s Oil Soap and go at it with a sponge. It works, thank god. Man sex is messier than woman sex.
I get myself a beer and sit down on the dry part of the sofa, just thinking. Yeah, my butt is sore and I don’t know if I’ll be able to walk for a week, but holy fuckin shit. Ennis Del Mar.
Sunday August 26

When I wake up, it’s nearly 6. Cool air crept in overnight an’ it’s blowin the curtains something fierce. Rain’ll come this morning for sure.

Jack was in my dream, something about me drivin to Texas to see him, an’ us meetin up in some mountains, but they was no different from where we’d go in Wyoming, and then we was ridin in a meadow, an’ I spurred my horse to go faster an’ then Jack was right up next a me laughin’, an’ then we’re inside some kind a barn, still on the horses but not movin. That’s when the cold air woke me up.

Junior told me one time about somethin she read in Reader’s Digest, what dreams mean. Don’t think I’ll ask her about this one.

I look in the bathroom mirror. Clint Eastwood, huh? I’m always thinkin that people, when they look at me can see what I’m really like, the things I like to do with guys. Hell, I’ve gotten in more’n one fight that way, punchin someone before they even said anything.

Jack as much as said I’m paranoid, but I knew things he didn’t. What happened to him was the worst “I told you so” ever, me to blame too ‘cause why was he by himself down there in Texas anyways?

I open the closet doors. Shirts still there, postcard, photo a Jack. “Jack,” I say in a whisper, an’ just then the rain starts pelting down.

*****

When I go out to check on Bluebelle an’ Sparkplug an’ some a the colts, Tex comes up an’ he’s talkative for once.

He tells me Bernadette got a job at the Buckhorn Bar and moved into the trailer.

“Nice,” I say.

“You might think that little trailer’s not much, but it’s the best place I lived in more’n a few years,” he says. “She's fixin it up nice. We’re gonna have you over for supper soon.”

“OK,” I say.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea for you an’ me,” he says. “What if after I pay off what I owe, we go in for a yearling we could bring up an’ sell?”

“I’ve seen that at other ranches I worked,” I say. “I’ll have to ask Stoutamire about it. He’ll probly say if you got time for your own horses, you got time to take on a few more for him.”

“Tell ‘im to bring ‘em on,” Tex says. “I’m already workin 13, 14 hours a day with this hayin. I know I can do it.”

“An’ I can probly find the time too,” I say. “How far are you from payin your debts off anyways?”

“Probably Christmas before I can put up any money,” he says.
I’m not greedy to make more money, got plenty these days, but it’s an idea anyways.

*****

Chuck calls around noon. “You’ll never guess where I’m going for supper tonight.”

Don’t tell me he was invited to Junior an’ Curt’s.

“Where,” I say, an’ if I don’t sound excited it’s ‘cause I ain’t.

“Junior invited Julie and me over,” he says. “It’s Julie’s last weekend in Riverton.”

Aw, hell. “I don’t think this is a good idea,” I say.

“Why not?”

Is he an idiot? “You think we can be decent around each other?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says. “Just keep your hands off me. Don’t grab my ass in the kitchen.”

“Don’t you fuckin look at me,” I say.

“Can’t do that, Ennis.” He’s laughin.

“Fuck you. I won’t look at you then.”

“OK, if you can resist,” he says.

“I’m totally serious,” I say. “You tell me right now you won’t do nothin stupid.”

“Of course I won’t,” he says. “For Christsake Ennis.”

*****

A half-hour later, Junior calls. I’m hopin she’ll cancel the whole thing ‘cause of the rain, but no.

“I hope you don’t mind I invited Julie an’ her daddy over too,” she says, a little breathless. “It’s Julie’s last weekend before she goes to school, and she’s been working all weekend and I’ve been with Curt.”

Perfect time to say one a the horses been taken ill an’ I can’t make it, but I wait a second too long.

“Daddy, you pick up some vanilla ice cream on the way, will you?” she asks. “I like that Dreyer’s they have at the Trading Post in Signal better than the stuff Monroe gets.”

*****

I get to Junior’s house after everyone else is already there, sittin in the kitchen. I’m not talkin much, tryin not to look at Chuck. He’s talkin to the girls about the 4-H, gossip about people they know. It’s wet out, but not rainin, so when Curt goes out to do the barbecuing I go with him to smoke, an’ we get to talkin about shootin an’ huntin.

He says Junior told him I’m a good shot an’ we should go huntin sometime during elk season, to his grandpa’s cabin near Shawnee. I say that sounds good.

We eat barbecued chicken, rolls, homemade potato salad and coleslaw. Then Francine tells me she wants to have word, an’ let’s go outside for a minute. The rain’s over an’ the sun’s back. I point out
“Daddy, can I come and live with you?” she asks. “Julie lives with her daddy.” No beatin around the bush with this one.

“Now why you wanna do that?” I ask, an’ here we go again. Junior asked the same thing a few years ago when I lived in the trailer. Times is different now, but I cain’t think it through standin here talkin to her.

“I can’t stand living with Ma and Monroe anymore is why,” she says. “It’s like I’m 13 years old and I’m the live-in babysitter.”

“This wouldn’t have somethin to do with that rodeo cowboy? What’s his name?” I ask. “You still seein him?” I’m playin; I know the name.

“Regent, Daddy,” she says, givin me a light slap in the arm. “Well, Ma doesn’t like him if that’s what you mean.”

“And what makes you think I do?” I ask, an’ I ruffle up her hair to let her know I’m kiddin.

“Dad-dy!”

“You know you’re 18, you could move out on your own.”

“How am I gonna go to college if I have to work to pay for my own place?” I have to shake my head at that one. Christ, I was 14 an’ wonderin how I could go to high school, an’ the answer was I couldn’t. I’m not sayin these girls are spoiled, but Jesus Christ.

“How you gonna get to school and your job in Riverton livin with me way out near Signal?” I ask.

“I got my car,” she says. “It’s no more than a half-hour drive. Please Daddy?”

“You know there’s not a stick a furniture in that little bedroom?”

“I can get furniture.” She’s got it all figured out.

“Let me think on it,” I say. “In any case, c’mon out an’ let’s go ridin next Sunday an’ I’ll give you the verdict.”

“That’s the other thing,” Francine says. “You’ve got the horses.”

“Sure enough,” I say. Maybe that’s what it’s all about, not so much spyin on her dad.

We go back in an’ Junior’s servin strawberry shortcake and ice cream for dessert. Afterwards, I go into the kitchen to help her with the dishes.

“Francine ask you to move in?” she asks.

“Uh, yeah, what do you make of it?”

“Ma was just as hard on me. You didn’t say yes, did you?”

“I’m gonna think on it, Darlin,” I say. “You know I’m better set up for it now than when I was in that trailer.”

“Yeah, Daddy.” She’s miffed, no doubt.
“An’ I got my horses right there, an’ she’s gettin into this e-quine thing.”

“Don’t spoil her, Daddy.”

“Now Darlin …” There’s no way to tell her what I want a say, that she’s my first-born an’ no one can ever knock her outta that place, so I say, “I wish I could a spoiled the both a you.”

She laughs an’ punches my arm. “No you don’t, and I don’t either.”

Just then, Chuck walks into the kitchen. “I’m headin out,” he says. “Thanks for the invite, Junior. I had a great time. Loved the dessert.”

“I’m gonna be gettin on too,” I say, an’ I give Junior a kiss on the head.

We walk out together an’ stand near my truck.

“How’d I do?” he asks.

“I dunno, I wasn’t fuckin lookin at you,” I’m lookin at him now. I want a grab him.

“Can I come over tonight?” he asks.

“No?” What’s he thinkin, Sunday night?

“Yeah, watch the sunset?”

“We cain’t just be goin over each other’s house whenever we feel like it,” I say. Shit, Jack an’ me went months an’ months between seein each other, an’ now this guy cain’t go two days. I should just say no, we don’t need this all the time like a couple a horny teenagers. It’s not even safe.

“Why not?” Chuck says.

“What, you’d drive your truck over there?” I say. “No.”

He takes a huge breath. “Ennis, I’ve been over there a few times and I’ve never seen anyone and no-one has seen me. C’mon. Or you could come over to my place, but Julie’ll be home later.”

I look at him, an’ those eyes get to me, an’ the tight jeans an’ those ridiculous boots. “Fine, my place,” I say. I’m just weak I guess.

*****

We pull kitchen chairs out to the front porch, grab beers, an’ watch the setting sun. The air is still damp, but the clouds have cleared.

He says he had a nice time at Junior’s, that we’re both lucky to be close to our girls, a lot of his friends who split from their wives barely know their kids.

“I’m seein a lot more a them since Junior got married an’ moved out,” I tell him. “Now Francine wants to move in here with me.”

“Oh yeah? What do you think about that?” he asks.

“I dunno. How’s it been, havin Julie livin with you?”

“Well, I’ve never lived alone,” he says. “When I moved to the ranch, she came with me. I’m going
to miss her when she goes off to school.”

“I been livin on my own nearly 10 years,” I say.

“So you think you’ll want the company?” he asks.

“I dunno,” I say, an’ I really don’t. “I always been closer to Junior. Francine, she’s got a wild side she didn’t get from me nor her ma.”

“Are you asking for my advice?”

“I guess.”

“I think you should say yes,” he says. “It’s an opportunity to get to know her better, and it probably won’t come around again.”

“Well, I’ll think on it,” I say.

We’re quiet for a while, just drinkin our beer. Then I feel Chuck starin at me, so I turn to him an’ say, “What.”

I can feel heat risin inside even though it’s kind a chilly out there.

“It’s cold,” he says, an’ he waggles his eyebrows. “You wanna go in?”

Next thing I know, I’m slammin into him in my own bed, crazy fuckin thing to be doin this in my little cottage on the boss’s ranch. Won’t be doin this if Francine moves in.

Monday, August 27

Tex doesn’t show up for breakfast, so I figure with the girl moved in, he won’t be takin meals here no more. It’s the summer hands’ last week a work.

After the meetin with Stoutamire and Jannelle, I need to talk to Tex, an’ I don’t see him outside, so I walk over to the stables and go in.

Right away, somethin don’t seem quite right.

I yell, “Tex?” but get no answer. Then I see him, sittin with his back to a stall, hunched over.

“You OK?” I ask.

“Fine,” he says, not looking up.

I wait a few seconds. “If you’re not feelin well, you can take the day off.”

He finally looks up. His eyes are bloodshot, face streaked with dirt like he’s been cryin.


“I dunno, I just … ” he says.

There’s a bathroom in the stable building, but I say, “Come on over to my cottage an’ we’ll get ya cleaned up.”
But as he gets up, he loses it again. I put my arms around him. “It’s goin a be all right.”

He’s leanin on me so hard I start to think he’ll fall down if I let go.

“It’s all right,” I say again, an’ with one arm around him, I walk him out of the building. At the door, the stable hand Mikey, is standin there starin.

“What you lookin at boy?” I say. “Don’t you got no work to do?”

In the cottage, I sit Tex down at the kitchen table and ask if he wants coffee or aspirin. “Whiskey,” he says.

“Coffee,” I say, an I pour a few cups into a saucepan to reheat.

“I hardly ever get these panic attacks no more,” Tex says. “It’s just … I got to thinkin about my dad. He died three years ago today.”

Shit. “So how’d he die?” I ask.

“Got bucked off a horse an’ hit his head wrong. I was with him. It was a rattlesnake scared the horse.”

“Shit, that’s bad.”

“I had to ride to get help, but I’m pretty sure he would a died anyways.”

“So sorry to hear it.”

Tex sits quiet for a while. I put on another pot a coffee an’ then pour us two. Finally, Tex says, “You remind me a him. Why I like workin here so much.”

“Yeah, well.” I don’t know what to say.

We sit a while longer, then I say, “You feelin any better?”

“Yeah, thanks,” he says. “Hey, Bernadette is off Sunday. You want a come over for supper?”

I say I’ll be there.

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Thursday, August 30

I get a call from Jannelle at 4:30 in the morning – she’d taken Stoutamire to the hospital with shortness of breath. She asks me to go to the house an’ cook breakfast for the ranch hands, she left the key under the mat.

Jannelle calls back at 6 to say they’ll likely be at the hospital all day, she’s trying to find someone to come over an’ cook but the two gals she’s tried so far are away or busy. I tell her I can handle it, I’ll see if one a my girls can do it. She tells me what’s for lunch an’ supper. Meanwhile, I can see we won’t be runnin the baler today ‘cause the sky is dark with rain comin’.

I call Francine an’ Junior at 7, but they’re both workin day shifts. Francine tells me she would a wanted to help, but she can’t cook anyways.

I go out to find out if any a the hands can cook worth a damn, an’ Tex says why doesn’t he just go
get Bernadette ‘cause she won’t be working until 5. I say that’ll work.

She’s a sweet, lively girl who looks to be partly Native American. She likes to tease Tex about how quiet he is. We help her make sandwiches an’ then she gets goin’ on the stew for supper.

It’s been rainin all week, slowin down the hayin an’ makin me worry that we’ll all need to work over the weekend, keep some a the hands around as long as we can ‘fore they’re goin back at school.

About an hour after lunch, the big thunderstorm hits. I’ve pert near run outta inside work the hands can do – they’ve already cleaned the tack an’ scrubbed out the calving barn. Bunkhouse an’ mess hall have to wait ‘til they’re gone. So I let ‘em sit around the bunkhouse playin cards, an’ me an’ Tex an’ Bernadette sit around Stoutamire’s kitchen table playin rummy an’ wait for the rain to let up.

When the thunder an’ lightnin stops, Tex go out an’ see corral fences down. Luckily all the horses are inside. We have a hell of a time fixin the fences in the rain. I send some a the hands out to check the far fencelines, an’ they’re back for supper with more bad news, lots a damage. Sky’s dark again, more rain comin’ so we’ll have to go out an’ fix ‘em tomorrow.

Jannelle calls to say Stoutamire’ll be in the hospital overnight for observation, an’ she’s stayin with him. She asks if Bernadette can come back an’ says to take chickens out a the freezer for tomorrow’s supper.

Tex an’ me clean up after supper. I tell him it looks like we’ll have to wait a while to ask Stoutamire about our idea for a side business. He says he gets it, an’ says him an’ Bernadette will be back at 5 in the mornin to get the breakfast goin, an’ she can do lunch an’ supper again if need be.

When I get back to the cottage, I’m thinkin I should call Chuck to cancel for tomorrow, too much goin’ on, but I fall asleep on the couch watchin TV an’ I don’t make the call.

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Friday, August 31

After breakfast, we load up the ranch pickup truck with fencin supplies an’ lunch. One a the hands drives the truck. Me, Stiv an’ the two best ropers ride out so we can round up any escapees. It’s a long day, wet an’ muddy. When we get back almost suppertime, Jannelle an’ Stoutamire are back an’ Bernadette’s already gone.

I go an’ knock on Stoutamire’s kitchen door, an’ Jannelle lets me in, even though I’m mud head to toe. The old man is sittin at the table lookin tired.

Jannelle thanks me for keepin everything together, an’ I say I was just doin’ my job. She says Bernadette did a great job too, had the chickens in the oven by the time they got back, didn’t want no money for her work but Jannelle told her she might as well take it or she’d see it Tex’s paycheck.

Jannelle stops talkin an’ looks over at the old man, but he’s looking at the table not sayin a thing. She looks at me an’ rolls her eyes.

“Uh, you goin a be OK, Mr. Stoutamire?” I ask.

He looks up at me, then at her. “You tell him,” he says.
Jannelle says to me, “You sit down and I’ll pour you a coffee.”

“No, ma’am, I’ll stand,” I say. “I’m filthy.”

“Ennis, you think I’ve never clean up a little mud?” she says. “Please, sit.”

I sit down. “You don’t need to tell me nothin if you don’t want to.”

He looks up at her, but she says, “Of course we have to tell you, Ennis. You’re our foreman. The doctors say it’s angina. It’s a heart condition.” She’s been strong, but her eyes fill up with tears, an’ he grabs her hand.

“We really don’t know nothin yet,” he says. “I wouldn’t a told you, but she insisted.”

“He needs to take it easy,” she says. “And we need to know we can count on you.”

“I guess you can,” I say. “Anything you need, just ask. I ain’t goin nowhere.”

“I plan to be around a long, long time,” the old man says.

“Of course,” Jannelle says, an’ looks at me. “But he needs to stay off his feet while his medicine kicks in. I’m going to ask you to help me keep him to it.”

“I’ll do the best I can,” I say, even though he’s shootin daggers at me with his eyes.

*****

The sky is clearin an’ it’s nearly 7 by the time I get back to the cottage. I take a shower, an’ when I get out, Chuck is sittin in the living room.

Supper is frozen fries, grilled steak an’ green beans from a can. We eat inside.

“You’re not a bad cook,” Chuck says.

“Huh,” I say.

Then he says, “Ennis, do you want to tell me about the other guy you were with?”

“All right,” I say, but I don’t know how to start or how much to tell him. Truth is, I’m exhausted. It’s been a long week. I’m peelin the label off my beer bottle.

“Ennis?” he says.

“Yeah, OK,” I say. “We was herdin’ sheep one summer up north a Dubois. Then I got married, an’ he did too, an’ he come back to find me a few years later, an’ we started gettin together a few times a year, up in the mountains. He’d drive up here from Texas.”

“So what happened?” Chuck asks.

“He died,” I say. “Just last year.” I can’t breathe. I feel tears burnin my eyes.

“How long did you know him?” Chuck asks, voice real quiet.

I can hardly talk. “Twenty years.”

“And you two were …” He can’t find a word, for once.
“We was buddies,” I say. “An’ I guess we was in love with each other. That’s it, I don’t know how else to say it. He wanted us to move in together, but I couldn’t picture it, two guys ranchin up.”

“How did he die?” Chuck asks.

“Well, his wife tol’ me this bullshit story about a tire explodin in his face,” I say, “but I’m pretty sure the fuckin rednecks down there got him.”

“Got him?”

“Got him with tire irons or something. Maybe he wasn’t careful enough.”

“What was his name?”

“Jack. Jack Twist.”

“I’m real sorry.”

“Yeah, well.” I cain’t look at him. I feel sick. I go in the bathroom an’ shut the door an’ try to puke, but nothin’s comin up. I take a piss an’ walk out to the kitchen an’ look out the window over the sink. The view is south, toward Texas.

There’s somethin wrong here, somethin wrong with me talkin about Jack, trustin this guy I hardly know.

Somethin else wrong too, I cain’t name it. Twenty years, me an’ Jack. Twice as long as my marriage to Alma, longer’n I knew my own parents. I’m bitin my bottom lip, tryin to keep the tears inside.

I hear Chuck walk up behind me, neither of us sayin a thing. I’m glad he’s not asking questions, knows when to shut up.

After a while, he puts his arm around me an’ says, “Thank you for telling me, Ennis.”

I turn an’ I let him hold me for a few seconds, then I feel all wrong again.

I let go of him an’ push him away, nearly knock him down.

“What the fuck are you doin?” I say, way too loud. I cain’t stand the feelins I’m havin, like Chuck’s got some kind a hold on me now that I told him about Jack.

An’ I’d been thinkin somehow Chuck could step into Jack’s shoes? Not a chance. This ain’t the same thing, not at all.

Chuck’s eyes are big an’ he’s steppin backward. He says, “Sorry?” like it’s a question. Like he’s got somethin to be sorry for. It’s not him, shit. It’s me an’ my big mouth an’ my crazy ideas.

I slam my fist on the counter an’ look at him hard. “You should go,” I say.

Chuck doesn’t move. I’m seein something in his eyes – not fear, like I want a see, but pity. Now my head is exploding.

“I mean it, get outta my house,” I say, sounds like a growl.

“No. I wanna talk about this.” He’s standin his ground, feet apart.
“I’m talked out,” I say. I want a punch him, anything to get him outta here. Shit, Stoutamire or Tex or anyone could knock on the door any time, find him here.

“I’m not gonna leave until you tell me what’s going on,” he says.

“There’s nothin goin on!” I say. “Nothin! This here … it’s a terrible idea. It’s over.”

He stands like he’s ready for a fight.

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” he says. “We need to talk. Can we sit down?” I’m kind a surprised he’s fightin back.

“Oh,” I say, but I follow him into the living room. I sit in my chair, he sits on the couch.

“C’mon, tell me what’s going on,” he says.

“I already said too much,” I say. “I don’t hardly know you.”

“Bullshit,” he says.

I’s takin deep breaths, tryin to calm myself down.

“I just don’t wanna get into this again,” I say. It’s a fuckin lie. I just have to look at him to know that. My body and my head ache.

“You’re scared,” he says. “It’s OK. So am I.”

Asshole calling me scared? Of course I’m fuckin scared. I look at him – his eyes are kind, not mad, an’ I want to kiss him. I don’t know what I want.

“Chuck, I just don’t know what to say.” Why cain’t I just say I’m sorry, I’m over-reacting, I want a go back to where we was. But I just can’t.

He stands up. “Tell you what,” he says. “I really want this thing between you and me to happen; I can’t tell you how much I do. But I’m not going to let you push me around and talk to me like you just did. I’m gonna go now. Let’s both think about things and I’ll call you after I get back from Laramie.”

He’s walkin to the door. I stand up too, an’ cross my arms over my chest. I want a grab hold of him an’ not let him go, an’ at the same time I want him to leave an’ stay gone. Why did I let this go as far as it did anyways?

“I guess I’ll see you,” I say. It comes out more like a question. He grabs his hat an’ he’s out the door.

****

Jack comes to me in my dream again. We’re sittin in the kitchen of a tiny house on a big ranch. Well, the house looks small on the outside, but I keep findin hidden rooms – all full a sunlight, views out the windows a flowery meadows an’ mountains beyond. Then it gets scary, too many rooms, an’ when I get back to the kitchen, Jack’s not there.

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Saturday, Sept. 1
I wake up before 5 with my heart poundin. I call Chuck’s number at 6, but no answer. Probly already on the road to Laramie. Don’t know what I was goin a say anyways.

Stoutamire comes out to the stables and gives me a brochure about the UW Extension in Riverton, gives me a check an’ tells me to sign up for the Master Cattleman program, startin a week later.

He bums a cigarette from me, says Jannelle threw his out.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be smokin,” I say.

“You neither,” he says. He tells me he’s feelin fine.

*****

I go into Signal to buy groceries, an’ even though I’m down to my last pack a cigarettes, I don’t buy a new carton, see how long I can put it off.

Later, I fill out the Extension forms. The course’ll last six weeks, ending with a dinner and a certificate. I’m scared shitless, an’ I wish Chuck was around to talk to.

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Sunday, Sept. 2

Francine comes out to the ranch an’ we pack tuna sandwiches, Oreo cookies and Pepsis, an’ she helps me get the horses into the trailer. I take her to Boysen an’ we ride for a while – me on Bluebell, her on Spark Plug. Then we picket them an’ set up for lunch at a picnic table in a clearing that smells a dirt an’ horse an’ dry pine.

She says she’s still seein the rodeo boy, but it’s hard ‘cause he’s never around.

“So Daddy, what about me movin in?” she asks.

“Well Darlin, we need to talk about some rules,” I say. All mornin, I been goin back’n’forth on the idea. I been thinkin about me at 18, no parents, no support. If I can give my girl something better, why not? Truth to tell, these 10 years been real lonely, even if it was my own damn fault.

She smiles, an’ of course she knows the answer’ll be “yes,” but she asks, “What rules?”

“You help out around the place,” I say. “If you really cain’t cook, at least you help clean up. An’ no boys overnight.”

“Oh Daddy!” she says, gettin up an’ throwing her arms around him. “I’m not that bad of a cook.”

“What about my rules?” I say.

“Sounds about right,” she says. “Can I stay over at Regent’s house sometimes?”

“What do his folks have to say about that?”

“It’s his ma and aunt, and it’s OK with them,” she says. “They have a guest room.”

“What about your ma?”

“I won’t lie, she’s not happy with me moving out,” Francine says. “She thinks you won’t supervise me, as if I need supervision.”
“Well, that’s between you and her,” I say. “You might wanna tell her about my rules.”

“OK.”

“An’ …” This is uncomfortable, so I’m talkin real quiet. “Just in case, you know about rubbers and the pill an’ all that?”

“Dad-dy!”

I cain’t help smilin. “You can move in whenever you’re ready.”

She hugs me again. “I’m startin school at Central Wy on Tuesday,” she says. “I’ll move in next weekend.”

*****

I head over to my old trailer for supper with Tex an’ Bernadette. Inside, it looks like a whole different place, more like a little farmhouse. They’ve painted the cupboards an’ the old wood paneling white, put up new curtains, hung old photos in frames on the wall in a neat pattern. She’s got some kind a stained glass hangin in the window over the kitchen sink, an’ she even stenciled flower designs on the cupboards.

We eat outside on the picnic table, red check tablecloth. She’s made lamb chops, mashed potatoes an’ cooked carrots with mint, all delicious.

Bernadette’s tellin us stories about growing up half-time with her grandparents on the reservation, other half with her other grandparents in Cody. Says her parents died when she was 10. I say I’m sorry to hear that, my parents died when I was 12. I never talk about this, but for once I feel comfortable.

She asks what happened a me after that, an’ I tell her about my brother an’ sis an’ goin to work on ranches. Tex says he’s never thought about himself as lucky, but at least he had his pa until he was 20.

“You’re lucky to get a girl like Bernadette,” I say, an’ he blushes an’ makes a toast to her. She’s a great girl. Reminds me of a cross between Junior an’ Francine, serious an’ lively, both.

It’s gettin cold, so we go inside an’ watch the rest a the Cubs game. Cubs win 4-2.

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Tuesday September 4

Before work, I smoke my last cigarette with my coffee.

We’re back to balin hay today, another long day. Stoutamire comes out to watch, so I go over to say “Hi” an’ ask how he is.

“You got a smoke?” he asks.

I tell him I quit, an he says, “You son of a bitch,” an’ goes an’ bums one from Stiv.

*****

I get home at 7:30, take a shower an’ try callin Chuck, no answer. I’d tried him last night an’ this morning. Maybe he’s not back yet.
At 9, he calls me, says he just got home. I feel giddy like a girl.

I ask how he’s doin. He says Julie’s settled in, his ma an’ his sister Martha and family are doing fine.

I tell him Francine’s movin in next weekend.

I want a say I’m sorry, or even that I missed him, but the words won’t come.

So I try to be as casual as I can. “Uh, see you on the weekend?” Maybe we’ll go back to shootin pool. I cain’t invite him over here with Francine comin’ an’ I won’t invite myself over there.

“Are you sure?” he asks. “You don’t want to take some more time to think about it?”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” I say. I never felt this way about anyone except Jack. No point pickin fights. You never know how much time you got.

“You wanna join me an’ my buddies for poker on Friday?”

“Uh, maybe not,” I say.

“You wanna meet at the Black’n’Blue Eagle Saturday night?”

“Uh, what if I just go over to your place, skip the bar? Julie’s gone, right?”

I hear Chuck take a deep breath, in an’ out. “C’mon over around 5,” he says.

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Thursday September 6

Two days without a smoke. Of course, just about all the hands smoke. No one’s goin a help me, but I bet Francine’ll be pleased enough when she moves in.

After supper, I get a call from Alma.

“I’m callin about Francine,” she says. “She really movin in with you?”

“Up to her,” I say. “I told her she could.”

“Ya know she’s a little live wire, not like her sister,” Alma says. “I’m callin to ask if you’re prepared to supervise her.”

“She’s 18,” I say.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

It means a lot of things. Child support is over, an’ where she lives is up to her, not part a no divorce decree. But I don’t say nothin, wait to find out what Alma wants.

“What kinda home you gonna give her?” she asks. Is she accusin me a something? I’m thinkin, no way Alma knows about Chuck – not even the girls know.

“She’s seen the cottage,” I say. “She helped me fix it up. Alma, if you got somethin to work out with her, work it out.”

There’s silence, an’ then there’s sobs comin over the wire, an’ I wonder if she’s been drinkin.
“Uh, you OK?” I ask.

“First Junior, now Francine,” she says. “I feel like I’m losin both a my girls, just like that.”

I can hear her hurt and loneliness like I never heard before. Then for some reason I start thinkin about what I put her through – the lyin, the doggy-style fucks, week-long trips, weekend fatherin.

“You been a damn good mother,” I say. “They’re good girls. They’re just growin up. You done right by them.”

“Thank you Ennis,” she says in a tiny voice. “You doin OK?”

“Just fine,” I say, not quite true. “An’ I meant what I said. Alma, you been drinkin?”

“I had a few glasses a wine,” she says, still sniffling. “I’ll be fine. You take good care of Francine.”

“I will,” I say an’ I hang up.

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Saturday, Sept. 8

Drivin over to Chuck’s, I feel nervous. But when he opens the door, he pulls me into a mighty hug, an’ it feels like everything’s goin a be OK.

“I’m real sorry,” I whisper. My voice is a little hoarse.

“It’s all right,” Chuck says. He’s smilin. “I’m just happy to see you.”

I punch him in the arm an’ ruffle his hair.

*****

He’s cooked homemade mac’n’cheese with broccoli an’ Polish sausage in it. I tell him he’s a fine cook himself.

I tell him about Francine movin in an’ the Master Cattleman course that’s about to start.

“Yeah, I’m gonna be guest lecturer in your class the second week,” he says.

“The fuck,” I say. “You pretend you don’t know me.”

“C’mon, Ennis, it’ll be fine,” he says. “I know most of the ranchers from here to Dubois. No one will think a thing if we already know each other.”

“Ya know why I didn’t want to play poker with you and your buddies?” I ask.

“‘Cuz you suck at it?”

“You know that ain’t the case,” I say. “Thing is, I don’t know how to act when I’m around you. That’s why I don’t know if I even want a go back to the bar an’ shoot pool.”

“I don’t know how to act either,” he says. “I thought I’d just be doing one-night stands in Denver or something for the rest of my life. I couldn’t believe my luck when I met up with you, and here you are, and I don’t even know how we’re supposed to do this thing.”

I feel blood rush to my face an’ ears. “Don’t say shit like that.”
“Like what?”

I know he’s not that stupid. “Luck?” I say. “Chuck, if we had any luck, we wouldn’t be like this, huh? Queer?”

“Gay,” he says. “That’s not how I figure it.”

“Oh yeah, how you figure it?”

“I figure, how many people in the world ever find someone who comes into their life and just makes everything better? Makes life worth living? Like you and Jack, didn’t he do that for you?”

“I guess he did,” I say. Where’s Chuck goin with this?

He goes on. “When I ran into you at Junior’s wedding, I’m telling you Ennis, you rocked my world. Even before we got physical. I say I’m lucky.”

Rocked his world? Why does he have to say things like that?

“You talk too much,” I say.

He pulls back like I just hit him, then he just looks at me. “OK. OK,” he says. “I’m going to change the subject. You said Jack was the only guy?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Did you look at other guys, before or after?”

“Not until you,” I say. It’s almost the truth.

“How many women you been with besides Alma?”

“Oh, that waitress Cassie, and a coupl’a others.”

“You looking for a woman to settle down with?”

“I never did look for a woman,” I say. It’s pretty much the truth. Alma’s the one asked me to dance at K.E.’s wedding, an’ she’s the one invited me to that church social in Riverton. She had us shoppin for rings before I even knew we was engaged.

“So what are we, you and me?” Chuck asks.

“I dunno, buddies?” I say.

“More than that, Ennis,” he says. “I’m not going to push you, but you let me know when you’re ready to talk about it.”

I wanna argue, but what’s the point. Buddies don’t do what we do.

I get up an’ clear the table, take the plates to the sink, an’ run water over them. I look out the window into the darkness.

This is it, I’m thinkin. He told me how he feels, an’ I let him, an’ I know what direction this is goin. Not like when I was 19. Not like that last trip with Jack when neither of us said one goddamn thing we really meant. At least I didn’t, an’ I sure hope Jack didn’t.
Chucks comes up behind me an’ wraps his arms around an’ starts bitin my neck an’ grindin into my backside. God it feels good.

“Unh,” I say. I turn around an’ pull him close.

*****

Later, we’re lyin in bed, Chuck’s head on my chest, an’ he asks, “What do you say we go elk hunting one weekend before the cold sets in?”

“You think maybe we should just do that?” I say. “Just go huntin or horsepackin one weekend a month or so?” As soon as I say it, I’m sorry I did.

He sits up straight. “Ennis, for Christsake don’t do this. I want to see more of you, not less.”

I get out of bed and pull on my jeans an’ T-shirt. “I’ll see if I cain’t put together a weekend we can get away,” I say. “Maybe wait until this goddamn class is over.”

“You’re not saying we can’t be together ‘til then?” he says.

“No,” I say. “I’m just fuckin with you.”

I walk over, put my hand on his cheek an’ kiss his forehead. “The Cubs are playin the Mets tomorrow. How about I come over here an’ you cook for me again?”

“You won’t stay over tonight?” he asks. I grab a pillow an’ hit him with it. We laugh. Maybe everything’s goin a be OK.
Daddy's Other Girl

Francine P.O.V.

CLASS: English Writing 1
ASSIGNMENT: Descriptive Essay – Who are you, how did you get that way, and who do you want to be?
LENGTH: 482 words
DATE: Sept. 5, 1984

I am Francine Bridget Del Mar Monroe, age 18. I got my start in this world on Jan. 30, 1966, when I was delivered by my father during a blizzard at a ranch near Worland, WY. He had a lot of experience delivering babies – baby calves, that is. My mother always said he did just as good a job as the rancher's wife who delivered my sister, Alma Jr. My daddy said I was about the size of his hand, even though I was almost full-term. He has big hands.

We never had a Brady Bunch-type family. My parents divorced when I was 8. All I remember about them together was a lot of yelling. After that, my ma married Bill Monroe and they had two more kids, my stepbrothers Michael and Jason. Monroe tries hard, but I’ve never thought of him as a dad.

I like to try everything. I’ve done all of the following: ballet, soccer, karate, yoga, softball, skating, skiing, Western and English riding, 4-H, sewing, knitting, crocheting, piano, clarinet, guitar, church youth group, musical theater, church choir, school chorus, vegetarianism, Buddhism. What has stuck: Singing, acting, playing piano and guitar, riding, skiing and sewing.

This is a year of changes for me. I graduated high school, I started college here at Central Wyoming, and I just moved in with my father on the ranch where he works near Signal. Junior’s always been closer to our father. I feel like I’m just getting to know him, and she’s known him forever.

People call me a motor-mouth because I like to talk a lot, and I get uncomfortable when I’m with people who sometimes don’t want to talk, like Junior and my father. Junior has one best friend. I have tons of friends because of all the activities I do, but no one I would call “best.” I think if I needed someone to talk to in a crisis, I’d go to Junior, but she doesn’t know that.

I don’t know who I want to be. I’m taking equine science because I’m thinking I might want to work on horse ranches, training horses and/or teaching riding. I want to travel and work all over the U.S. and Europe and even in Africa, and I figure there are horses everywhere. I’d like to meet every kind of person there is and have penpals all over the world. I don’t want to get married anytime soon, maybe never. I’ll wait until I’m 30 at least.

What I still want to do: Be a barrel-racing queen, star in movies or on Broadway, be the royal riding instructor for Princess Diana’s boys. I would also like to be taller, nicer, less impulsive, more generous and more compassionate. I’d like to be someone who doesn’t always have to fill the silences, who can look at a sunset and just stay quiet.

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Monday, Sept. 10

I’m on my way home to Daddy’s cottage, my new home. I like living on the ranch, but I don’t
know how living with Daddy is going to work out.

Ma had warned me about two things, both contradictory. One, that Daddy would be even stricter on me than she was, and would make me cook and do all the housework. Two, that Daddy won’t “supervise” me properly and I’ll run wild, and he’s a fool if he thinks I’ll do any cooking or lift a finger.

It’s so weird that she got married when she was 18, but she doesn’t even think I can handle having a boyfriend. And Daddy was so funny when he asked me about rubbers and the pill. I’m 18, and it’s 1984! They act like it’s 1960 or something.

But anyway, I already know that Daddy won’t be smothering me, for sure.

Regent and Argent helped me move in on Saturday, and I was going to cook us all supper, but Daddy breezed in around 4:30, took a shower and said he was going out. When I asked where, he just mumbled something and he didn’t get back until almost midnight, definitely not drunk.

Regent had hung around, saying he didn’t want to leave me there alone. When Daddy finally got back, Regent asked him if it was safe, leaving me out here in this house by myself. Daddy said no one ever bothers him, and the ranch hands are gone for the season and they wouldn’t dare mess with me anyways.

Regent kept arguing, saying you never know who might come around, and Daddy looked like he was starting to boil over, so mad I thought he’d explode, but he didn’t say anything.

I told them I didn’t want them arguing about me like I was some piece of property, that I can take care of myself, and they both looked at me as if I’d lost my mind. Then Daddy said to me, not looking at Regent, that he’d give me the ranch phone numbers, he’d always let me know how to reach him when he’s out, and he’d buy me a .38 and teach me to use it. Regent left angry, I could tell.

On Sunday, Daddy made me breakfast and then took me up to the farmhouse to meet Mr. and Mrs. Stoutamire, very nice people who seemed pleased he’d gotten a new roommate. Next, we went to the corral where he introduced me to the horse trainer, a shy and polite young guy, very cute. Then we set up tin cans on a fence and he had me shooting his .38. I’d done a little shooting in the 4-H, but he showed me the difference between a handgun and a rifle, and how to aim better. We must have gone an hour until my arm felt like it would fall off. He said we’d be back out next week.

I had to go work at Monroe’s store at noon, and Daddy said he’d be home late tonight, not as late as last night, and would I feel OK alone in the house? I said I was fine. He gave me a phone number where he’d be, and I asked whose number it was.

He hemmed and hawed until I said, “Is it some woman Daddy? You can tell me. I won’t say a thing.” And he said no, it’s Chuck Ausman and they’d be watching a baseball game, that Chuck’s TV is way better than his.

*****

Regent stopped by the store at the end of my shift and we went for a soda. He said he worries about me out at the ranch by myself. I said I worry about him out riding broncos, with all the buckle bunnies hanging around, but I trust him. I said he needs to let me live my life and if he wants a puppet to control, he needs to find a new girl. He laughed and said he never knew I was a woman’s libber, but he guessed he’d try to relax. I kind of appreciate his concern. I know he’s just trying to do the manly thing.
Daddy came home around 10 and went straight to bed. This morning, I heard him take a shower, but he was gone and the coffee almost cold by the time I got up at 7.

So tonight will be our first supper together. I told him I’d cook.

*****

Daddy comes in a little after 7:30, just as the sun’s going down, and takes a shower. I’ve made chili and cornbread.

“It’s real good,” he says after the first bite. “An’ you said you couldn’t cook.”

“I’m about as good as you,” I say. “We could take turns.”

“All right,” he says in that slow way of his. “Tomorrow I’ll be grabbin myself a sandwich ‘cause I’ve gotta go into Riverton for a class. At your college.”

“Really?” That’s a bit of a shock. Mama always talks about going back and getting her G.E.D., but I’ve never heard Daddy speak of it. He explains that it’s some kind of Extension course he has to do for his job.

“And I work Wednesday nights,” I tell him. “We’re hardly ever going to see each other, Daddy.”

He’s quiet for a few seconds, then he says, “Honey, if you moved in here lookin for company, I’m sorry, ‘cause I ain’t goin a be home much, between workin an’ ...” He doesn’t finish his thought.

“No, it’s not a problem,” I say. “I like the peace and quiet out here.” I’m not going to ask about his social life because Junior told me to give him his space, and I don’t want to make him squirm.

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Thursday, Sept. 13

I’m sitting in the cafeteria eating lunch with two of the girls in my class, thinking I need to start waking up earlier and make my own lunch. An older student walks up, and it’s a second before I realize it’s my daddy’s ex-girlfriend Cassie.

She remembers my name, then asks, “How’s your daddy? He seein’ anyone?”

I say he’s fine, I’m staying with him now and he gets out but I don’t think there’s anyone special. Cassie says she’s starting her second year of a nursing program and to please say hello to him, have him call her if he wants.

****

Daddy makes us grilled cheese and minestrone soup for supper, and I tell him about Cassie.

He just grunts and asks me if I’ve seen Junior, who’s taking an art class Monday and Wednesday mornings, but I have a horse anatomy class at the same time across campus.

I clean up after supper, and he sets up to study his Extension stuff at the kitchen table, reading glasses on and loud sighs. I ask if he needs any help and he says no, “Don’t you have some studyin’ to do yourself?”

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Saturday, Sept. 15

Ma invited me over for tea to tell me that if I want to move back in with her and Monroe and the boys, there’s no hard feelings.

I tell her I’m doing fine, but thanks for the offer. She asks if I wouldn’t mind coming over sometimes on the weekend to babysit the boys and stay overnight. I figure why not, nights when Regent is gone and Daddy’s out. Ma and Monroe have a VCR and I can rent a movie to watch with the boys and one to watch by myself after they’re in bed.

*****

And that’s pretty much how it’s going to go with Daddy.

He has his nights out, I have my nights out and we have supper together a few times a week.

Here’s his routine: He takes a shower in the morning and another one when he comes in from the ranch. He keeps the kitchen and bathroom clean, but he’s oblivious to clutter around the rest of the house. He listens to country music on the radio in the kitchen. His TV is ancient – colored, at least, but it’s got a rabbit-ear antenna and you always have to fool with the vertical hold button.

He hangs around with Chuck Ausman a lot. He told me they knew each other from a ranch where he worked when he was a teenager.

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Sunday, Sept. 23

Curt’s parents are having a party for Junior’s 20th birthday, and they invited me, Daddy and Regent. Mama will have Junior’s real birthday at her house tomorrow.

I bake a cake and ride over with Daddy in his pickup truck. Curt and his daddy are watching some game in the living room, so I head to the kitchen to see Junior and Curt’s ma, Ellen.

“So how do you like living with Daddy?” Junior asks.

“Did you know he quit smoking?” I say. “He hasn’t smoked – in the house anyway – since I moved in.”

“No!” Junior says.

“And he’s a clean freak. He keeps the kitchen and bathroom spic an’ span.”

“That’s what I noticed when I went over to cook supper,” Junior says. “You remember that trailer, Francie?”

I roll my eyes and say, “Other thing is, he goes over to Julie’s dad’s house a lot.”

Junior says, “He’s allowed to have friends, isn’t he?”

“Of course he is, but wasn’t that Jack Twist the only friend of his we ever knew about? We met him one time,” I tell Ellen. “He was from Texas, real cute. But he died in an accident a few years ago.”

Just then, Regent walks in and he’s in rough shape, with a black eye and fat lip and limping. He’d been at the rodeo in Gillette.
I hug him hard and ask if he’s been in a fight or got thrown from a bronco.

“Got thrown just out of the gate,” he says, pretending to be mad. He’s tough, and I like that. I introduce him around.

Ellen serves roast beef, mashed potatoes with gravy and roasted vegetables.

I give Junior a gift certificate for a manicure and pedicure, and Daddy gives her a soft blue scarf and hat set that he bought from the knitting lady at the farmers’ market.

While we’re having the cake, Daddy asks Regent how soon he might be available to work on the ranch, and I’m glad to see everything’s OK between them.

Regent says rodeo season is over, but he’ll be busy rebuilding the apiary at his mama’s farm for the next month or so. Daddy says it’ll be November before he has any work anyways. Then Daddy says he’s going to be leaving soon, and asks Regent if he wouldn’t mind driving me home tonight.

Regent says no problem, and Daddy takes off.

*****

I’m back in the kitchen with Junior and Ellen, cleaning up.

“Doesn’t he seem happier?” Junior says. “I don’t just mean happier than when he was drinkin all that whiskey, I mean even from a month ago.”

“Maybe it’s just having me there to take care of him,” I say.

“Or maybe there’s a woman,” Ellen says.

“It’s just nice to see is all,” Junior says.

*****

When I get home, it’s after 10, and Daddy’s not here. I hear him come in and hit the shower at 11, and I wonder where he’d be going on a Sunday night after supper.
Monday, Sept. 23

It’s mighty nice a Gill an’ Ellen to have everyone over for Junior’s birthday, but I been workin all day an’ by 8:30 I feel pretty tired, so I thank everyone an’ take off.

Drivin home, I’m about to pass the turnoff to the Flyin W when I decide to give Chuck a little surprise. Not that I’d appreciate it if it was me, but I bet Chuck will. Things have been goin pretty good, I gotta say. He came an’ spoke to the Master Cattleman class last week an’ we handled it OK. I don’t think anyone suspected.

Another idea comes to me just as I pull up in his driveway.

“Ennis!” he says when he opens the door. Way he said it an’ his smile make the trip worth my while.

I step inside an’ close the door. I say I hope it’s OK I stopped by.

“Sight for sore eyes,” he says, pullin me into a hug.

“C’mon, don’t say that shit,” I say. “An’ don’t you be givin me no surprise visit payback.”

He snorts. “I know you better than that,” he says. We go into the kitchen for beers an’ sit down at the table.

“You had any more thoughts about a weekend in the mountains?”

“I just got started that extension course,” I say.

“How about if our trip is your graduation gift?” he says. “I’ll take care of everything.”

That don’t sound right, but I ain’t goin a say nothin. I came over here for one thing tonight, an’ it wasn’t to fight.

“I got another surprise for you,” I say. “C’mere.”

We’re kissin, an’ I push him back against the wall an’ pin his arms by his sides.

“I’m goin a do something nice for you for a change,” I whisper in his ear, then keep kissin slow down his neck, to his chest, and then I’m kneelin in front a him, kissin and nuzzlin the bulge in his jeans, still holding his arms by his sides.

I let go a the arms an’ say, “Don’t move. Don’t touch a thing.” I’m goin real slow, opening his belt buckle an’ button, then takin the zipper down one tooth at a time, keepin the pressure on with my other hand. I hitch his jeans down a bit an’ rub along the outline in his briefs. Chuck moans an’ runs his fingers through my hair.

This is the first time I done this for him, an’ I’m doin it the way Jack done me on that first time up in the mountains after he come back an’ found me in Riverton. I’d thought maybe Lureen taught him some new tricks. I never went down on Jack the summer a Brokeback, but I done it quite a few times after that.

I hitch Chuck’s jeans further and pull the briefs down. I lick the clear slick first, an’ then start
lickin up an’ down. I’m rollin his balls with my hand at the same time, slow an’ steady. I push his legs further apart an’ lick his balls. He’s moanin again, an’ I feel my own dick gettin harder. Finally I put my whole mouth over him an’ move his hips to get him fuckin my mouth. I’d learned not to gag.

Then he’s spewin an’ I’m holdin on, swallowin the juice. “Sweet Jesus,” he says. He’s unsteady for a second, then he pulls me up to my feet an’ kisses me. “Thank you Ennis.”

I don’t mind so much, even though this is something I’ll save up for special occasions.

“You ain’t done,” I say, an’ I put his hand to where my dick is just beggin to be taken outta my jeans.

*****

When it’s time to go, Chuck tells me his band’ll be playin at the Black’n’Blue Eagle for Riverton High’s homecoming. I guess it’s a big deal. He asks if I’ll go, give him moral support an’ maybe I’ll even like the music. I say I’ll think about it, crowds really not bein my thing.

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Friday, Sept. 28

Junior says she’s likin the art class, she’s learnin about color theory an’ composition. Francine says that sounds like what she learned in music, an’ Junior says she’s thinkin they’re similar, both have rules you should know before you can create new things.

All over my head, but my girls are smart, I know it.

Junior brought over a chicken pot pie she’d cooked, an’ we’re sittin down to eat with Francine, kind a like old times the three of us.

“You ever think about goin back for your G.E.D. Daddy?” Francine asks.

“No point,” I say. “Anyway, I got too many responsibilities right here, ‘specially with Stoutamire doin poorly.”

“You could do it, I know you could,” she says.

“Not a question a that,” I say, but I’m lyin. The readin for the Extension class is near killin me. The good thing is, I been takin notes in class an’ anyway I can remember just about everything the instructors say.

*****

Francine is goin out with Regent tonight an’ then stayin over at his folks’. Me an’ Junior clean the dishes an’ sit down for “Dallas,” season opener. Looks like Bobby’s goin a be OK after bein shot, but he’ll be blind, poor guy.

After the show, Junior says, “So you quit smoking, huh Daddy?”

I say it’s been a few weeks. I’m hopin I’ll stay quit.

“I’m real glad,” she says. “I got Curt to where it’s outside only, an’ he says he’ll stop altogether before the snow flies.”
That’ll be soon, I reckon.

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Saturday, Oct. 6

The parkin lot is packed when I get to the bar at 8, so I have to park two blocks away. Julie’s in town an’ Francine’s over at Alma’s babysittin, so Chuck’s comin over to the cottage after the gig. His band’s the warm-up act. The headliner’s a country band from Laramie.

The Black’n’Blue Eagle is usually a quiet place, mostly older guys drinkin an’ playin pool. Tonight’s it’s a different story. They’ve set up a dance floor in front an’ covered over the pool tables an’ shoved ‘em to the side.

The band’s playin a Beatles song. I head to the bar an’ it’s a while before I can get a beer. The band sounds damn good, I must say. Chuck’s a good singer, an’ he’s doin all the antics an’ he’s got the all-black get up an’ the pointy boots like usual, an’ his hair goin wild. I catch his eye an’ give him a nod.

I see Junior and Julie at a table across the bar an’ I wave “Hi.” Junior motions me over, but I shake my head, just wave again. I’m OK standin.

A woman comes up beside me an’ says, “You didn’t go to Riverton High, did you?”

“No ma’am,” I say.

“I’m Lianna Walker,” she says, puttin out her hand for a shake. Red hair, too much makeup, big tits, lots a cleavage.

“Ennis Del Mar,” I say. She’s standin so close that her titties brush up on my arm. I try to pull myself in.

“You wanna dance?” she asks, movin even closer so now I can smell whiskey on her breath.

“Maybe a little later,” I say.

“I’m class of ’62,” she says, stickin out her hand. She’s kinda slurrin her words. “I’m here from Casper with my friend Delta.”

“Uh,” I say.

“So where did you go to school, Ennis?”

“Sage, Wyoming, near the Utah line,” I say. She says she’s never heard of it. No one has.

She starts to tell me about the parade an’ the football game earlier today, says her an’ Delta took flasks a whiskey into the game an’ they been drinkin ever since.

She asks if I’m married, I say I was, an’ she says her and Delta married Casper boys, so they come to the reunion every year by themselves, “Girls weekend.”

Then “Yesterday” starts up, an’ she grabs my arm saying, “C’mon, a nice slow one.”

The dance floor is packed, an’ Lianna’s pressin up real close. Every time I look at Chuck, I see he’s lookin at me. When the song finally ends, I have to pry myself loose. “No more dancing for now,” I say, but just then a brunette grabs me an’ says to Lianna, “He’s mine now.”
“This here’s Delta,” Lianna says with a little laugh. Before I know what’s happening, “Hey Jude” starts up an’ I’m slow dancing with Delta. Most everyone else is dancin apart, not slow, but this gal’s got her hands around my waist and pressed right against me an’ grinding her crotch into my thigh. She even takes one a my hands from her shoulder and puts it on her ass – a nice firm ass, I notice, an’ I’m gettin a little turned on in spite a myself.

“You’re some nice-lookin cowboy,” she says. “You didn’t go to Riverton High, did you?” and here we go again.

I look back at Chuck, still lookin at me. When he gets to the “na-na na na’s” of the song, I say, “Sorry, I gotta sit down” an’ I have to dodge Lianna on my way back to the bar.

Barstools are still all taken, so I look over at where Junior’s sittin with an empty seat next to her, an’ I go over there.

She pushes a bottle a Stroh’s over to me an’ says, “Take this, Daddy. I poured mine from the bottle.”

“Thanks, I need it,” I say. I give Julie a nod, an’ they introduce me to the boy they’re sittin with from their class of ’83. I guess Curt’s workin.

“I thought you youngsters would a gone to Kelley’s bar,” I say. That’s where the younger set usually goes, where they’ve got a real dance floor an’ a mechanical bull, of all the ridiculous things.

Julie says, “We wanted to see my daddy’s band. What do you think of them Mr. Del Mar?”

It’s a normal enough question, so I say, “Very good.”

Julie gets up to dance with the boy to “Rock Around the Clock,” an’ Junior an’ me watch the band as best we can ‘cause we’re off to one side a the stage.

When the song’s over, Chuck says, “Thank you” and starts to leave the stage, but folks are callin “More!” an’ he says, “OK, one more,” an’ “Proud Mary” starts up.

Junior asks, “You wanna dance, Daddy?”

“Darlin,” I say. “You know me an’ dancin. If I was any good at it, you’d surely be the partner I’d choose.”

She smiles. “I saw those ladies dragging you up there.”

“Well.”

“How are you doin anyways Daddy?”

“I’m all right,” I say. “I’m gonna head out after … the band’s set is over.”

I see her eyes flicker, an’ a smile she’s tryin a hide, an’ right then I know it. She knows about me an’ Chuck for sure.

“You an’ Curt doin good?” I ask.

“Real good,” she said. “I sure miss him when he’s gone. That two weeks is a long time.”
“Well, if you can’t fix it …” She’s already rollin her eyes, so I don’t finish. She’s heard me sayin it too many times, but she smiles anyway.

“Hey, sorry about the Cubs,” she says. They lost the pennant race to the Padres last week.

“Next year, huh?” I say.

The song ends, an’ Chuck’s thankin everyone, so I get up an’ say “I’m goin a help the band pack up their stuff,” an’ I kiss the top a Junior’s head. She takes my hand an’ squeezes it. “See you soon, Daddy.”

I walk over to the stage an’ ask Chuck if he needs a hand.

He shoots me a dirty look like I never seen from him before. “Can you roll up those cords?” He points to a mess of extension cords.

I get to work on them.

After a few minutes, Chuck says, “Grab that amp, would you? Let’s take this stuff out to my truck.” He picks up a few of the cords and his guitar case. I take the amp – big an’ heavy, both my arms around it – an’ follow him. Chuck holds the door.

At the truck, I say, “Hey, you sounded real good.”

“That so,” he says. Yeah, there’s something wrong all right.

“You OK?” I ask.

“I’m fine.” I keep lookin at him. He’s got his mouth shut tight like he’s got somethin to say but wants to keep it inside.

“Well, I’m gonna head back home then,” I say. “See you soon?”

“Sure.”

Just then, Lianna and Delta tumble out the door.

“Chuck Ausman! Rock star!” one a them says. Both kiss him on the cheek. “You know this cowboy dude? You guys wanna smoke a joint?”

I look at Chuck, who says, “Hey, Lianna, Delta. This here’s Ennis Del Mar. No weed for us. Our daughters are in there.”

“C’mon Chuck, they’re all grewed up,” Lianna says.

“No thanks,” Chuck says. He’s openin the door to his truck.

“We’re stayin’ right down the road at the Motel Siesta,” Lianna says. “We could get some whiskey an’ all go back there for a little party. For old times’ sake. C’mon Chuck.”

Chuck says, “Sorry, ladies. Ennis and me need to be in Denver at daybreak, no partying for us tonight.”

They’re still protestin, but he’s in his truck now.

“What about you, Ennis?” one a the girls says.
“Like he said, I gotta go,” I tell ‘em an’ I tip my hat. “‘Night, ladies.”

*****

Chuck’s truck is already parked near the cottage when I get home. He’s standin at the door, not even a hello for me.

After I get the door open, he heads straight to the fridge for a beer, faster’n I ever seen him walk.

“You got any whiskey?” he asks

“Don’t keep none in the house,” I say. Not since before Junior’s wedding.

He opens his beer bottle and gulps half of it down. Must be thirsty. He gives me a look that’s almost scary.

“You OK?” I ask.

“No I’m not,” he says.

“You wanna tell me what’s wrong?”

“It’s you, Ennis. I can’t … fuck it.” He walks over to couch an’ sits. I sit next to him.

“What,” I say. I put my hand on his thigh.

But he pulls away. “I can’t stand seeing you with women,” he says.


“You were ready to go back to the motel with them!”

“The hell I was!”

“Why didn’t you say anything? You just looked at me as if you wanted to go.”

“Did not!” I say. “I mean, I would a gone along if you wanted to, but it was you they was askin. They was your friends.”

“Of course I didn’t want to go! Jesus Christ, Ennis. Delta was dry humpin’ your leg, you didn’t notice? I wanted to fuckin’ shake her.”

I got no idea what to say. “Chuck, you know I don’t give a shit about her nor any other woman.”

“Then stay away from them!”

“They started it, not me,” I say. “You think I asked ‘em to dance?”

“Not just tonight,” Chuck says. “You’re always flirting. My ex-wife. The waitress. The other women you told me about. You act all strong silent type and they just want to smother you with their love.”

I cain’t help snortin. “Fuck you! You know me, Chuck. Flirt? Hell, I’m ‘bout the most awkwardest guy west a the Mississippi. I’m silent ‘cause I don’t have a goddamn thing to say.”

“So why do women always go for you, huh?”
“Damned if I know. They go for you too, or didn’t you notice?”

“They go for you first,” he says. “It’s that brooding thing they like, and you’re better looking. But I guess you can’t help that.”

“Stop talkin like that, I ain’t jokin’.”

That only riles him more. “I can’t tell you I like the way you look, but a woman can smoosh her twat into your leg? Which way do you roll anyway Ennis?”

“I thought I told you,” I say. Christ, do I have to keep tellin him something that I never even told Jack?

“Tell me right now you won’t ever touch another woman,” he says.

“Chuck, a woman asks me to dance, I gotta do it,” I say. “It’s a show. Nothin’ to do with what me an’ you got goin’ on.”

“It makes me fuckin crazy,” he says. “Like you want your cake and eat it too.”

I still don’t get it. If it’d been Chuck dancin with Lianna or Delta, I really couldn’t a gave a shit. But then I think about him dancin with some guy at that bar in Denver an’ it finally starts to dawn on me.

“Know what makes me crazy, punch-in-the-face crazy?” I say. “The idea a you lettin’ another guy lay his hands on you.”

“That’s not gonna happen again, Ennis, you can bet on it,” he says. “Now you tell me you won’t touch another woman. Or another guy, for Christsake.”

“You’re already a handful,” I say. “I got no interest in other guys.” Jack don’t count, is my thinkin.

“What about women?”

“OK, no sex with a woman,” I say. “That’s no sacrifice. But why not dance just so no one suspects we’re queer huh? You can see the point a that, cain’t you? I fuckin hate dancin anyways, an’ you seen how bad I am.”

“Gay,” he says, an he cracks a smile. “Not queer, gay.”

Good to see him smilin again, eyes comin alive. I grab his head in my hands an’ kiss him hard on the lips. “What about you, huh? No more Denver? No more gay bar?”

“Not without you,” he says. “But you know what? We’re gonna go there together one day and you’re gonna dance with me, mark my words.”

“The hell,” I say. Now it’s time for make-up sex anyways.

****

It’s almost 11, an’ Chuck’s gettin ready to leave, when he turns to me an’ asks if he can spend the night. “I don’t feel like driving back to Riverton.”

“No way,” I say.

“What time do you get up?” He’s persistent.
“By 6 on Sundays.”

“Who’ll be around between now and 6?”

“Stoutamire an’ Jannelle are at the house, an’ Stiv’ll show up around 7, an’ maybe Tex a little later,” I say.

“I bet no-one gets up early on Sundays,” he says. “C’mon Ennis. I’ll be out by 6. Promise.”

He’s right, no one else gets up early on Sundays, ‘specially not Stoutamire since he took ill. It’ll still be dark at 6, and you cain’t see the cottage from the road into the ranch anyways.

“OK, just this once,” I say. “You’re gone by 6. An’ what about Julie? You need a call her? Won’t she be waitin’ up for you?”

“She’ll be fine,” he says.

****

I’m lyin on my side behind Chuck when I wake up before 5, only at first I think he’s Jack. I might a said his name out loud, I dunno.

I sit up an’ take a good look at this Chuck, like I used a do with Jack.

Chuck don’t have the pretty face that Jack had, but even so, damn, he’s a fine lookin man. He’s shorter’n Jack an’ he don’t have nearly as much meat on him, less of an ass to grab ahold of. Enough anyways.

I pull back the covers to see more. A little more body hair’n Jack, black an’ soft. Maybe same size a dick, not clipped though, so it’s hard to tell. I’m startin a get hard.

Chuck reaches for the covers. “Hey! It’s cold!” he says in a sleepy voice.

I cover him back up, get dressed an’ I’m off to the kitchen to cook a Sunday breakfast – eggs, bacon, homefries, sliced tomatoes an’ coffee. I’m singin along to some lonely country song on the radio, an’ all of a sudden I can feel the sadness of it – me lettin Chuck spend the night here, me an’ Chuck talkin about things I wouldn’t let Jack touch. It’s a fuckin shame I was such an asshole, is all I can think, but I cain’t fix it no how.

I hear Chuck getting up, so I shut up.

“Go on singing,” he says. I don’t.

After breakfast, I watch him drive away. It was a good night, but we won’t be doin that again anytime soon.

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Sunday, Oct. 8

Francine is out an’ I’ve got Tex an’ Bernadette over for supper, payback for them havin me to the trailer. I cooked a pot roast outta the “Joy of Cooking” with a bunch a vegetables an’ biscuits from a Betty Crocker mix.

Bernadette’s full a compliments. After we’re done, Tex asks how I quit smokin cold turkey like that. I don’t know what to tell him. I cain’t promise I’ll never pick up another cigarette. I remember
Jack sayin one time that if he was as stubborn as me he’d put it to quittin smokin. Maybe that’s it, I just wouldn’t be licked. Not sayin it’s easy. I think about it all the time, ‘specially when just about everyone I work with smokes.

Bernadette wants to play cards, but Tex says let’s go to Lonesome Lefty’s an’ shoot pool, so that’s what we do.

I play Bernadette, who’s not too bad, even though I beat her. Tex is at the other table playin a regular an’ he gets whooped, losin a $20 bet.

The three of us are havin another beer. Tex says he sure misses havin a stable hand to shovel shit, even though we still have the boy Mikey comin in for a few hours on weekends.

The place is nearly empty, an’ we’re mindin our own business when a big son of a bitch comes up to our table outta nowhere an’ says somethin about a squaw. I see Bernadette grab Tex’s hand. Tex looks fit to be tied, but he stays sittin even though he’s starin hard at the asshole.

“I said, we don’t allow no squaws in here,” the guy says real slow, loud enough that the bartender hears. No one moves for a few seconds. I’ll be damned if I’ll put up with that kind a shit bein said about a woman. I get up real sudden an’ smack the guy, takin him by surprise. He’s had a few drinks, so he staggers backward.

“That ain’t no way to talk about a woman,” I say. The bartender’s over at the table by now tryin to get between us.

“We don’t want no trouble here,” he says, an’ then to the other guy, “I suggest you leave.”

The guy mouths off a little more, an’ next thing you know the bartender’s foldin his arm behind his back, a real slick move, an’ walkin him to the door.

“Thanks, Ennis,” Tex says when I’m sittin back down. “I’d a done the job myself, but I don’t wanna go back to prison.” So that’s it. Smart kid not to get himself in trouble.

“Sorry it had to happen to you,” I say to Bernadette. “You must not think much about the hospitality around here.”

“Thanks Mr. Del Mar,” she says. “The sad thing is, we’re totally used to it, everywhere we go.”

“People can’t mind their own goddamn business,” Tex says.

The bartender comes over an’ asks if everything’s OK. We thank him, an’ he says no problem, introduces himself as Chester, the owner’s son.

Bernadette introduces herself an’ me an’ Tex.

“My sister’s boyfriend is from the reservation,” Chester says. “You’d think it’s still the Wild West, the things people say.”

We have a nice enough time after that. I cain’t help thinkin that if folks find a white boy an’ a half-Indian girl to be a problem, imagine what they’d say about two men. Don’t tell me times is changin.

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Wednesday, Oct. 17
Yesterday was the last a the Master Cattleman class, thank god. I lived through it anyways, passed all the tests. I guess I learned a few new things about risk management an’ calvin schedules.

When Stoutamire stops by in the mornin, I tell him I’ll be graduatin next week.

“That’s a pay raise for you,” he says an’ slaps me on the back. “You got a graduation dinner to go to?”

“Yeah, I was thinkin about skippin it,” I say. It’s the “and spouses” part that got me.

“How about if I go with you?” he says. “I wouldn’t mind seein the instructors again an’ meet the other cattlemen.”

Couldn’t hurt, I guess. “That’d be all right,” I say. “Next Tuesday at 6. We can drive over together.”

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Tuesday, Oct. 23

Chuck’s not at the graduation. I knew he wouldn’t be ‘cause he’s generally got 4-H on Tuesdays. On the way back from the dinner, I mention to Stoutamire that I want a take a weekend off soon to go fishin.

“You wanna use my cabin up near Whiskey Mountain?” the old man asks.

Really? “That’s real nice a you, Mr. Stoutamire,” I say, but I wonder if he’ll want a go too.

“You goin alone?” he asks.

“Me an’ a buddy.”

“Well, I’d go with you, but I don’t think Jannelle would stand for it,” he says. “Doc said to take it easy for six to eight weeks, an’ she’s holdin me to it.”

A relief. “Well thank you, Mr. Stoutamire,” I say. “I’ll let you know when I fix on a date.”

“You should get to it before the snow comes,” he says.

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Francine’s in her room when I get home at 9:30, so I call Chuck.

“Well, I did it,” I say. “Graduated.”

“My man! Master Cattleman!”

I’ll ignore that “my man” for now anyways. “Stoutamire said we could borrow his cabin over by Whiskey Mountain.”

“You been there?”

“No, but it sounds real nice, not too rustic.”

“Sounds good.”

“So when do you want to go?
“Next weekend OK?”

That soon? “Could be all right,” I say. “I’ll talk to Stoutamire.”

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Friday, Oct. 26

There’s a little snow swirlin around, but it don’t look to me like it’ll get bad, an’ the radio says the temperature’s goin up to 50 tomorrow. Chuck has the better truck and horse trailer, so he’s drivin. He’s pickin me up at 5. I already bought groceries an’ packed up the fishin gear.

Chuck’s pretty talkative on the ride, tellin me about the tough week he had an’ needin to call in federal marshals in a altercation he got into with some rancher near Dubois. I’m quiet, cain’t help thinkin about all them trips with Jack. We always came separate an’ sometimes we almost missed each other by goin to the wrong entrance to the park. We had to come to an agreement that I would stay wherever I was an’ he’d be the one to drive around lookin for me ‘cause he always had new trucks. I’d always be frettin if he wasn’t there right at noon or whatever time we’d set, but I’d tease him to no mercy when we did come together, blame him whether it was his fault or not.

The cabin turns out to be a real log cabin, but bigger an’ nicer than a regular huntin cabin. Looks like Jannelle put in her touches. We get there at dusk, feed an’ picket the horses in the lean-to, unload the truck, an’ start a fire in the inside fireplace. Pretty soon we’re wrestlin each other into the king-size bed in the big bedroom.

*****

I cook up canned beans, pork sausage, canned corn an’ biscuits from a mix for supper. Chuck says it’s the perfect meal for first night in camp.

After we eat, we head to the living room, a nice recliner for each of us, an’ Chuck takes out a bottle a Old Rose whiskey an’ a box wrapped up with Sunday funnies. He hands it to me. “For your graduation.”

“Hey now,” I start to say, but I go ahead an’ pull the paper off an’ open the box. What’s inside is a trophy, a gold statue of a cow on a wood base, with a plaque sayin “Ennis Del Mar – Master Cattleman 1984.”

I never won a trophy before, an’ I feel my heart poundin. I say “Thank you,” but it sounds kinda choked to me.

“Didn’t I say you could do it?” Chuck says, an’ he pours the whiskey into tumblers. “A toast. To you and to Whiskey Mountain.”

I haven’t drunk no whiskey in months, but I figure what the hell, I’m not likely to go all weepy here with Chuck.

We hit the bottle fast and hard.

Chuck says he’s worried about Queenie.

“She’s depressed,” he says. “She’s so lonely she’s been calling me and crying and saying she wants us to get back together.”

“What do you say to that?” I ask.
“Oh, hell no,” he says. “I’m sorry about her banker boyfriend leaving her, but I have my own life now, and that’s with you. Of course I didn’t tell her that.”

I feel my jaw clenching up. “You ain’t picturin us ranchin up together are ya?” I say. “’Cause I never said nothin about that an’ it ain’t gonna happen.”

He looks at me then says, “Relax, Ennis. I’m just saying, I’m not going back to her. I do miss her cooking.”

I have to laugh. “You’re a good enough cook.”

He asks, “How is it with you an’ Alma?”

“I never told you,” I say, “but she called me just before Francine moved in an’ I got the idea she was drinkin that night. I guess Monroe’s been travelin and the boys are a handful. I wanted to have a boy myself, ya know? I felt ripped off when Alma asked for a divorce.”

“So it was her who kicked you out? Did she have any idea about you an’ Jack?”

“Turns out she did, but she didn’t put it to me ‘til after we was split.”

“You think she told Monroe and the girls about you and Jack?”

“Monroe knows, an’ she told Junior,” I say. “Junior seems OK with it, we talked. Francine, that’s another story.”

I fill up the tumblers.

“You should tell Francine,” he says.

“Why? Does Julie know about you?”

“She knows about you an’ me,” he says.

I sit up straight in the recliner. “That means Junior knows. Why’d you tell Julie anyways?”

“She could tell, just watching me,” he says. “Listen Ennis, I was thinking about you and Jack. He gets killed, and no one knows to call you and let you know. What if you never got the postcard? It’s like you weren’t even part of his life, but you were a big part of it.” I’d told him how I found out about Jack dyin an’ how I met his folks.

“I feel like the people closest to us should know about us,” he says. “Why should we have to sneak around?”

“You know goddamn well why,” I say. “Guys get killed for this. Even if we can trust our girls, what if they blab to the wrong person, huh?”

“We ask them to be discreet. They’re big girls. But you get my point?” he asks. “We don’t have to hide from everyone?”

“I guess,’ I say. “That Francine has a big mouth.”

“But you agree she should know, living with you and all,” he says. I’m about to tell him to drop it when he changes the subject. “Hey, you know I brought my guitar?”

“Mmm, I seen it,” I say. “You go ahead, you sing good.”
“Maybe you’ll join me?” I don’t answer. He gets the guitar an’ starts playin’ “Git Along Little Dogies.” Pretty soon I do start to sing, real quiet.

“You play good,” I tell him after the song. “You shoulda heard Jack on the harmonica. Offended the coyotes.” It’s nice I can talk about Jack so easy.

“You sing well,” Chuck says.

“Fine, you want a put it that way, you sing well too,” I say, an’ we both laugh.

We work our way through “Cowboy Logic,” and a few other cowboy tunes. Chuck sings harmonies, just makin it up as we go along, like my ma an’ Bridget used a do. We get into some Johnny Cash and Hank Williams and even “Heartbreak Hotel.” That one gets us laughin so bad we have to stop.

“You have a great voice, Ennis,” Chuck says. “You never thought about performing?”

I snort, cain’t help it. I have a hard enough time talkin most a the time, like hell I would get up in front of a crowd an’ sing. “Naw, this is for your ears only,” I say. “You an’ the coyotes.”

After that, we get into stories about ranch disasters we seen or heard about – all pretty tragic, but we’re laughin an’ tryin a gross each other out, no harm intended to the folks in the stories.

Chuck tells about a Mormon cowboy who disappeared with a prize bay mare on Christmas Eve, an’ everyone thought he’d run away an’ stolen the horse, but they found horse an’ rider’s bodies in the woods not far away after winter thaw – horse rattlesnake-bit an’ rider’s back broke.

I tell about a rancher’s young wife who slunk around the bunkhouse until the old man caught her in the act an’ shot her dead an’ shot the balls off the 17-year-old boy she was with. “Last time he messed around with anyone’s wife,” I say. I never knew these folks, only heard the story myself.

Then Chuck starts talkin about catchin 4-H kids doin all kinds of things with livestock, mostly sheep.

“Fuckin K.E. used a get the calves to lick his balls,” I say, then we’re both snortin an’ hootin.

Just as the laughin dies down, I put on a straight face an’ say, “No seriously, that’s animal abuse, ain’t it?” an’ we’re off again.

By this time, both our words are startin to slur together. Chuck keeps pourin whiskey, an’ we tell a few more stories. Chuck tries pluckin’ a few more tunes, but his fingers have gone all clumsy.

Finally, I say, “I’m drunk an’ I don’t think I’m gettin up from this chair.”

“C’mon, I’ll help you,” Chuck says, even though he can hardly walk himself.

“I’m gonna sleep on that couch right there,” I tell him. He helps steer me in the right direction, an’ I plop down.

“I’ll get you some covers,” he says. Not that I don’t want a share that big bed with him, I just cain’t move. I put a cushion under my head an’ lie on my side so I can fit the couch an’ close my eyes.

When Chuck comes back with the blanket, I don’t bother to open my eyes. Then I feel him kiss me on the cheek an’ I hear him whisperin, “I love you, Ennis.”

Still I don’t open my eyes, don’t say nothin. Love? Shit, I don’t hardly know the guy.
Saturday, Oct. 27

I wake up before dawn with cramps from sleepin all folded up, so I go into the bedroom an’ slip in beside Chuck. Big bed, but I move up right behind him. Pretty soon, we’re both wide awake, an’ we get to wrestlin again, then kissin even though we both have really bad breath, an’ then I’m poundin his ass an’ the headboard is thumpin’ an’ we’re moanin an’ yellin loud as we want, this place so far off the road.

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After we shower, I make breakfast an’ Chuck packs sandwiches for lunch. There’s about an inch a snow on the ground, but not a cloud in the sky. By 8, we’re ridin up switchbacks.

“Does it get any better than this?” Chuck asks. I give him a smile, but I don’t answer. Only thing better’n this would be if he was Jack, I cain’t help thinkin, even though I know it’s foolishness. Seriously, when the day warms up an’ the sky stays clear, it’s a day you wish you could just bottle up an’ take with you.

We’re gone all day explorin the hills an’ along the stream. When we’re back, groomin the horses, I ask Chuck not to take a shower. I want a smell the sweat an’ horse on him.

It’s warm enough we light a fire in the outside fireplace an’ we grill burgers an’ eat ‘em with store-bought potato salad an’ coleslaw. We sit outside drinkin beer and talkin, singin and playin a few more cowboy songs an’ listenin to the coyotes until around 9. Then I get up an’ walk behind Chuck, an’ whisper in his ear, “Time for bed, Buckaroo.”

This time, we go slow, an’ we end up in a 69 position, somethin I’d only heard about from ranch hands talkin about doin it with a woman. I never liked the taste of a woman, always tried to avoid puttin my mouth down there. Never did this with Jack either. It’s pretty amazin, this feelin a bein totally together, like you forget who’s doin what to who. Chuck’s the one to come first, an’ after we’re done I just gotta tease him about that.

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Sunday, Oct. 28

We go fishin in the stream an’ actually catch a few a what Chuck is callin perch. We ice ‘em up an’ clean up the cabin, no washin machine so I take the sheets with me to wash back home. We get back to Signal at 5, an’ I cook the fish in a fryin pan an’ boil up some potatoes an’ open a can a green beans.

We’re just sittin down to eat when Francine walks in the door an’ stops, frozen.

“Hi Daddy, hi Chuck,” she says after a second. I’d told her I was goin a Stoutamire’s cabin for the weekend, but I never said who with.

“Uh, you want somethin to eat?” I ask her. “I cooked up the perch we caught. There’s plenty.”

“Sure,” she says, an’ she puts away her coat an’ sits down.

I fill up a plate for her, an’ Chuck keeps the conversation goin, askin’ Francine about her equine studies. Francine says she wants to get into barrel racin’ an’ compete in rodeo next summer. That’s her, always thinkin up the next thing to do.
When we’re done eatin, I walk Chuck out to his truck.

He turns to me an’ says, “Ennis, I just want to say, this was the best weekend of my life.”

“You gotta stop that,” I say.

“Stop what?” he says. “You think I’m lying?”

I give him a little shove toward the truck. “See ya next Saturday?” an’ he says he might call me before that. I watch him drive out.

“So how was the weekend?” Francine asks me when I get back in.

“Good, yours?”

“Real good,” she says. “Daddy?”

“Uh-huh?

“Thanks for letting me move in with you.”

I rumple her hair an’ say, “Good to have you, Little Darlin.”
Tuesday Oct. 30

Francine says she’s goin’ to Alma’s for Halloween, take the boys trick-or-treatin. Alma’s not up to it an’ Monroe’s out of town.

“Your ma doin OK?” I ask.

“She’s fine, just wants a Halloween off,” Francine says, so I say, “I’m sure she ‘preciates your help.”

Francine makes us spaghetti an’ meatballs, a fine meal on a cold night. I’m always grateful to get good food cooked by someone else.

Outta the blue she asks, “Hey Daddy, Regent’s ma and aunt are inviting a few people over there for Thanksgiving, and they want you to come. What do you say?”

“I dunno, I’ll probly be workin,” I say. Like hell do I wanna go to some big thing, an’ anyways, he’s just her boyfriend, so why do I need to meet the ma already?

“You an’ Rodeo gettin serious, time to meet the parents, huh?” I ask her. “Junior had a ring an’ her weddin day all set up by the time I met Curt’s folks.”

She gives me the “you hopeless idiot” look an’ says, “Daddy, I’m 18. I’m not gonna get serious about a boy for years and years.”

“You never know,” I say. “It could come up an’ take you by surprise.”

“I mean I like him a lot,” she says. “I really like his family and the farm. I think you’d like them too.”

“I’ll meet ‘em some other time, OK Darlin?” I say. “Thanksgiving is family time, so I’m fixin to give Tex an’ Stiv the day off.”

“Sure,” she says, an’ she’s quiet for a second, an’ then, “You have a family too, you know.”

“I got you girls,” I say. “An’ you both got your own plans. I’ll be fine.”

We eat a little more an’ then she says, “Can I tell you something about them?”

“Who?”

“Regent’s folks.”

“I guess.”

“His Aunt Flo’s not really his aunt.”

“No? So who is she?”

“A friend of his ma’s. A special friend.”

I look at her, an’ see her eyes are dancin’.
“Huh?” I ask, but I think I know what’s comin.

Always the performer, she waits a few second, then says, “They sleep in the same bedroom,” real fast like it’s all one word.

It’s too hot in here, so I unbutton my cuffs an’ move my sleeves up. I’m thinkin, holy shit. “That don’t mean nothin,” I say.

“In the same bed, Daddy! They’re a couple! When Regent told me, I didn’t believe it, so he had me ask them and it’s true.”

“Well now,” I say. I’m sweatin’, so I pick up the napkin an’ wipe my forehead. “You sure we cain’t turn the thermostat down just a few degrees?” She’s always turnin it up too high.

“Daddy, I set it for 68. Ma an’ Monroe have theirs at 70.”

“I guess they can afford it,” I say. I get up an’ get a beer, sit back down.

“You know any lesbians?” she asks.

I know how to shut people down when they ask too many questions, but I’m thinkin maybe I won’t.

“Not that I know of,” I say. It’s gotta be easier, two women livin together, them pretendin to be sisters, I’m thinkin.

“So is it OK with you?”

“It’s none a my business. Is it OK with you?”

“Daddy! Of course it is,” she says. “I bet if Ma knew she’d think it’s her business.”

“So don’t tell her.”

“I won’t.”

“You shouldn’t be tellin anyone,” I say. “You shouldn’t a told me.”

“Well, I know you’ll be discreet,” she says.

“Sure enough,” I say.

Then, she comes out with: “So how serious are you and Chuck anyways?”

An’ there it is, right? “What are you sayin?” I ask. Of course I know what.

“You and Chuck,” she says. “You’re more than just friends, aren’t you Daddy?”

Her face is so innocent, like she’s 5 years old again, askin’ me to play tea party with her.

I’m thinkin about what to say, an’ then it just comes out: “Not serious enough for you to meet the folks, if that’s what you’re askin.”

She stares an’ then bursts out laughin so hard she sprays out a mouthful a milk, all over the table an’ even onto my face.

Then I’m laughin too, swipin the milk off my face with my sleeve.
“Anyways, his dad’s dead an’ his ma’s in Laramie,” I say, tryin to keep a straight face.

That only eggs her on. She’s laughin so hard she’s havin a hard time catchin her breath. Christ, I hope it’s not goin a bring on the asthma.

“You never made me laugh so hard in my life, Daddy. Oh God.” She wipes away some tears. “No disrespect to Chuck’s dad.”

When she’s calmer, I ask, “Junior tell you?”

“No, I figured it out on my own,” she says. “I live here, remember? I tried to get it out of Junior, but she wouldn’t talk about it.”

“You too. You keep it a secret,” I say.

“I’m pretty sure my drama teacher at Riverton High was gay,” she says. “He probably could have been fired if anyone knew, but the kids loved him and no one ever said a word.”

“A lotta people around here would just as soon kill someone who’s … queer … as look at ‘em,” I say. “You don’t talk to no one on the ranch nor at school.”

“Not a word, Daddy. I can keep a secret.”

“I doubt that, Honey,” I say. “You just spilled the beans about Regent’s folks.”

“But you’re going to meet them anyway,” she says. “Can I tell Regent about you and Chuck?”

“I guess he can take it,” I say.

“I won’t tell anyone else, Daddy, I swear,” she says. “Regent won’t either. He’s used to this. We’ll be careful. I’d never want anything to happen to you.”

I need to talk to Chuck, but it’s his 4-H night.

Later, I’m havin a devil of a time tryin to sleep. This ain’t goin a be easy, me an’ Chuck tryin a carve out some kind a space for us down here on the plains in real life instead a just once in a while out in the middle a nowhere.

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Wednesday Oct. 31

I call Chuck when I come in from work at 6:30.

“Hey Chuck, I gotta talk to you ‘bout somethin, not over the phone.”

“What are you doin for supper?” he asks.

“I dunno, beans maybe?”

“I’m making chicken fried rice,” he says. “How about if you come over here?”

*****

“I told Francine,” I tell Chuck as soon as I’m in the house. “I mean, she guessed. I told her she could tell Regent too.”
“He’s a good kid, quiet,” Chuck says.

I’m bustin to tell him about the ma and aunt, but I don’t wanna spread gossip after I just told Francine not to. On the other hand, maybe he should know.

“You know his ma an’ his aunt, right?

“Yeah, I’ve known them for years in 4-H,” he says.

“What if I told you the aunt’s not really his aunt.”

“Well, they’re not sisters,” Chuck says. “Flo is the sister of Lisa’s ex-husband.”

“Not from what Francine tells me,” I say. “Turns out they’re a couple.”

“Well shit,” he says. “What’s the chances the daughter of a gay guy and the son of a lesbian get together?”

Him sayin “gay guy” is botherin’ me, but I don’t say nothin.

Come to think of it, there’s something else been botherin me. I ask Chuck what weapons he’s got in the house or in his truck, an’ he says he’s got two huntin guns locked away in the basement.

“No good, you need a .38 in your bedroom an’ one in your truck,” I tell him.

“What’s the point?” he asks. “I can’t shoot worth shit anyway.”

“You need a learn,” I say. “Come over on Saturday an’ we’ll set up target practice. I’m serious, you need to do this. Anyone comes after us, we need to fight back.”

He says that reminds him, he found my wedding ring under his bed, almost sucked it up into the vacuum cleaner. He hands it over an’ I put it in my pocket.

“What was that all about anyway, that night?” he asks.

I tell him about wearin it over to Casper to buy the K-Y.

“So you’d be ready?” he says, eyes twinklin.

“I’m ready right now,” I say. Didn’t think we’d get into this on a weeknight an’ all, but here it is.

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Friday, Nov. 2

I’m over at Junior’s, just the two of us. We’re eatin pizza from the deliveryman, an’ coleslaw she made herself.

She shows me sketches she’s done in her art class, an’ one she did of her house an’ another of Curt.

I tell her they’re real nice, ‘cause they are. I’m not sure how to go from here to tellin her about the thing with Chuck.

“Thing is, uh,” I say.

“What, Daddy?”
Deep breath. “Well, you know I been hangin around with Chuck Ausman a fair bit?”

“Yeah …”

“We’re, uh …” I’m tryin, but Jesus Christ almighty this is hard.

I start again, “He’s uh … Honey, you remember that thing with Jack Twist?”

Her eyes are soft an’ she’s got the sweetest smile. “Yeah Daddy. You and Chuck are together like that. I know.”

I got no idea what to say. “So, I guess …”

“I’m so glad you told me,” she says. “I’m happy for you. I seen you sad for too long, and it broke my heart. You’re doing so much better now.”

I can feel my face goin red. “Yeah, well.”

“You know me and Julie went to the prom with two gay guys?” she says. I cain’t believe it, more of ‘em around here than I’d ever thought.

“Didn’t know it,” I say. “You didn’t go with Curt?”

“He didn’t want to walk back into Riverton High after being graduated two years, and he didn’t mind.”


“Next you’ll be tellin me the gay fellas danced together,” I say.

“No Daddy! Hardly anyone knows about them. They just moved in together a few months ago to an apartment over Mimi’s Café.”

“Well now, don’t be gettin some notion that me an’ Chuck is goin a shack up,” I say. “That ain’t goin a happen.”

“What about that AIDS, Daddy? You worry about that?”

I’ve heard of it, but no, never thought much about it, one more thing to worry about an’ it don’t seem like I’m part a that scene anyways. “Seems like that’s a big-city thing,” I say. “I mean guys who get around a lot.”

“Maybe, but you be careful anyway, Daddy,” she says. I got nothin more to say ‘cause this ain’t something a father talks to his daughter about.

We eat chocolate chip cookies an’ watch “Dallas” together. Bobby’s got his eyesight back an’ he’s goin a marry the girl played by Elvis Presley’s wife. Junior says she likes Pam better. Either one of ‘em’s OK, I guess.

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Saturday, Nov. 3

I set up cans for Chuck to shoot, an’ it don’t take me long to figure out that even Francine can shoot a .38 better’n him, so I say let’s go to the shootin range in Lander. We’re there for a few hours, an’ it’s OK to touch Chuck once in a while to help him set his sights, ‘cause other guys are
doing the same thing. They’re probly not feelin what I’m feelin in my jeans.

He tells me that’s enough for today, an’ why don’t we go to the Buckhorn Bar an’ grab some supper. Why not is ‘cause what will people say, two guys out together … but wait, even I know there’s always guys together there, more guys than women.

When he goes to pay for the range time, I grab a handbill about shootin lessons.

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We both order Buds ‘an burgers, an’ when the waitress is gone, Chuck asks, “Is this our first date?”

I reckon it is, but I say, “You shut up. It’s goin a be our last unless you tell me you’re goin a learn to shoot. Here, look at this,” an’ I give him the paper. “It’s where you call an’ set up an appointment.”

“OK, I’ll do it,” he says. “But you know I’m doing this for you, right? I don’t really think it’s necessary.”

“Fine, do it for me then,” I say. I know what I’m talkin about, you gotta be ready for the sons a bitches.

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Monday, Nov. 5

Stoutamire pre-sold most a this year’s calves on contract, an’ we’re startin to ship. We’re takin a few to auctions this week, empty cows that never got pregnant, a few bulls an’ some extra calves.

We’re at the Monday morning meetin, an’ the old man says we need a day laborer to help out, so I ask if I can hire Regent, ‘cause the boys from summer are back in school. Stoutamire’s OK with that.

Then we’re lookin at the schedule for the month. I show him where I’m goin a work on Thanksgiving an’ give Stiv an’ Tex the day off to be with their families.

“Are you going to work Christmas too, Ennis?” Jannelle asks.

“Sure,” I say. “Why not?”

“Well, part of being foreman with two men working for you is you don’t have to work holidays,” she says. “You can have one of them work one day and one the other.”

I’ve been workin holidays so many years it never occurred to me to take both off. Most years I was happy enough to work ‘cause it’s so much easier to forget about the people you’re not with on a holiday when you’re shovellin shit, ridin horses an’ generally freezin your balls off.

“I guess I’ll think on that,” I say.

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Saturday Nov. 10

Stock is shipped, so I go ahead an’ call Jack’s parents like I said I would, to find out about goin’ up there for a few days. I’m glad when Jack’s ma answers.
“So good to hear your voice, Ennis,” she says. “John’s not well, got a bad cold. We only had 30 calves to sell this year and the prices weren’t so good.”

“I bet he’s got some odd jobs for me,” I say.

“A lot more than you can do, but your help sure is welcome.”

“How about next Wednesday an’ I’ll stay overnight?”

“Maybe the weekend would be better,” she says. “We could hire a boy in town to help you.”

I’d rather have my own helper an’ be back here by Saturday night. “Maybe I can bring someone with me, my daughter’s boyfriend,” I say. “Good kid, good helper. He’s been workin for me at the ranch.”

“He won’t mind sleeping on the couch? I was going to put you in Jack’s room.”

I hadn’t thought about spendin’ a night in that little room where Jack had grew up. I cain’t think about it now either.

Maybe I should tell her Regent’ll stay there, but instead I say, “That’ll work, ma’am.”

*****

Chuck an’ me meet up to shoot pool at Lonesome Lefty’s. I figure it’s OK, at least it’s not Riverton. We run into Curt’s dad, Gill, an’ his buddy Hi who’s manager at the hardware store, an’ we take ‘em on for $20 each, best two of three.

We split the first two an’ now Chuck’s sinkin the 8-ball. The four of us sit down at a table an’ get to talkin about ranchin an’ farm equipment an’ the NFL. I don’t care much for football.

Then Gill says Junior’s a fine cook an’ a fine lady, an’ I have to agree. He says she’s makin Curt very happy, but the commute is killin him.

“I hope to be a grandfather soon,” Gill says, “either from those two or my girl Caroline and her Jimmy.”

I nearly choke, but I get out, “Me too.” I like babies an’ I’m lookin forward to puttin a little one on a horse the first time. Thing is, it feels so damn strange to be sittin across the table from a man I’m goin a fuck later tonight, an’ talkin about such things.

*****

Chuck leaves first to go home. I head over there about 10 minutes later.

“Hi Gramps,” he says when he opens the door at his house.

“Not yet,” I say. “An’ anyways I should be callin you Gramps ‘cause you’re older’n me by what, two-three years?”

“When’s your birthday?” he asks.

“I ain’t tellin.”

“I’ll check your driver’s license when your jeans are off.”
“My jeans ain’t comin off.”

He looks at me an’ raises his eyebrows in a comical way.

“OK, January 6,” I say.

“Ah, Capricorn, an earth sign.”

“That’s total bullshit an’ you know it.”

“And you’re going to be 41?”

“Huh.”

“I’ll be 43 on February 27,” Chuck says.

“You’re robbin the cradle,” I tell him, an’ he hits me an’ we laugh.

I tell him I’ll be goin up to Lightnin Flat next week to help out Jack’s folks, takin Regent along.

Chuck opens his mouth like he’s goin a say something, but nothin comes out. So I lean over an’ grab him by the back a the head an’ kiss him hard.

We go at it quick an’ dirty in the big bed, an’ afterwards he goes downstairs an’ gets us beers. We’re sittin with our backs on the headboard, an’ he’s tellin me about his week at work.

“You want to spend the night, Ennis?” he asks.

“Cain’t do that,” I say. “We cain’t be gettin used to that.”

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Monday, Nov. 12

Turns out Don Wroe, who I knew from the Elwood Hi-Top ranch, is foreman at an outfit near Laramie, an’ he come with his boss to pick up 25 calves they’d bought. Jack an’ me stayed one time at his cabin near Shoshoni – a mind-blowin weekend, I gotta say.

“Mr. Stoutamire tells me you’re the new foreman?” Don says. “Fine man you got here,” he says to Stoutamire. “Best horse trainer I ever worked with.”

“Ain’t that what I told you, Ennis?” Stoutamire says.

My face is burnin up even in this cold.

The old man an’ Jannelle know the rancher an’ Don pretty well, so they’d invited ‘em to the house for lunch. Stoutamire says I’m welcome to join ‘em, so I do. Makes me feel I kind a like one a the big boys.

After lunch, Don says to me, “You ever want a use my cabin again, just ask. We’re up there for all the holidays, but lots a weekends it’s sittin empty.”

I tell him thanks, I probly will, an’ I have him write his number on a business card his boss’d given me. But I’m thinkin I probly won’t ‘cause I wouldn’t want a replace the memories I got a that cabin. I want a leave ‘em right where they are.
Wednesday, Nov. 14

We’re takin Regent’s truck, not new by a long shot but a sight better’n mine. When I get to his folks’ farm, Sweet Acres, he’s outside an’ ready to go, so we’re on the road to Lightin Flat by just after 5. I’m drivin an’ Regent is dozin.

He wakes up after we get off the interstate, an’ we get to talkin about some a the work we’ll be doin up there.

I gotta warn him about Mr. Twist, so I say, “He’s an old son of a bitch, but don’t let him intimidate you.”

“So why do you go up there?” the boy asks.

“I wouldn’t give him the sweat off my balls,” I say. “But they’re my friend Jack’s folks, an’ he used to go up there once or twice a year to help ‘em out. An’, well, He died last year, an’ the ranch is worse than ever, so I figured, why not help out? The ma’s real nice and she’s a great cook.”

I’d talked to the old man on the phone an’ decided we’d need three full days up there to get done what he wants done.

We walk in at 9 an’ Jack’s ma gives us coffee an’ coffee cake, then the old man sets us to replacin the broken window, then strippin part a the roof an’ layin new tile. Rebuildin the corrals an’ replacin rotten wood in the stable an’ barn’ll be the big job, so we got our next two days a work cut out for us. I don’t know how the old man handled even 30 calves with the state the ranch is in.

Lunch is tuna sandwiches, canned pears an’ lemonade. Jack’s ma asks Regent what he’s studyin in college.

“Agricultural management,” he says. “I’m probably goin back after Christmas. I took time off for rodeoin.”

The old man rolls his eyes. “Now whatcha wanna do somethin’ like that for, boy? You ride the bulls or the broncs?”

“Broncs,” Regent says. “When I’m done with that I might try my hand at calf ropin’.”

“That’s for sissies,” the old man says.

I don’t know if he’s talkin about the broncs or the ropin, but I ain’t goin a stand for him talkin about sissies. I fix a stare on him an’ I say, “Watch it there.”

The old man stares back for a pace, then goes on. “Tell you what, I rode the bulls in my day, an’ so did my boy Jack. I could show you some buckles in the barn.”

“Sure,” Regent says

“Bobby’s ridin bulls on his high school team,” Jack’s ma says. “That’s our son’s boy,” she says to Regent.

“That so?” Regent says.

“Maybe you can meet him when he’s up here in Wyoming next spring.”
“Sure enough,” Regent says.

*****

We work on the roof the rest of the day. The old man leaves Regent an’ me to the task while he’s doin other things.

Over dinner – roasted chicken with potatoes and turnips – Jack’s ma says, “Regent, you’re a real fine boy. Your parents raised you well.”

“Thanks,” he says. “I’ll tell them.”

I don’t mean to, but I shoot him a look an’ he catches it.

“Really ma’am, my daddy died when I was four and it was my ma an’ my aunt who raised me.”

“Your ma’s sister?” she asks.

“Uh, no, my daddy’s sister.”

“Well they did a fine job,” Jack’s ma says. “Ennis, you must be proud of your daughter’s boyfriend here.”

“He’s a good worker,” I say.

“An’ learned it all from womenfolk!” the old man says, shaking his head. No one pays any attention to that.

After supper, the old man makes himself scarce. I take out pictures a my girls to show Mrs. Twist. She ooh’s and aah’s an’ says I must be proud. Regent says she should come down to Riverton an’ meet ‘em for herself.

She takes a quick look at the old man’s chair an’ says to me an’ Regent, “Maybe I will.”

We pass the evenin playin rummy an’ Parcheesi.

*****

I can sleep just about anywhere, but this little bed is killin me, so I take off the covers an’ lie down on em’ on the floor, cover myself with the sheet. No surprise, I dream about me an’ Jack in the cold, cookin breakfast an’ then goin back in the tent to make us some heat.

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Thursday, Nov. 15

During lunch on Thursday, Jack’s ma asks me if I’ll take her down to the cemetery.

“Of course,” I say.

“You come out to the barn an’ I’ll show you my old rodeo stuff,” the old man tells Regent.

As soon as we’re in the truck, Jack’s ma says, “How are you, Ennis, really?”

“I’m doin’ real good,” I say.

“You still miss Jack?”
“Not a day goes by I don’t think about him.”

“Same with me. I’m so looking forward to meeting Bobby.”

“Me too,” I say. “An’ you know what Regent said about comin for a visit? You’d be welcome to stay with me or my married daughter.” I’m not thinkin it’ll happen, just want her to know we’d be happy to have her.

After a few minutes, she says, “I hope you won’t mind me asking, but do you think you’ll ever have someone new come along?”

I can’t lie, so I say, “Could happen,” real quiet. “It don’t mean I don’t miss Jack.”

“Of course not,” she says, an’ she taps my knee. “But you’re only 40. You never know what might happen. I know it’s hard for men like you and Jack.”

I gotta chew on that for a second. She said men like you an’ Jack, not queers like you an’ Jack. Like it’s perfectly OK with her, an’ I just cain’t get over that. I ain’t goin a tell her that maybe someone’s already come along.

When we get to the cemetery, we step outta the truck an’ walk over to Jack’s marker. His ma kneels in front an’ puts her head down. I stay standin.

I don’t believe in ghosts or afterlife or even in god that much, but I find myself talkin to Jack in my head like I’ve done a few times before.

Here I am, Bud. I miss ya. Your ma is the best, you know that? I wish I coulda given you that sweet life you wanted. I hope you can forgive me …

All of a sudden, the wind comes up, an keeps comin like it’s goin a push Jack’s ma right over.

“Oh my,” she says, an’ she holds her hand for me to help her up.

“We best be gettin back,” I say.

*****

Regent an’ me work on the corral fence until the dark hits at 4:30. When we get back to the house, Mrs. Twist says I got a phone call.

“Someone named Chuck. He left a number,” she says. Only person I’d given the number here was Francine. I look at the piece a paper; it’s not his number or any other I recognize.

Jack’s ma says to Regent, “Let’s go in the living room and give him some privacy.” When I call the number, a woman answers “hello” an’ says Chuck’ll be right there.

“It’s my mother,” he says when he comes on. “She had a stroke last night and she died this morning. I’m at my sister’s in Laramie.”

“I’m real sorry,” I say. “You want me down there?” That just came out. I wasn’t even thinkin about it.

“No, that’s OK,” he says. “I just wanted to let you know what’s going on.” Then he whispers: “No privacy here, how about you?”

“Not much,” I say. “You need anything, you just let me know, huh? When’s the funeral?”
“Probably Saturday.”

“You want me to go?” I’m hopin not, but I feel like it’s the right thing to say.

“No, I don’t think that’ll work,” he says, an’ he asks when I’ll be back in Signal. I say Friday late. He says he’ll call me Saturday morning.

I hang up. I’m feelin like I want a be with him right now, help him out with whatever he’s goin through. It’s a warm feelin inside, like I’m not used to.

Friday, Nov. 16

After another long day a work an’ early dinner a beef stew, Jack’s old man pulls out a wad a twenties and hands ’em to me. “This for you and the boy,” he says.

I count out $200, take $100 of it an’ give it to Regent, an’ try to hand the other $100 back to the old man.

“Take it, I insist,” the old man says, an’ he pulls his hands away.

“Cain’t,” I say. “You didn’t pay Jack, didja?”

“No.”

“Then why would you pay me? Take it.”

The old man shakes his head and takes the money, puts it back in his pocket.

“When will we see you again?” Jack’s ma asks.

“Well, we’ll be calvin in April an’ then there’s brandin an’ vaccinations an’ all,” I say. “What if I come in June, maybe stay a few days?”

“That would be wonderful,” Jack’s ma says. She grabs me in a hug. “I’ll find out when Bobby’s coming. What about you Regent?”

“I hope to be back riding the broncs, ma’am,” he says.

“I’ll have some local kids workin for me by then,” the old man says, then nods. “Del Mar, La Rocque. Good work.”

*****

“Goddamn, my back hurts,” I say as we’re drivin away.

“Me too,” Regent says.

“Fuckin’ little boy bed.”

“Fuckin’ couch.”

We laugh. I like this kid.

“You know, Mr. Twist never said another thing after you answered him back,” Regent says. “I think he respects you.”
“I don’t know about that,” I say. “But I do know he needs the help. Anyways, I’m goin a pay you the other $50 when we get back.”

“You don’t need to, Mr. Del Mar.”

I don’t mind the “Mr. Del Mar”; it’s how ranch hands talk to foremen. I say, “C’mon, nearly three days’ work, an’ don’t tell me you don’t need the money. How much didja make from your rodeo career this year anyways?”

“Whoa now, that’s like asking a Texan how many head of cattle he’s got.”

“You broke even?”

“A little over,” he says. “I won in Gillette and Casper, and came in second in Riverton. You were there for that.”

“I was impressed,” I say. “Jack, he loved the rodeo but he busted too many bones.”

“Truth is, I missed home like crazy and I missed Francine,” the boy says.

“You got it that bad?” I say.

“I love her,” Regent says. “I want to marry her and take her with me next summer.”

“Hmm,” I say. I can’t see Francine gettin married any time soon, tho’ I can see her goin with him on the rodeo circuit.

We listen to the country music stations that fade in and out on the radio.

Then Regent asks, “Hey, what if you an’ me made up a calf roping team?”

“I’m too old for that,” I say.

“There’s guys twice your age,” he says. “Well, a lot older than you anyways.”

“Let me think on it,” I say. I still can’t see the point a rodeo, but at least ropin resembles something real cowboys do on real ranches.

We’re quiet the rest of the way home, an’ I doze off for a while. We’re almost to Sweet Acres Farm when Regent says, “So you know about my ma an’ aunt.”

“Francine shouldn’t a told me,” I say.

“No, it’s OK,” he says. “People close to us know.” Then there’s a little silence.

“Uh, she told you about …” I start.

“Yeah.”

“How fucked up is this conversation anyways?” I can’t help a little chuckle.

“Pretty fucked up,” Regent says.

“You can keep your mouth shut?”

“Oh yeah, Mr. Del Mar. I’ve been keeping my mouth shut most of my life. You wouldn’t believe the stuff I know and don’t talk about.”
“Attaboy,” I say.

“You wanna come in and meet them?”

I look over at the clock, almost 10. “They’ll be up?”

“Watching Dallas,” he says. Good taste, I’m thinkin.

This meetin is goin a happen sooner or later, so I say, “All right then, get it over with.”
Thanks to You

Friday, Nov. 16, 1984

We walk in the side door to Regent’s house right at 10, an’ just then two women step into the kitchen, a huge room with a big round table.

“You’re Ennis Del Mar!” says the larger a the two, with a big smile, sparkling eyes, curly red hair an’ a chestful of cleavage. She walks over an’ gives me a big handshake. “I’ve seen you at the farmer’s market! I’m Lisa La Rocque and this is Regent’s Aunt Flo.”

“Please to meetcha ma’am,” I say an’ I shake Lisa’s hand. “Ma’am,” I nod an’ tip my hat to Flo, smaller, shorter, with a cute face an’ short dark hair. I know her from somewhere, I’m sure of it.

“No-ho! We’re not doing ma’ams,” Lisa says. “I’m Lisa, she’s Flo. You guys just drove down from near the Montana border? Sit down and have something to eat. We’ve got leftover meatloaf and peach custard pie. Want a sandwich?”

“I’ll have pie,” Regent says. He sits down at the big round table in the middle a the kitchen.

“Not for me, thanks,” I say, steppin back. “Guess I’ll be goin’ along.”

“Oh no you don’t,” Lisa says, walkin toward the door as if to block it or something. “We got you here, so c’mon, sit down Ennis. You want a beer? Tea or coffee? Shot of whiskey?”

There’s no sayin’ no, so I say, “Beer’d be all right,” an’ I take a seat.

The place is nice, roosters an’ red checks everywhere you look. I’m rememberin that they raise chickens an’ keep bees.

Flo, who hasn’t said a word, opens the fridge an’ grabs two beers. “You want one Lisa?” she asks. Now I know where I seen her before. She works at the hardware store.

“Oh hell yes,” Lisa says, an’ Flo grabs one more. Lisa sits right next to me an’ puts her hand on my shoulder. I try not to flinch.

“So we like Francine a lot,” Lisa says, an’ takes her hand off. “What do you think of our Regent?”

“Good worker,” I say. “You raised him good.”

“I bet you didn’t get two words out of him the whole three days.” I see him shake his head.

“Yeah, well,” I say.

“So you’re divorced?” Lisa goes on. “You never remarried?” So they don’t know? That’s a shock, gotta give Francine some credit.

“No,” I say.

“Good looking guy like you? Aren’t the widows and divorcees all over you?”

“Aaw, leave him alone Ma,” Regent says.

“Well aren’t they?”
I feel like I’m bein squeezed into that bench vise we was usin today in Mr. Twist’s shop. I know my face must be red.

“I, uh,” I say. “I’m with someone.”

“Girlfriend?” she asks. “Francine didn’t say anything about that.”

Now I’m regrettin what I said. Lisa keeps lookin at me, then Regent, then back to me. No one’s sayin nothin.

“Boyfriend!” she finally says, real loud. “Well God love you. ‘Someone,’ huh?” She turns an’ smothers me in a hug, an’ she kisses my cheek, even though I’m tryin a turn away.

“Stop it Ma!” Regent says.

I feel like my whole head is goin a light on fire.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asks Regent, then to me, “You know about me and Flo, right?”

“Sure enough,” I say.

“So you’re not the only one. You’re not all alone. You know there are queers and lesbians all over these parts, hidden behind closed doors?”

“I, uh, cain’t say I know much about that.”

(Of course not,” Lisa says. “Folks around here can’t be out and about like in the big city. Some of us socialize together, and some keep to themselves. We have a nice little community. Everyone respects each other.”

“Cain’t say I’d wanna be a part a no community.”

“No one joins who doesn’t want to,” she says. “Anyway, you’re like family now, so I hope you’ll want to hang around with us at least. What about Thanksgiving?”

“Like I told Francine, I got work.”

Lisa cocks her head. “That so? You can’t come over here after work? Bring your boyfriend?” There’s that word again, an’ I don’t like it ‘cause it just don’t fit a 40-year-old man who likes to spend his time with another man.

“For God’s sake, Lisa, leave him alone!” Flo says, first words out of her mouth. “You’re scaring the shit out of him!” Then she looks at me. “She’s the biggest busybody in town. Lisa, let him be!”

Lisa laughs. “She’s right. I push it, and I don’t let up ‘til she stops me.”

Like an old married couple, I’m thinkin. “Anyways, I gotta go,” I say, standin up. “Nice to meet both of you. Thanks for the beer.”

Lisa stands too, an’ throws her arms around me for another hug. The woman is too damn much.

I grab my hat an’ Flo comes over, shoos Lisa away. She says in a quiet voice. “She’s a loudmouth, but she can keep a secret. Don’t worry about that. Notice she didn’t ask who your friend is.”

I nod, put on my hat an’ step out.
I make it as far as my truck before I double over an’ vomit. Not from the stew Jack’s ma’s made us, I’m pretty sure a that.

I get into the truck an’ take the bandana outta my pocket, spit into it an’ blow my nose.

The whole fuckin town’s gonna know before long, I know it, an’ the tire irons won’t be far behind.

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Saturday, Nov. 17

I wake up at 6:30 with a massive headache. I barely get a sip off my first coffee when the phone rings, probably Chuck.

“Hey, baby brother.” It’s Bridget. Right away I think something happened to K.E. ‘cause why would she be callin so early?

“Hey Bridget.”

It’s not K.E. but something else altogether: “Marty an’ me are comin for Thanksgiving.”

That wakes me up good. “Wha-?”

“You heard me. I’m gonna cook all week an’ bring everything ‘cept the turkey with me. You got nothin to say no to.”

“What if I got plans, huh?” I worked it out so I’ll work Christmas an’ take Thanksgiving off, but I thought I’d be goin a Regent’s folks, hard to take as that might be.

“Change ‘em,” she says. “How often does your big sister come for a visit?”

Shit, it’s been at least 10 years since I seen her. “Where you gonna stay?” I ask.

“You said you moved into the foreman’s cottage, right?”

“Yeah, but Francine’s livin here with me now.”

“Send her to her ma’s. You got a couch, don’tcha?”

“Bridget, I’m sorry, but I just don’t think this is goin’ a work.”

She won’t take “no” for an answer. “You’ll work it out, Ennis. C’mon, this is family. Go ahead an’ invite K.E. too.” A family reunion, too much.

“An’ where’s he goin a stay?”

“You got a bunkhouse, don’tcha? Cain’t be no worse’n where he’s stayin’ now.”

My head’s near explodin. First Lisa last night; now this, an’ the sun’s barely up. But I’m a pushover where Bridget’s concerned.

“OK, OK, I’ll call K.E.”

*****

I wait ’til 8, then call my brother. He sounds happy enough with the invite, but says he’s gotta work the whole weekend an’ he needs the overtime pay. An’ anyway, K.E. says he’s wary a
enterin the state a Wyoming because a some kinda unpaid fines.

Still Chuck hasn’t called, so I stick around the house an’ wait. Francine’s up at 8:30 an’ I tell her about meetin the ma an’ aunt.

“That Lisa …” I start to say.

“Don’t let her intimidate you, Daddy,” Francine says. “She’s really got a heart of gold. Both of them do.”

I’m wonderin if I should warn Francine about Regent’s intentions, but I figure it’s not my concern, she’ll find out soon enough. She gets ready to go to work an’ asks if I’ll be around tonight. I say I don’t know, ‘cause I don’t know when Chuck is comin back.

He finally calls right after she leaves. He says he’s doin OK, Julie’s there with him an’ the funeral’s goin a be at 11. So I couldn’t make it down there on time if I tried.

“It’s just such a shock,” he says. I tell him I know the feelin.

“When you comin home?” I ask. He says tomorrow, so I invite him over here, but he says he needs to unpack an’ settle back in so I should go over there. He’ll be home by noon.

“You want to go away for Thanksgiving, go hunting?” he asks. “I’d thought I’d be coming here, but now …”

“No, sorry,” I say. “My sister’s goin a come here, from Cheyenne. Her an’ my nephew. I haven’t seen ‘em in 10 years.” I’m lookin forward seein her, I am, but it don’t feel good sayin no to him when he’s feelin so shitty.

“Well, see you tomorrow anyway,” he says.

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Sunday, Nov. 18

I call Chuck at noon, an’ again at 1, an’ this time he’s there. I ask him if he wants me to pick up groceries so I can cook him supper.

He sounds surprised, but says that’ll be all right an’ asks me to get him some milk an’ eggs too. I tell him I’ll be there in an hour if that’s OK, an’ he says it’s fine.

*****

After we unload the groceries, we sit on the leather couch in the family room. Well, I’m sittin an’ he’s lyin down with his feet on my lap, an’ I’m rubbin them.

He tells me him an’ his two sisters stayed up late last night an’ had a few drinks an’ he “outed” himself to them.


“I told them I’m gay,” he says. “You know, out of the closet?” I guess I’ve heard that. “And I told them I’m seeing someone.”

So, more folks knowin. “An’ what’d they say?” I ask.
“They were both shocked,” he says. “My older sister Barb – she’s a nurse in California – she said she’s fine with it. Martha though, she got into the Bible and all that.”

“Abominations,” I say, ‘cause I know the exact chapter an’ verse he’s talkin about.

“I told her people read the Bible their own way, but one thing it says pretty clearly is that God will be the judge. Anyway, she ended up crying and hugging me and saying she’d pray for me.”

“You know, Jack’s ma told me one time that she stopped prayin for him to be normal, an’ prayed for him to be happy instead. Course that didn’t come to be neither.”

“Don’t say that,” Chuck says. “I bet you guys had a lot of happy times.”

I guess he’s right in some ways, but I don’t really wanna talk about it just now, so I tell him about meetin Regent’s ma an’ aunt.

“I know them,” Chuck says. “Characters. Well, Lisa anyway.”

“I thought Francine would a told them about me … you know … but turns out she didn’t,” I say. “So here’s this Lisa with her 20 questions about why I ain’t married, an’ I ended up tellin ‘em I’m seein someone, an’ Lisa guessed it ain’t no woman, an’ I didn’t want a lie.”

“So you outed yourself too,” he says. “How was that for you?”

“Tell you the truth, I went back to my truck an’ puked my guts out.”

He sits up an’ scoots over next to me an’ puts his arm around my shoulders.

“This is real hard for you, isn’t it?” he asks.

“Ain’t it hard for you?”

“Of course it is. Did you tell them I’m your fella?”

Is he jokin? I pull back from him. “No! Hell no! Didja want me to?”

“I guess not.”

“You know, we go around drinkin an’ shootin pool together like we do an’ people’s goddamn well goin a figure it out,” I say. “Your buddies ever say anything?”

“Not about that,” Chuck says. “But I haven’t been hanging around with them as much lately. You and me have been staying in a lot. That’s OK, isn’t it?”

Now he turns around so his head’s in my lap.

“Stayin in is fine with me,” I say. “But that’d be a problem, your buddies start to notice.”

“Yeah, and I got the 4-H to think about, what the parents would do if they found out.”

“That must scare the shit outta you,” I say. “It does me.”

“I was thinking about resigning anyway now that Julie’s grown and gone.”

“But now you have to ‘cuz a me, huh?” I say. “That’s fucked up.”

“Because of you?” Chuck says. “No. Because the world is one fucked-up place. Ennis, I told you,
you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Chuck, don’t …”

“No! I’m gonna say this! It’s because of you that I wake up happy every day. It’s because of you that I’ve got something to look forward to every Saturday night. It’s because of you …”

I get out from under him an’ stand up. “An’ the sun shines outta my ass, huh? Cut the poetry crap, would you?”

“No crap Ennis,” he says. “I wish you could see yourself like I see you.”

“Yeah, well.”

“OK, we both have our own demons to fight,” he says. “Inside and out. I’m saying I’m willing to put up a fight for us, and it’s worth it to me.”

“Well, I ain’t one to step back from no fight,” I say. “I just don’t want the whole fuckin world to know. I don’t want a walk into town an’ everyone’s lookin at me, or the ranch hands laughin behind my back, there goes the faggot foreman. Not just what people think, but what they’d do.”

“The whole world is not gonna know,” Chuck says. “And probably half of ‘em don’t give a shit anyways, as long as you tip your hat to the ladies and don’t fuck with anyone’s fencelines.”

“Gotta stop talkin about it,” I say, an’ I sit back down. “Gonna make myself sick again.”

Chuck’s head is back in my lap.

“So tell me about your sister,” he says.

“Well, she’s larger’n life an’ I don’t mean big around.”

“She’s bringing her family?”

“Just her youngest boy. Freshman at U-W.”

“I wonder if Julie knows him.”

“Anyway, she’s bringin the whole fuckin dinner except the turkey, so that’s pretty nice.”

“I don’t know what I’ll be doing,” Chuck says. “I don’t want to go back to Laramie, and Julie’s probably going to Queenie’s mother’s.”

“I’ve got my eyes closed, an’ I’m runnin my fingers through his hair. He could be Jack, I’m thinkin.”

“Are you invitin yourself over to my house for Thanksgiving Chuck Ausman?” I say.

“I guess I am, if it would be OK.”

“Well shit, Bridget’ll know for sure, won’t she?”

“What’s the cover story?”

“What?”

“What do I tell Bridget about why you’re there?”
“That your buddy’s mother just died so he has nowhere to go on Thanksgiving?”

“You’ll act normal an’ all?”

“Sure, Ennis.”

I’m rubbin my hand on his chest, an’ for some reason, I’m thinkin: he’s a man. Hard chest, no titties. I sit him up an’ give him a kiss, an’ pretty soon we’re headin upstairs. Later, we take his horses out for a ride around the ranch.

He cooks us two big steaks, an’ we have storebought pumpkin pie an’ whipped cream for dessert. Then we watch “Giant” an’ we have this crazy conversation about which one we’d go for. For me it’s James Dean, for him it’s Rock Hudson. How does he get me talkin about such things?

Then, we’re back at it again, this time blow jobs on that leather couch. It’s real nice, spendin time together like this. It’s nearly midnight when I say I gotta go, an’ he invites me to stay over. I say no to that.

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Sunday, Nov. 18

Curt’s ma Ellen calls at 8 an’ asks me over for Thanksgiving dinner. Funny all them years with no plans except work, an’ now the invitations come pourin in.

I tell her no thanks, my sister’s comin for a visit. She says you can bring her here an’ I thank her for that, but no.

Next, I call Junior to tell her about Bridget an’ Marty. She tells me she’s goin’ over to Curt’s folks on Thursday, an’ to Alma’s on Friday.

“Didn’t Ellen invite you to their house for Thanksgiving? I’m sure she’d be able to squeeze in two more.”

I tell her no, Bridget’s cookin herself. She says she’d like to have Bridget an’ Marty an’ me over on Saturday night. I say sure. I hadn’t thought about the rest of the weekend.

Then I call Bridget. “You’re still up for this Thanksgiving thing?”

“Oh hell no, you’re not tryin a get out of it, Baby Brother,” she says. “I just bought all the groceries for my side dishes.”

“Well, I got another one comin over, a friend a mine. His ma just died this week an’ he’s got nowhere to go. He’s divorced.”

“What about your girls?”

“Busy with their menfolk’s families, an’ they’ll be at Alma’s Friday. You can see ‘em on Saturday. How long you stayin anyways?”

She says ‘til Sunday, an’ for me to buy a 24-pound Butterball turkey. “Make sure it’s Butterball.”

*****

I go out to take Sparkplug an’ Bluebelle out for rides, an’ Tex is out workin with the two-year-olds.
Stiv drew the short straw, so Tex’ll have Thanksgiving off. I ask him if he’s got plans, an’ he says him an’ Bernadette both have the day off, so they’re goin up to Cody to spend the day with her grandma.

He tells me he’ll be payin off his last debt after this paycheck, an’ he’s got a colt he’s interested in buyin to raise on his own as a side job, an’ do I want to invest $200? I say let’s take a look at her after work tomorrow.

“An’ I want a thank you again for all you done for me,” he says.

“It’s nothin,” I say, an’ I mean it. He does an honest day’s work an’ we pay him for it, nothin special about that.

“No, it’s something,” he says. “Bernadette thinks you’re an angel. I mean, she’s into that kind a stuff.”

Probly the most ridiculous thing I ever heard, but I say, “Tell her thanks for that, I guess.”

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Tuesday, Nov. 21

I’m just about in bed when Chuck calls at 10 to tell me that Julie’s comin home for Thanksgiving an’ she’s bringin a friend a hers from U-W, an’ she wants to have the day with him, not Queenie this year.

I say fine, I’ll have my hands full with Bridget anyways.

“I was thinking, maybe we could move the whole thing over here,” he says. “Your nephew might appreciate the company of the young ladies.”

Christ, this thing is gettin so complicated. I feel like saying no, maybe Bridget won’t bring enough food, but I’m pretty sure she will.

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Wednesday, Nov. 22

I been cleanin for two days, an’ when I get in from work I make a pot a chili.

Bridget an’ Marty show up at 9:30, an’ we all hug before standin back an’ lookin at each other.

“Ennis, you’re goin gray,” she says.

“Sure enough,” I say. “You’re lookin good Bridget.” Her hair’s the same honey color that I remember, just like our ma’s, an’ still curly too.

“Well I get a little help with the hair,” she says, an’ I say, “Huh?”


The boy’s just standin there, about my height an’ maybe 30 pounds heavier, lookin like a college kid down to the loafers.

“Come on in,” I tell them. They say they’ve already eaten, so I ask ‘em if they want a beer.
“Marty ain’t of age,” Bridget says.

He looks embarrassed. I say, “Well, this is my house. You want a beer Marty?”

“I just wanna lie down,” he says.

“Well, there’s your bed,” I say, showin him the couch.

“You two gonna stay up all night yapping?” he asks.

“Your ma would, but it’s my bedtime too,” I say. I tell her about the two extra guests, an’ movin the whole thing over to Chuck’s.

She says no problem, let’s talk in the morning, ‘cause she don’t want the boy takin her bed.

“You still get up before dawn?” she asks.

“A course,” I say. “Ranch work don’t start in the middle a the day.”

“Me too. Cain’t be burnin daylight.” What our dad used a say.

Thanksgiving Day, 1984

Me an’ Bridget are both up by 6, an’ it’s a good thing she needs her cup a coffee before she gets to talkin.

“I done bad by you, Ennis,” she says when she’s startin on her second cup. “I didn’t really know it ‘til I had my own teenagers. A kid needs motherin for a lot longer than what you got.” No small talk with this one.

“Aw Bridget, that’s the point,” I say. “You wasn’t my ma, you was my sister. You done the best you could.”

Marty wakes up an’ moves to Francine’s room sayin, “Jeez, it’s supposed to be a holiday!”

“Anyway, what makes you think you done bad?” I ask Bridget. “I’d say I’m doin pretty good.”

“I just mean I have some regrets for takin off an’ gettin married, an’ leavin you an’ K.E. to fend for yourselves.”

“Water under the bridge,” I say. “I turned out OK anyways. Let it go.” I don’t remember her ever talkin like this, an’ I don’t know if I like it. You can’t change what already happened no matter how hard you try.

Bridget comes out to the stables an’ the horse pasture to tag along with me, talkin a blue streak about her kids an’ her baby granddaughter.

I introduce her to Tex who’s got Bernadette with him checkin on our new colt.

“That was our mama’s name,” Bridget says.

“Yeah?” Tex says. “Ennis never tol’ me.”

“He rarely says anything he don’t need to say,” she says.

I get the saddles an’ rest of the gear to take my horses over to Chuck’s. Bridget talks with Tex a
few more minutes, then helps me carry the gear to my truck.

We load Bluebelle an’ Sparkplug into the horse trailer, an’ go back in to wake up Marty.

*****

When we get to Chuck’s, he tells us that Julie an’ her friend didn’t get in ‘til midnight, an’ they’re still sleepin. Marty’s got schoolbooks with him, so he goes to the family room to read. I sit down with Bridget an’ Chuck for a cup a coffee.

They talk a little about Cheyenne, where I been only a couple times, an then he tells us the friend Julie brought is a boy, not a girl, but not a boyfriend.

“Well, that’ll make it easier on Marty,” Bridget says. Turns out the boy is kind a shy, ‘specially around girls.

Chuck says the friend, Louie, grew up on his parents’ sheep ranch near Rock Springs. “And he’s gay,” he says, like it’s as natural as sayin “and he’s got black hair.”

I cain’t help it, I choke a little on my coffee. Bridget’s eyebrows fly up, but all she says is, “Well, I’m lookin forward to meetin him an’ your daughter.”

She gets to work dressin the bird an’ makes breakfast for the young people when they finally wake up. Julie stays in the kitchen to help with pies. Louie comes into the family room where there’s a football game on.

The boy is small, an’ he looks to be Mexican, with skin a little darker an’ black hair an’ real dark eyes. He moves more like a woman than a man, the kind a guy that might be called “faggot” or “fairy.”

“Ennis spent a summer as a sheepherder,” Chuck is tellin him, just tryin to get a conversation goin but irritatin the shit out of me.

“How did you like it?” the kid asks.

“It was alright,” I say, an’ it’s true enough about the sheeperin’ part. I’m not about a say it was the best summer of my fuckin life, pure magic.

“That’s what my brother and I’ve been doing every summer since I was 13,” he says. “It gets so lonely. We play a lot of cards, and I make little wood carvings.”

“I used to do that too,” I say.

“I won the coyote-shooting contest last summer,” he says. “Five of them.”

“Good for you.” I cain’t help thinkin it’s good he can handle a rifle. “I won that one too. Guy I was with couldn’t shoot his own foot off if he tried.” They all laugh.

Then Louie’s askin me about what I do at Stoutamire’s, normal enough.

*****

At noon, Bridget brings in egg salad sandwiches an’ canned peaches.

After we’re done, I ask who wants to go ridin. We got four horses between us, enough for the kids an’ one adult.
Bridget says she hasn’t been on a horse in 25 years or more. Julie an’ Louie are all for it, but Marty says, “I brought some books. I need to study.”

Cain’t fool me, I can tell the boy has probly never been on a horse in his life, shame on Bridget.

“Y’all go ahead,” I say. “I’ll stay here too, keep my sister company.”

Before they go, I tell Chuck in a quiet voice, “Leave Bluebell here an’ I’ll see if I cain’t get the kid out there.”

After the rest are gone, Bridget says to me, “Now that was a crock, you’d rather stay in than ride a horse. Why didn’tcha go?”

“I want a know why Marty here didn’t go,” I say.

“He’s a city boy, ain’t never been on a horse,” Bridget says.

“Ma! I gotta study,” Marty says. “And I have been on a horse. Uncle Ennis put us on ponies one time.”

“Back at the Rafter B, I remember,” I say. “Hey, you want me to take you out there now I’ll show you the ropes, get you started?”

“Nah.”

“Git out there,” Bridget says, an’ she gives Marty a little push. I go up to Chuck’s room an’ find a pair a old boots for the boy in his closet, a little too dressy but they’ll do.

*****

My girls was no older than 2 when I first put ‘em on a horse, something I know scared the crap outta Alma, but nothin bad ever happened an’ they grew up to be fine riders, ‘specially Francine.

Dealin with a 18-year-old who’s kind a scared, even if he won’t admit it, is a different story. But by 3 o’clock, just when Chuck’s group trots back, I think maybe Marty’s ready to give it a try, long as they go real slow.

“You wanna take him out for a while longer?” I ask em’.

Chuck says he’s done, but the kids can go back out if they want. Julie an’ Louie both say, “Sure.” I notice that Louie sits well on Sparkplug.

“You keep an eye on Marty here,” I tell them. “City boy just got his first real lesson. He’s doin OK, but he’s not ready for the races.”

“Don’t worry,” Julie says. “We’ll just go to the Ferrises’ house and back.

Chuck an’ me walk back in to unsaddle his horse.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me about the queer boy?” I ask as soon as they’re out of earshot.

He says he didn’t know himself until they got there at midnight. “I don’t think Julie meant any harm.”

“But she told him about us.”
“Yeah, and I’m sorry about that Ennis. She said she thought it would be OK.”

“It’s not,” I say. “This here’s the problem when we start tellin people our little secret.”

“Nothing’s happened,” he says.

Then grabs my ass an’ pulls me close to him. “How long you think they’ll be gone?”

I look over at him an’ I can see the devil himself in his eyes, an’ suddenly my dick is doin the thinkin.

“Five or 10 minutes tops,” I say. “We cain’t …” but he’s all over me, kissin me an’ pullin me along.

“Last stall over here is empty and it’s clean,” he says, an’ we make our way over, kissin, grabbin, steppin on each other’s feet. When we get there, I swing Chuck around so I’m facin his back, an’ I reach around to undo his fly. We still have our jackets on.

“Can you take it with just spit?” I ask. “Or we could …”

“I can take it,” he says, an’ pretty soon I’m humpin away on him, pumpin his dick with my hand. So crazy to do this out here. I blame him for rilin me up, an’ he just laughs.

The youngsters came back just as Chuck starts brushin his horse, an’ I’m already goin back to the house for a shower.

*****

I’m watchin football when Chuck comes in for his shower an’ the kids go to help Bridget set the table. Julie’s lightin candles.

I haven’t sat down for a Thanksgiving dinner since that time with Alma an’ Monroe almost 10 years earlier. This is real nice.

Once we’re all seated lookin at the bounty Bridget’s put together, she says, “My family’s tradition is, instead a sayin grace, we all say what we’re thankful for. I’ll start. I’m thankful to be here with my baby brother an’ for Chuck here hostin this gatherin. Marty, you’re next.” I remember my ma doin the same thing when we was kids, only we was usually eatin elk my daddy had shot.

“Aw Ma …” Marty says.

“Go on boy, tell us what you’re thankful for,” Bridget says. “Show ‘em how it’s done.”

“All right … I’m thankful to get back on a horse, even though my butt is killing me. I’m thankful for meeting new friends.”

It goes around the table, an’ I got no idea what I’m goin a say.

Chuck: “I’m thankful for Bridget coming here and cooking this beautiful feast.”

Louie: “I’m thankful for friends, new and old.”

Julie: “I’m thankful for my dad hosting, for Bridget cooking and for Marty and Louis being here.”

Me: “I’m thankful for a lot. For ever’thing,”
We feast on turkey with cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes an’ gravy, candied yams, green bean casserole an’ salad with the kind a dressing my ma used a make.

The kids talk about college mostly – football, professors, classes, dorms – an’ Bridget an’ Chuck weigh in from time to time.

Chuck an’ me clear the table, an’ Bridget brings out two pies – pumpkin an’ apple, with whipped cream not from a can.

“Hey, guys do the clean-up,” Chuck says after the pie.

The guys all head into the kitchen. Chuck loads the dishwasher an’ I wash the pots an’ pans while the boys dry ‘em.

“My ma doesn’t make me to do this at home,” Marty says.

“You’re spoiled,” I say.

After everything’s all washed up an’ put away, we all head to the family room. Chuck goes to turn on the TV for more football, but Julie says, “C’mon Daddy, why don’t you take out your guitar and we can all sing?”

Bridget likes the idea.

Chuck gets the guitar an’ asks for requests.

“What do you know?” Bridget asks.

“Everything – folk, rock and cowboy songs,” Chuck says.

“Me an’ my ma used to play piano, the whole Fireside Book a folk songs,” Bridget says. “Remember, Ennis?”

“Huh.”

“I know a lot of songs. Try me,” Chuck says.

“How about ‘Red River Valley’ for starters?”

Chuck looks at me before he starts, but I just give him a little shrug. I’ll be damned if I’m goin a sing in front a people.

Chuck, Julie an’ Bridget sing, an’ Louie joins in on some a the songs. Marty watches Julie.

I remember my ma an’ Bridget both had real nice singin voices, an’ I used a sing along with ‘em, until I was probly 12 or so an’ K.E. called me a sissy.

They go about one verse on a few songs, not bein able to remember the lyrics after that. I got a head full a more songs than I can handle, but I’m not sayin nothin.

“C’mon Ennis,” Bridget says. “He used ta sing, but after his voice changed he wouldn’t open his mouth. C’mon, let’s hear your man voice. What about you Marty?”

I look at her an’ say, “Bridget, Marty an’ me’s not goin a sing, an’ if you keep askin we’re goin a get in the truck an’ drive home an’ leave you here to hitchhike home.”
“Well you don’t mind if we sing, do you?”

“No!” we both say.

They work their way through “Shenendoah,” “Oh Susannah,” “Arkansas Traveler,” “Darling Clementine” an’ more, Chuck singin harmonies like he does. They stop for a water break an’ then get into a few folk songs from the 1960s – “The Times They are a-Changin,” “Five Hundred Miles,” “Where Have all the Flowers Gone” an’ then, “It Ain’t me, Babe.”

I couple a times I look over at Louie, an’ he’s starin at me. After about an hour of singing, everyone’s spent. The rest set up a game a poker with chips, but I don’t feel like joinin ‘em. The youngsters are gettin along well enough, an’ Bridget seems to like Chuck.

When we start gettin ready to go, Julie says, “Louie and me are going to see the new James Bond movie tomorrow, then to my grandma’s for dinner. Marty, you wanna come along?”

Marty looks at Bridget an’ she says, “Sure, you can take the car.”

Julie says, “Oh yeah, and on Saturday, everyone’s invited to Junior’s for supper and then we’ll all go out to Kelley’s Bar.”

I’m thinkin I’ll go to Junior’s, but I ain’t goin a no bar. I’m already exhausted.

“How ‘bout some girl time with you an’ my nieces tomorrow?” Bridget asks Julie. “Can we fit it in?”

“Maybe lunch,” Julie says. “Call me.”

At 9:30, Julie an’ Chuck an’ me go to put my horses back in the trailer, then Bridget an’ Marty say their thank-yous, an’ we pack up the cookin stuff she’d brought.

As soon as the truck door shuts, Bridget says, “That wasn’t so bad was it Marty?”

“It was OK,” he says.

“The boy didn’t think he could stand hangin out with us country hicks,” Bridget says. “What did you think a that Julie?”

“Nice,” he said.

“What about Louie?”

“He’s all right. Gay.”

My heart starts poundin an’ I feel my hands tightenin on the steering wheel. Why the fuck do they have to talk about that?

“So he’s no competition for Julie,” Bridget says, an’ that’s it. No fire an’ brimstone. Not that she’s ever been religious that I remember.

“Ma!” Marty says.

“Go on, boy, you don’t think I have eyes in my head? I saw you lookin at her.”

“Well, it was kind of uncomfortable with Louie,” Marty says.
“Whyzat?” Bridget asks.

“He’s always laughing and joking with Julie, like they have all these little gay in-jokes.”

Christ, what the fuck is there to joke about?

“They’ve known each other longer’n you have,” Bridget says, an’ the conversation’s over.

When we get home, Bridget tells Marty to move into Francine’s bedroom an’ she’ll move to the couch. “Little Brother an’ me’ll be up talkin tonight,” she tells him.

Marty says goodnight, goes into the room an’ closes the door.

“Let’s have a beer,” Bridget says.

I’m ready for bed, but I get two bottles from the fridge, an’ sit down at the table with her.

“First, a toast,” she says. “To me an’ my littlest brother gettin back together after all these years.”

We clink the bottles, then she gets right down to business.

“So, Ennis, do you wanna tell me about you an’ Chuck?”

God damn it to hell.

“He worked up at the Bar Eight where me an’ K.E. was, near Worland” I say.

“And?”

“An’ his daughter’s Junior’s best friend.”

“And?”

“Bridget, you got somethin to say, spit it out.”

“He likes to hear you sing,” she says.

“He told you that?”

“No. His eyes told me.”

Here we go again, people seein things that aren’t even there. “His eyes.”

“Ennis, do you think you’d notice if, oh, say, my boy Marty was makin’ eyes at Julie?”

“He was. I ain’t blind.”

“Well, Baby Brother, I’ve known you longer’n anyone walkin the earth today. An’ I’d say you an’ Chuck look at each other with something more than fondness.”

I’m not lookin at her, not sayin anything.

“You can tell me, Ennis. God knows I’ve loved you for 40 years. I won’t judge you.”

I breathe in deep. “I ain’t gonna lie,” I say. “But do we really have ta talk about it?”

“Whatever you’re comfortable with,” she says, then she plows on anyways. “How long’s it been
“Goin’ on?”

“A couple a months.”

“I was watchin’ him, Ennis. He likes you a lot.”

“Yeah, well.”

“You know I got tons a lesbian friends,” she says. “Well, four to be exact. You gotta be careful. This ain’t New York or San Francisco.”

“No shit.”

“You remember that Earl?”

Jesus. “How could I forget, Bridget?”

“I know, you couldn’t keep your food down for three or four days. Ma hated Dad for takin’ you two out there.”

So I gotta ask her. “You think he done the deed?”

“Well, he knew about it anyways,” she says. “You don’t know what happened?”

“Not much,” I say. “I got a feelin’ I’m about to find out.”

“Well, it was that Ray, next ranch over, Ray an’ his two shit-kickin’ boys,” she says. “You remember they used a help us with the brandin’? Well, the older one had a dispute with Rich, something about a truck he bought. Ray an’ the boys were out at the Railroad Tavern, tear-it-up drunk, an’ Earl walks in by himself, an’ the older boy starts mouthin’ off at him, an’ they go outside, an’ the boy comes back in an’ says Earl grabbed him in the wrong place. You know the rest.”

“An’ our dad wasn’t there?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why was Earl out alone anyways?”

“Earl was the friendly one,” she says. “He’d go into town for a drink now an’ then, maybe after he’d done his errands. Rich was the alpha dog, mean old guy likely to reach for a shotgun if someone looked at him the wrong way. You know that Peter worked for them? I sometimes try to imagine Rich at home that night, waitin’ for Earl to come back, then probly goin’ out to look for him, an’ the son-of-a-bitch sheriff swingin by to tell him yeah, it happened, but we got no suspects, nothin’ to go on.”

I feel sick thinkin’ about how the night must’ve gone for either of ‘em.

“Anyway, Ma heard about it on the party line, an’ Daddy drug you two out to see before the sheriff got there. Ma didn’t speak to Daddy for a long time after that. That’s when she started sleepin’ on the couch.”


“Well, it was Earl’s family’s ranch,” she says. “Rich started there as a ranch hand when he was just a boy, an’ he moved into the house after Earl’s parents died. Rich managed the ranch hands, an’ he
had their respect. Peter tol’ me that not five minutes after the sheriff come to the door, Rich went out an’ got the body into his truck an’ had the hands dig a grave right there on the ranch. A few hours later, he was outta there with the truck, horse trailer, the two best horses, every weapon in the house, all the silver, Earl’s ma’s jewelry an’ all the cash. He paid the hands an extra week’s pay, an’ told ‘em to keep the stock fed until Earl’s sisters got there. They had no bank account to speak of. They were together nearly 50 years.”

“Fifty years?” I can hardly believe it. I remember something a how they looked – Rich was big an’ solid, Earl a bit rounder. I cain’t help thinkin about me an’ Jack an’ the ranch at Lightnin Flat. That could have been us, one way or the other.

“You might not remember this,” she says, “but about a year later, the older a Ray’s boys rolled himself over in that truck an’ died, an’ after we moved away, the other went to prison for killin a woman. A woman, Ennis. That’s what kind a people they were. Then old Ray himself died a pneumonia. I’m not sayin it’s karma, but maybe the lot of ‘em got what was comin.”

I don’t really believe in stuff like karma.

“You sure Dad wasn’t there?” I ask.

“I don’t think so. But he was an asshole to take you an’ K.E. to see, an’ his drinkin got a lot worse after that.”

I don’t know why, but I say, “I got a buddy died something like Earl just last year.”

Bridget’s eyes go all soft, like they’re meltin with sympathy. “I’m so sorry to hear that. Was he …”

I put up my hands an shake my head. “I cain’t really talk about this.”

That don’t stop her. “This happen nearby here?”

“Texas.”

“Well a course Wyoming ain’t no different. You got two kinds a people in Wyoming. Those that mind their own damn business an’ those that don’t. Problem is, you cain’t tell the difference between the two. I woulda thought Daddy to be the live’n’let live kind, ‘cuz he wasn’t all fire an’ brimstone, but I woulda been wrong.”

“I got some good memories of him, an’ then that one real bad one,” I tell her. “All good memories a Ma.”

“Just one bad memory?” Bridget asks. “You don’t remember his drinkin? You don’t remember him kickin the shit outta you an’ K.E.? At least he never hit Mama, but he killed her just the same, insistin on drivin that day when he was drunk.”

“He was drunk?” I’d never heard this. Of course I remember the beatings, I just figured that was how boys was raised back then.

“Oh, Jesus, Ennis, they was drivin into Kemmerer to see the banker, an’ he started drinkin at dawn. Like he was goin a get the goddamn loan anyway.”

“If I knew, I forgot it,” I say. “I don’t think I ever knew it.”

“Well, you was what, 11, 12? I didn’t want you to know. God, Ennis, I hope you don’t think there’s anything wrong with you just ‘cuz our daddy was so mean.”
“I wouldn’t say that.”

“There’s nothin wrong with you. You’re perfect,” she says, an’ she gets up an’ hugs me. “God made you just the way you are.”

“I dunno about that,” I say. “I don’t know as K.E. would agree with you either.”

“K.E.’s got his own troubles to worry about,” she says. “Now what about this Chuck guy? You two fixin to move in together, or you goin a keep on like you are?”

“No, we ain’t goin a ranch up together, Sis,” I say. “Shit, you was just talkin about Earl. No. Like you said, this ain’t New York or San Francisco, whatever they’re doin over there.”

“Just askin,” Bridget says. “He’s a real nice guy.”

I have to agree. “That he is.”

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Friday, Nov. 23

Bridget calls Junior an’ Francine in the morning to arrange a girls’ lunch an’ some shopping. She takes her car, an’ I let Marty drive my truck over to Chuck’s.

Once they’re gone, I call Chuck.

“Can you talk?” I ask.

“Yeah, Julie and Louie are out riding.”

“She knows,” I say.

“Your sister?”

“Yeah.”

“You told her?”

“No, you did.”

“What?”

“The way you looked at me. Jesus Christ, Chuck, what are we gonna do?”

“Well what did she say about it?”

“That’s not the point,” I say. “Well, she seemed OK actually.”

“I think Louie has a crush on you.”

“That’s fucked-up.”

Chuck laughs. “I think your nephew has a crush on Julie.”

“No shit. Hey Chuck?”

“Yeah?”
“When I said I was thankful for everything? You’re part a that.” I can hardly believe I just said that.

Dead silence.

“Chuck, you still there?”

I hear him clear his throat. “You trying to give me a heart attack Ennis Del Mar?”

“OK, see you tomorrow night.”

*****

Bridget comes back in the afternoon with magazines an’ books she bought in town, an’ I’m happy enough she’s got somethin to do other than just talkin.

We have Thanksgiving leftovers for supper, an’ then play some gin rummy. Bridget’s goin on about her family an’ our ma an’ dad, not askin me a bunch a questions. She says she’s pleased I settled down, but she’s real worried about K.E.

We watch “Dallas” an’ it’s a good one, Bobby really blastin J.R. for his busybodyin. We’re both in bed before Marty gets home.
Saturday, Nov. 24

Lots a people over at Junior’s for supper – 10 of us – an’ she serves up ham, sweet potatoes, biscuits, broccoli casserole an’ salad, all laid out on the kitchen counter an’ stove. Some who don’t get seats at the dining room table sit in the living room.

I feel like I’m almost suffocatin from all the people.

I’m gettin mighty irritated at Louie. He’s been drinkin, an’ it’s like his voice has gone to a higher pitch an’ his laugh turned into a giggle. He keeps lookin at me, an’ I want a smash him in the face, but I wouldn’t do that to Junior. I’m just countin the minutes until I can bolt.

When Regent asks Louie if he ever rodeoed, the kid says, “Oh, I’m a rodeo groupie! I love the bull riders!” to which Julie an’ Marty burst out laughin.

“What the hell,” Curt says. I give a little cough an’ look over at Chuck. He rolls his eyes an’ shakes his head just so you’d barely notice it.

Bridget, thank god, changes the subject to Junior’s recipe for broccoli casserole.

After apple pie an’ coffee, Julie says, “OK, let’s pack up an’ head over to Kelley’s Bar.”

Everyone starts gettin their coats an’ boots together, an’ I say to Bridget, “Time for us to go on home.”

“No wait a minute,” Bridget says, loud. “Is the older generation invited or not?”

“Yes!” “Of course,” Francine an’ Julie say at the same time.

“C’mon Ennis, we don’t have to stay too long,” Bridget says.

“C’mon Daddy,” Francine puts in.

“You an’ your cousin ain’t even old enough to be out drinkin,” I say.

Regent says, “If there’s any trouble I’ll drive ‘em home.”

Bridget says, “Ennis, it’s family.” I’m glad Chuck’s not sayin anything.

“OK, one beer,” I say, even though I’m not feelin good about it.

“Two,” Bridget says.

In the truck, she says, “I know you don’t like the big crowds, but once in a while cain’t be so bad.”

“Why cain’t I say no to you Bridget?” I ask.

She just laughs.

*****

Kelley’s Bar is only about three-quarters full when we get there around 8:30. We push tables together to form one long table, with me, Bridget an’ Chuck at one end. There’s a live band playin
country music, not too bad.

My eyes’ve barely adjusted to the light inside the bar when I see Alma an’ her sister Jeannie walk in an’ sit a few tables over. How much worse can it get?

The girls go over to say “Hi” to their ma, an’ I give her a nod when she looks over at me.

“Is that Alma over there?” Bridget asks.

“Fraid so.”

“Should we invite her to join us?”

“No,” I say. “For Christsake, Bridget.”

“Well, I’ll have to go over an’ say ‘Hello,’” Bridget says, an’ she gets up. “C’mere Marty, say ‘Hi’ to your Auntie Alma.”

Meanwhile, the waitress comes an’ takes our orders. I ask for two beers for myself an’ one for Bridget, thinkin I can get through the two-beer promise faster that way.

“How are you doing?” Chuck asks in a quiet voice.

“I’m gonna punch that little asshole’s teeth in if he keeps lookin’ at me,” I say. “An’ you seen Alma over there?”

“Yeah … you OK Ennis?”

“Cain’t get outta here fast enough.”

Bridget comes back to the table. “You order for me?” she asks.

“I got you a beer.”

“You gonna ride the mechanical bull, Ennis?” she asks, loud enough for some of the youngsters at the table to hear, I’m sure of it. The drinks come an’ I down half a my first beer in one swig.

Most a the kids are up dancin or linin up to ride the bull. Louie comes an’ asks Bridget to dance, an’ of course she says yes. Then Jeannie asks Chuck to dance, an’ he throws me an odd look but I just shrug my shoulders an’ he goes ahead to the dance floor.

I’m watchin him an’ he’s still a good dancer, I gotta say. Then there’s someone sittin down next to me. It’s Alma.

“How you doin’ Ennis?” she asks.

“Uh, good, how are you? Where’s Monroe?”

“Girls’ night out. Funny that Chuck Ausman is here. Queenie was goin a come with us but she’s got herself a new boyfriend. You have a nice Thanksgiving?”
“Uh.”

She leans in an’ her voice goes softer. “Listen Ennis, our boys wanna ride horses, an’ I was wonderin if Francine could take ‘em out to the ranch so you could try them out on your horses before we sign ‘em up for lessons.”

I’m thinkin she wants to come out to the ranch an’ spy on me, not that there’s anything to see. “Lots a other places you could take ‘em,” I say. “How old are they anyways?”

“Michael’s 9 an’ Jason is 6,” she says.

“What does Monroe have to say about it?”

“It’s fine with him.” I don’t say anything, but then a cloud comes over her. “Oh, you don’t think …” she starts.

“Alma, don’t say it,” I tell her. “If you want me to show your boys how to ride, you get back to me when the snow’s gone.”

“Thanks, Ennis,” she says.

Francine an’ Regent come off the dance floor, along with Bridget an’ Louie, who sits next to her. Alma’s tellin Francine about takin the boys out to the ranch when the snow’s gone.

I ask Bridget, “You wanna leave with me now, or ride back with Marty?”

“You’re not stayin’?” she asks. “At least finish your beer.”

Then Louie says, right in front a Alma an’ Bridget, “Hey Ennis, I was wondering if I could interview you for a research project I’m doing about homosexuality in rural Wyoming?”

My stomach turns even before I feel the blood rushin to my head. I grab the kid by the shirt, yell “Fuck off!” an’ push him, hard enough that he stumbles back a few steps an’ knocks over a chair.

I grab my jacket an’ I’m across the bar in three or four strides, then walkin as fast as I can to my truck. I’m so mad that I slam the truck into reverse, then into first, an god knows the transmission cain’t take it. I see Chuck comin out of the bar, but I gun the gas an’ take off.

What the fuck kind a thing is that to say, right there in the bar, everyone around to hear?

I stop at a party store, but I don’t get outta my truck. I can feel my ears burnin an’ it’s almost like I can feel my blood pressure goin’ up, heart poundin. I sit there a while, long enough to be pretty sure I’m not havin a heart attack or a stroke.

Then I go in an’ buy a 40-ounce bottle a Old Rose whiskey. I open it an’ start swiggin right there in the truck.

It’s almost 10 when I get back, an’ the door lock is fuckin up. That makes me so mad I pound my fist on the wall. When I’m finally inside, I pour myself a glass a whiskey an’ sit in the dark. Pretty soon, the phone rings. I don’t answer. Then it’s ringin every 10 minutes or so. I pour another glass a whiskey, an’ go in my room an’ lock the door. I’m lyin in bed, my head spinnin, my guts burnin with the shame an’ the whiskey.

Not too much later, I hear a vehicle drive up. The front door opens an’ closes an’ I hear voices.

“Tryin’ a sleep,” I say.

“Chuck’s here. Can you come out here an’ talk to him?”

“No!”

A minute or so later, the doorknob starts rattlin’ an’ it’s Chuck’s voice. “Ennis?”

“Get the fuck outta here!” I yell.

Then Bridget’s voice. “I’m pretty sure he just bought it, an’ look how much is gone already.”

Then quiet talkin’ that I can’t hear.

The front door opens an’ closes again, an’ I hear the Chuck’s truck drivin away. I can’t fall asleep for a long, long time.

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Sunday, Nov. 26

I’m up an’ dressed before dawn. I tiptoe though the house an’ head right out to the stables, no coffee. My right hand still hurts from poundin’ the wall last night, an’ I need a hit something with my left hand so they’ll both hurt, so I slam it into a pillar. I don’t mean to, but I let out a yell.

The horses whinny at the agitation. I gotta calm down. I try to breathe slower an’ think about something other than that little fuck Louie an’ the whole barful a people hearin’ him call me a homosexual. Chuck comes to mind, but I don’t want a go there either. I think about a calm lake – I read somewhere that works – but a course that brings me to Jack. I’m thinkin’ I’ll ride Bluebelle out to the pond that borders the BLM land at the far pasture, try an’ clear my head.

Just as I’m finished feedin’ the horses, Bridget comes out with a mug a coffee for me.


I’m gettin’ hungry an’ I need the coffee, so I walk back to the cottage with her.

“Marty’s not up yet?” I ask, kinda hopin’ the kid would be up an’ ready to get on the road.

“I’d give him ’til 11,” Bridget says. “He got in pretty late.”

I want ‘em both gone, ‘cause I don’t think I can deal with playin’ host for one more minute.

The phone rings. I don’t make a move to answer it.

“Should I get it?” Bridget asks.

“Suit yourself,” I say.

She answers the phone. “It’s Junior.”

I walk over an’ take the phone. “Hi Darlin’.”

“Daddy, are you OK?” she asks.
“Yeah.”

“Daddy, Francine told me what happened, and I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I say. “You didn’t do nothin.”

“Curt’s leavin today. Can I come over tonight, make you supper?”

“Naw, you won’t want a be with me tonight.”

“What does that mean?”


Bridget is starin at me. “What was that?”

“What?”

“You hung up on your daughter? Ennis, what’s gotten into you?”

I shake my head an’ pick at the bacon and eggs on my plate, appetite gone.

The phone rings again, an’ Bridget picks it up.

“Hello? … No, he’s OK. Just a second,” she says, then puts her hand over the receiver.

“It’s Chuck.”

I shake my head. “I’m not here.”

“He’s still out with the horses,” she says into the phone. “Yeah, OK. You take care,” and she hangs up.

“Ennis, are you goin a tell me what the fuck is going on?”

I don’t say nothin.

“You’re mad because a what Louie said, right?”

“Part of it,” I say, real quiet ‘cause I don’t trust myself not to yell.

“Well, he shouldn’t a done it, but you can’t control what other people say.”

“I can control myself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Means I don’t have to be like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like a homo-sexual. The big joke. The town queer.”

“What are you talkin about?”

“I don’t want everyone starin at me an’ talkin about me, an’ young assholes thinkin they can make a fool a me.”
“Who’s talkin about you?”

“Probly half the town by now.”

“Ennis, no one heard what Louie said. All they saw was you tellin him to fuck off an’ the chair fallin over. He could a said anything for all they know.”

“See? People are talkin.”

“You’re paranoid!”

“Yeah, well.”

“What about Chuck? Why won’t you talk to him?”

“Bridget, I’m done with him, with all a that.”

“Done? What did he do?”

“Nothin. It’s me. I should a never started this.”

“So you’re just goin a dump him?”

“I’m no good for him neither.”

“Isn’t that up to him to decide?”

“Not if I’m the one callin it quits.” Fuck, there’s that word, quit. I feel like pukin up the little bit I had to eat.

“I cain’t stand what’s happenin to you,” Bridget says, an’ she’s startin to cry. “You’re like a different person than when I got here Wednesday. It’s my fault for makin you go out last night.”

“Ain’t your fault,” I say. I put my hand on her shoulder. “No one makes me do anything. It’s my own damn fault for lettin this thing get outta control when I knew better.”

“An’ Chuck don’t mean nothin to you?”

I got my jaws shut so tight my teeth hurt, an’ I feel my heart beatin in my head.

“You know what I see, Little Brother?” Bridget says. “I see someone who’d rather explode and hurt people than let his feelings out.”

“Fuckin psychobabble Bridget? Really?”

I stand up to go. “I gotta go check the fencelines. You an’ Marty pack some sandwiches and have a nice ride back, huh? An’ not a word about any a this to K.E. Thanks for the visit.”

“Of course I wouldn’t tell K.E.,” she says. “So help me god, Ennis, don’t walk out on me.”

“I gotta go,” I say. I fill up a Thermos with coffee, grab my jacket, give her a little hug an’ a peck on the cheek, an’ head out. Just as I’m closin the door, I hear the phone ring again.

*****

I saddle up Bluebell an’ ride probly two hours to the furthest leased pastures, not bein used at this time a year, an’ then creep along the fenceline, makin notes in my head a the repairs needed.
When we get to the pond, I picket Bluebelle. I crouch down to skip stones, try to calculate how soon Bridget'll leave. I’m goddamn hungry. I wish I had a cigarette.

I squint my eyes an’ try an’ picture one a the times me an’ Jack skipped stones. Those was nice times, up there in the mountains far away from all this. K.E. an’ me used a skip stones once in a while on a creek that ran through our ranch.

*****

When I get back to the cottage, I see that Bridget’s car is gone, but now Chuck’s truck an’ Francine’s car are there instead.

They’re sittin in the livin room watching football. I don’t say nothin, don’t even look over at them, but head straight to the kitchen an’ get a beer an’ start fixin me a turkey sandwich.

Francine walks over to the kitchen an’ gives me a hug. “You OK Daddy?”

“Good enough,” I say.

“I’m sorry about …”

“Nothin’ a be sorry for,” I say. “Me an’ Chuck’s got some talkin to do. You wanna take Sparkplug out for a trot?”

“Sure,” she says. Her eyes look like they’re full a questions, an’ I’m glad that for once she don’t go ahead an’ ask ‘em. She puts on her jacket, hat an’ gloves, an’ leaves.

I sit at the table an’ eat my sandwich. Chuck stays on the couch, doesn’t turn around.

When I’m finished, I take my beer over an’ sit in my recliner, eyes straight ahead.

He gets up an’ turns off the TV.

“Why didn’t you return my calls?” he says.

I know I’m goin a have to say something, but the words just ain’t comin right away.

“Are you going to talk to me Ennis?”

“What.”

“Can you look at me at least?”

I look at him. His face says he’s upset an’ he didn’t get much sleep last night.

“I’m sorry about last night, any role I played in it,” he says.

I shake my head. “You didn’t do nothin. It’s not about last night, Chuck … I … we gotta stop this right now.”

He jumps to his feet. “Stop what?”

“Everything. Us meetin up like we do.”

“Ennis, for Christsake, what are you talking about?”

“It’s no damn use. This ain’t no good for neither of us. One of us is liable to get killed.”
He’s real agitated now. “We’ve gone over this Ennis! We said we’d fight for it. And what makes you think it’s more dangerous today than it was yesterday?”

“This ain’t no fairy tale!” I say. “We cain’t be happily ever after, not after last night, half the town knowin’ our business, makin’ fun of us, lurkin’ around every corner.”

“Half the town?” he says. “What are you talking about? That Louie – he’s just a stupid kid. But no one beyond our table heard him.”

He just don’t get it. “Point is, Chuck, if anyone did hear, the whole town’ll know soon enough, an’ the 4-H, an’ the ranch hands here an’ every fuckin’ person you see in the street every day. Sit down, will you?”

“No! You’ve lost your mind! You’re paranoid and you’ve got no cause!”

I get to my feet. “I think you should go.”

“No! Two days ago you were so happy I came into your life, and now this? What the fuck happened, Ennis?”

“I come to find out I’m the town joke. The gay cowboy, the faggot daddy! I cain’t stand it Chuck!”

“Ennis, it was one a the stupidest things ever said, by one stupid just-out-of-the-closet kid. That’s all it was.”

“Not how I see it.”

“So you’re gonna run away?”

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

“You’re gonna shut me out of your life?” There’s a little catch in his voice an’ I want a throttle him.

“You wanna live like a queer, fine. Just find someone else to do it with,” I say.

“I don’t want someone else! I want you! I love you, Ennis!”

Now he’s definitely on the verge a cryin’, an’ I’m feelin bad for makin someone so miserable. Again.

But I keep my face hard, no point givin him hope that I’ll change my mind when I won’t. An’ I cain’t have him talkin about love for Christsake, guy I’ve known for, what six months?

“Listen to you …” I say.

Suddenly he comes flyin toward me an’ sucker punches me in the jaw, hard. I reel back an’ trip to the floor, tastin’ the blood in my mouth.

As I’m scamperin to get up, Chuck jumps square on top a me an’ tries to kiss me on the mouth.

I wrestle him around an’ now I can see my blood on his lips. I plant a hard punch to the side a his face. I get up an’ rub my knuckles, ‘cause my hand is really hurtin now. He stays on the floor rubbing his jaw. “Ennis, please.”

I go in the bathroom, spit in the sink, splash water over my mouth, an’ wet a washcloth.
He’s just getting to his feet when I get back.

“Here,” I say, an’ give him the washcloth an’ a towel. He takes them an’ heads for the bathroom.

I sit back down on my chair.

A few minutes later, Chuck’s back out. He walks over to the couch, stops an’ grabs his jacket.

“You wanna change your mind, you know my number,” he says. His eyes are red an’ his voice still sounds shaky. “You know where to find me on Saturday nights.”

I don’t say nothin, an’ he lets himself out.

I feel real bad, doin this again to someone who thinks they love me. What are they thinkin anyways? Hell, I don’t love me. I fuckin hate myself. I take the whiskey bottle out an’ pour myself a glass.

*****

I’m watchin football when Francine comes back. “Everything OK with Chuck?”

“No, well, it’s over, anyways.” I say.

Her face scrunches up. “Did you …”

But I gotta cut her off. “Nothin’ more to say, Darlin’.”

She goes into her room for a while, an’ comes back out with a little girl suitcase an’ her school backpack. “There’s still some leftover turkey and stuff from Junior’s in the fridge. I’m going over to Regent’s for a few days.”

Well, I ain’t stoppin her, so I say, “All right then.”

She comes over an’ gives me a hug. “And Daddy, there’s nothing the whiskey’s going to make better.”

I ain’t goin a tell her to mind her business, so I don’t say nothin. Why shouldn’t I drink? Who the fuck cares what I do anyways?

*****

I hardly eat a thing for supper, an’ I keep pourin the whiskey.

Bridget calls at 9. I’d thought a unpluggin the phone, but I’m on call when I’m here, part a the job.

“I just wanted to let you know we got home OK,” Bridget says. She sounds all cold an’ formal. “An’ thanks for the weekend.”

“For what it’s worth,” I say. I bet she won’t be comin back here anytime soon.

“Did you talk to Chuck?”

I let out a groan.

“Ennis, he loves you.”

I feel my blood comin to a boil all over again. “You stay out of it, Bridget.”
“He called after you stomped out and he came right over,” she says. “He was real worried about you.”

“Well, I talked to him anyways, an’ it’s over between us. I’d like to think it never happened.”

“Please change your mind,” she says. “I only want you to be happy.”

“You know what makes me happy Bridget?” I say. “Mindin’ my own goddamn business an’ everyone else minds theirs.” An’ I hang up.

*****

The shirts are hangin on the closet door just like always. I’m lookin at them an’ the picture a Jack, an’ I’m thinkin about the look in Jack’s eyes the day he drove up after the divorce when I sent him packin. Same as Chuck today. Same as Cassie that time in the diner.

An’ I just know it, I cain’t do the queer thing no more. Once in a while in the middle a nowhere worked good enough for me, but not for Jack. Tryin it down here, with all kinds a people knowin, that don’t work at all, not for anyone. I cain’t keep doin what everyone in the world is dead set against just ’cause it feels good to me.

An’ anyways, Chuck’s no Jack, an’ I really don’t need the aggravation in my life.

The whiskey is helpin me clear my brain. What the fuck was I thinkin, callin Chuck an' tellin him sweet nothings like some woman!

Then I get an idea: Cassie.

She’s good enough, she likes me enough an’ maybe we can just get together an’ live a normal life. Wouldn’t be so bad, would it? I’ll give her a call tomorrow. Fuck Jack an’ Chuck an’ that little asshole Louie an’ all the rest a the queers.
Goin the Wrong Way

Monday, Nov. 26

I wake up with a Class A headache, an’ I’m late for the ranch meetin with Stoutamire an’ Jannelle for the first time ever. I have a hard time concentratin on what they’re sayin.

Jannelle keeps throwin me strange looks, must be the fat lip. “You OK?” she asks me afterwards.

“Ih, didn’t get much sleep last night,” I say, even though I slept fine after consumin enough whiskey that I could hardly walk to my room. She don’t say nothin about the fat lip, so I don’t.

I sit in my little office most a the day pretendin to do paperwork – feed reports an’ breedin records. I’m thinkin about Chuck an’ I’m thinkin about Jack. What I hate about bein queer got nothin to do with either of ‘em. They’re both fine men, good people. There’s just no place for guys like that, not in Wyoming anyways, an’ I ain’t about to move to some big city where it’s supposed to be OK.

At 5, I head back to the cottage an’ look for Cassie’s number in my old address book.

“Ennis? Del Mar?” she says when she answers. “How are you doin?” It’s good to hear her voice, still perky.

“Good, you?” I’m lyin, I’m not doin good at all.

“I’m fine. On my way to work.”

“Still at the Wolf Ears?”

“Part-time,” she says. “Your daughter tell you I’m in nursin school?”

“Yeah, how’s that goin?”

“Pretty rough. I was outta school for over 10 years an’ it’s hard goin back. How are your girls?”

“Good, you know Junior got married?”

“So I heard.” There’s a pause, an’ I don’t know what to say next.

“So why you callin?” she asks. It sounds like she’s flirtin, at least a little.

“Was wonderin if you might wanna …”

She cuts me off. “I dunno, Ennis, I …”

Shit. Of course, she’s got someone new. What was I thinkin, a nice-lookin girl like that would be twiddlin her thumbs? So I ask, “You seein anyone?”

“Mmm … not really,” she says. “You?”

“No.”

Another pause. I’m tryin a find the right words to say, but I cain’t. Should a planned this better.

Finally, she asks, “Are you lookin to start things back up?”
“I’m … just lookin for company, to be honest.”

Another pause. “Well, I’m workin Friday night, but I’m off at 6 on Saturday. What were you thinkin a doin?”

I don’t know if it’s a good thing or a bad thing that she’s so damn easy. “Maybe take you for supper at the Knife’n’Fork, out for a drink after?”

“OK, sure,” she says. “Pick me up at work.”

After we hang up, I want a pour myself a big glass a whiskey so bad it hurts my head. What stops me is I cain’t afford to have days like today, holed up in my office doin nothin. Ranch work ain’t for slackers, an’ this is the best job I ever had. I’d be a fool to squander it.

So I go to bed early an’ I have a nightmare that wakes me up at 4 in the morning. I wake up sittin bolt upright in bed, but all I can remember is drivin down a highway in the snow an’ then crashin into something.

Wednesday, Nov. 28

I get home from work an’ I see Francine’s been here in the cottage. She left her room door open, an’ the little girl suitcase is on the bed an’ a pile a laundry on the floor.

I’m thinkin maybe the whole idea a her movin in wasn’t a good one. She says “bless you” every time I sneeze – nothin she learned from me or Alma – an’ she’s always tryin a get me to eat more. I mean, I’m an old bachelor by now, set in my ways like they say. An’ she’s got a lot goin on in her life in Riverton, nothin to do with stayin on a ranch way out here.

The whiskey’s callin to me again, so I open the high cupboard. I see there’s a note attached to the bottle, so I take it down. The bottle’s empty. The note says, “Dear Daddy, I want to come home but not if you’re drinking whiskey. Please call me at Regent’s house, 858-2209 if you want me to come back.”

So she’s stickin it to me, an’ I don’t know what to tell her. I cain’t say straight out “OK, so don’t come back,” so I put off makin that call.

A while later, Junior calls an’ asks me if she can come over Friday night an’ make supper. I say I ain’t good company just now, an’ she says, “Oh, I don’t care about that. Please, Daddy.”

There just ain’t no way to argue against that, an’ I don’t want a let her down. Maybe it’ll be good to talk, let her know it’s for real that I’m movin on, that she won’t be weighed down by a freak of a father after all. So I say OK, c’mon over.

Christ, I wish Francine hadn’t dumped that bottle. But I ain’t gettin into the truck to go buy a new one.

Friday, Nov. 30

Junior’s makin some kind a steak cut in strips with a bunch a green peppers an’ mushrooms an’ soy sauce. I help her cut everything up. We’re not talkin much, but with her, it’s OK. She boils up some rice an’ throws the other ingredients together in something she calls a “wok,” one a her weddin
gifts.

We sit down to eat, an’ that’s when she starts the conversation.

“Daddy, I’ve been talking to Julie,” she says, then stops.

“All right …” I say.

“Her dad is really upset, and I’m worried about you.”

“Well, you got no reason,” I say. “I’m doin fine.”

“But you’re still not talking to him.”

“Darlin, you’re goin a have to let this one go,” I say. I’m not gettin into this with my daughter. Not sayin none a her business, but this just ain’t a topic of conversation.

“You know Francine is scared to go back to your house?”

“I cain’t say I blame her,” I say, but inside I feel it. I remember what it’s like bein afraid a go home, not knowin what you’ll find.

She stares at me an’ I’m the one who looks away. I cain’t stand to see those sad eyes.

She gets back to tellin me about her art class an’ she wants to have me an’ Francine an’ Regent over to her house for Christmas dinner. I tell her I’ll be workin an’ on call after that. She says she’ll figure out a date, maybe the weekend before.

“This supper is delicious,” I tell her.

“Wait ‘til you see dessert,” she says. Turns out she brought a homemade apple pie.

We clean up the kitchen an’ then watch Dallas.

Then I’m helpin her pack up to go – she leaves half the pie – an’ she says, “Daddy, no matter what happens, please don’t push me an’ Francie away. We love you too much.”

“You’re good girls,” I say. Lump in my throat, damn it.

I sit up late thinkin about this date with Cassie.

Saturday, Dec. 1

I’m at the hardware store in Riverton buyin some things for the ranch – new extension cords, a power saw and nails, an’ who’s at the checkout but Regent’s Aunt Flo. So that’s where I know her from.

She’s shy, not a chatty one like some of ‘em. When it’s my turn to pay, I nod an’ tip my hat to her. “Flo.”

She nods an’ cracks a smile. “Ennis.”

I’m last in line. She says to me, real quiet, “You want to get together for a coffee?”

I’m guessin she wants to talk about Francine an’ Regent, cain’t imagine what I’d have to say though. “I guess,” I say. “When?”
She says she can take a lunch break soon, or I could come back when she gets off at 6. I gotta get back to the ranch an’ I have this date with Cassie tonight, so I say, “Maybe some other time.”

“I’m off tomorrow,” she says. “How about we meet at Mimi’s Cafe? At 9 for breakfast?”

But I’m pretty sure breakfast’ll be with Cassie, so I say how about afternoon coffee around 2, ’cause it looks like she’s goin a press it. She says that’ll work.

******

The wind is howlin and snow is flyin when I get outta my truck at the Wolf Ears Tavern just before 6.

I sit down at a table, an’ in no time Cassie’s here with a Bud for me. She’s still cute like I remembered, an’ today she’s wearin some kind a low-cut puffy top, a short black leather skirt an’ a pair a cowboy boots with fancy toolin’. Big silver earrings, big smile.

“Hey, Cowboy,” she says. “I’ll be just a few more minutes.”

I smile an’ nod. I watch her wiggle her ass as she walks away, an’ I imagine my hands grabbin it and then hitchin up the skirt. I look at my hands. Yeah, that ass is gonna feel fine.

She comes back to the table with a glass a white wine and sits down.

“You’re lookin good,” she says.

“No, you are,” I say. She looks like she’s only gettin younger.

“Hey, you know that’s a bitch of a storm brewin out there,” she says, “so I was thinkin maybe we could just stay here in Signal an’ I’ll cook you supper at my place.

But stayin in don’t fit my plans for the evenin, so I say, “Not so bad out there, an’ you like the Knife’n’Fork don’t you?”

“Whatsoever you want,” she says, not mad at all, still easy-goin. “Maybe we could go dancin at Kelley’s Bar?” That ain’t part a my plans either, so I don’t say nothin.

The heat in my truck don’t work, so we take her car, me drivin. It’s an old Plymouth Duster, an’ I can feel the wind blowin us all over the highway. At least the snow’s not comin down too bad.

She’s talkin a blue streak about work an’ nursing school. She don’t need much back from me, so I just give her a “uh-huh” from time to time.

Junior’s workin at the Knife’n’Fork, just like a figured. She’s hostess tonight. She does a double take when we walk in, but then she’s all business.

“Hi Daddy, hi Cassie,” she says, with a fake smile. “Table for two?”

“Yeah, Darlin.” I give her a hug an’ she takes us to a booth.

Cassie keeps talkin. She teases me when I pull out my readin glasses to see the menu, so I talk to her in an old-man voice an’ she laughs. I order steak an’ she orders roast chicken. When the food comes, she says, “So tell me what happened, Ennis Del Mar. What have you been up to since you dumped me?”

That’s harsh, but it’s true enough. I was an asshole to her. “This an’ that,” I say. “Moved out to
Stoutamire’s ranch last summer an’ Francine moved in with me, so I’m outta that trailer.”

“Thank god,” she says. “You really haven’t been seein anyone else?”

I hesitate, thinkin it might be better to say I was. “Kinda, but it’s over,” I say, but as soon as it’s outta my mouth I regret it.

“Is she married?” she asks. “Francine said you go out, but she didn’t know with who. I figured it must be a married lady.”

“Somethin like that,” I say.

“So why did you dump me anyways?” No plainer way to say it.

“I didn’t wanna keep you on a string,” I say. “Didn’t think I wanted a get married again or have no more kids.”

“Did I ask you to marry me and make babies?” she asks. She’s kinda smilin, but I can tell she’s dead serious.

“No, but I know you talked to Junior about gettin married.”

“An’ she said you’re not the marryin kind. I got that. So I figured you weren’t Mr. Right, but maybe you were Mr. Right Now. I was OK with that.”

“You still OK with it?”

“I dunno,” she says. “I fell hard for you. I missed you, an’ I hated you for the way you broke up.”

“Sorry.”

“An’ I’m 29 now, not gettin any younger.” I sure didn’t feel young when I was 29, me an’ Alma about to split.

“Well, I cain’t pretend I’ve changed,” I say. “Still not thinkin on gettin married again.”

“So why did you call me?”

“Lonely, I guess.” Not exactly true.

“You want someone to warm your bed?” she says with that little smile an’ a twinkle in her eyes.

“Maybe …” I say, an’ I make myself smile too. Never was any good at this.

The food comes, an’ Cassie gets to talkin about other things – her dad the alcoholic an’ her ma who puts up with his shit.

After we’re done eatin an’ we’re finishin our second drinks, Junior comes by with the dessert menu, but we both say no, we’re too full.

“You wanna go out for a drink after this?” I ask.

“Sure,” she says. “Kelley’s Bar? We can do some dancing.”

Not part a my plan. “No, I … maybe I’m not so welcome there just now.”

“Got into a fight?”
“Huh, I was thinkin about the Black’n’Blue Eagle Tavern.”

“Well it’s a dive, but I’m game,” she says.

*****

As soon as we walk into the bar, it’s clear to me I made a mistake. I’m not a good schemer, not at all, an’ I didn’t think this one through.

We sit down at a table near where Chuck an’ me usually sit. Alice the waitress comes over an’ looks surprised to see me with my hot little date. I feel bad for her, ‘cause she really is a nice woman.

“Bud, Ennis?” she asks. “And for the young lady?”

“White wine please,” Cassie says.

She picks up the conversation where she’d left off, some story about her sister an’ her husband. I look over to the pool tables, but I don’t see Chuck at first.

“Tell me about Junior,” Cassie says. “She pregnant yet?”

“Not yet,” I say. “Curt’s a good enough guy.”

Just then, I see Chuck, but he don’t see me.

“What are you lookin at over there?” Cassie asks, an’ she turns her head. “You wanna shoot some pool?”

“No, nothin,” I say.

“So tell me about Francine.”

I force myself to make conversation. “Well, you know she’s in college. Seein a rodeo cowboy. Nice kid. He’s been workin at the ranch, but he’ll be back to U-W after Christmas.”

“Good for her,” Cassie says, an’ then she’s off on another story, somethin about one a her teachers.

My eyes are wanderin again, an’ this time when I look at Chuck I see that he’s starin at me real angry. I move my eyes back to Cassie.

We’re on another drink when Chuck starts walkin this way. As he gets closer, I’m seein his face is angrier than I ever seen him, eyes flashin. I can’t help thinkin, oh god, he’s gorgeous. It’s a word for a woman or a horse, not a man.

Just then it comes to my mind that Chuck could make my life hell if he gets angry enough. He could tell folks I made moves on him, an’ then what? My heart is poundin.

He leans on our table. “Hey Ennis, no pool this week?” He sounds like he’s mockin me.

“No, uh, Chuck, this here is Cassie,” I say. “Cassie, Chuck.”

“Cassie,” Chuck says, tippin his hat, then turns right back to me. “Well, maybe I’ll see you next week?”

“Maybe not,” I say. He stands there borin’ his eyes into me for a few seconds, then tips his hat to
Cassie again an’ walks away.

I cain’t help watchin his ass in his tight jeans.

“What’s his problem?” Cassie asks.

At least she’s not askin what my problem is. “No idea,” I say. “You wanna head back? Snow might be worse.”

She says OK. We get out there, an’ sure enough, there’s a about three more inches of snow on the ground, and more comin down with the wind back up.

“Well, I’m glad you’re drivin,” Cassie says. “So I got someone to blame when we spin out an’ die in a snowbank.”

“Where to?” I say. “My place is a little closer.”

“Well, is your daughter home?” she asks.

Truth is, I don’t even know. She hasn’t been home, but of course she has the key.

“Could be,” I say.

“Then we’ll go to my place, dummy,” Cassie gives me a little punch on the arm.

An’ again, it comes to me how stupid my schemes are. As if Cassie would want to traipse around my place with Francine maybe home or on her way home. I feel like I need whiskey just to keep goin with this.

I ask her if she’s got any in the house, an’ she says, no but we could pick some up, so we stop at a party store just outside a Signal an’ I buy a pint a Old Rose an’ a bottle of white wine, not the cheapest brand. We drive on to her apartment upstairs from an insurance office in Signal.

*****

She turns on the electric fireplace an’ gets herself a glass of wine. I pour myself a glass a whiskey. Her cat, Miss Boots, is rubbin up against my leg. Always liked me for some reason.

“Why does your buddy dress like that?” Cassie asks.

“Who?”

“Your buddy from the Black’n’Blue Eagle.”

“I dunno,” I say. “He sings in a band.” This is dangerous, talkin to her about Chuck, so I ask her how old Miss Boots is now, an’ she says just turned 3. I remember when she was a kitten.

That gets her into a story about the dog she had growing up. “Did you have a dog?” she asks me when she’s done.

“We had border collies,” I say. “My favorite was a runt bitch I named Blackie. I used a sneak her into bed with me, give her leftovers from the house. When she was all grown an’ gettin ready to have puppies a her own, I let her come into the house an’ have ‘em in the closet in my brother an’ me’s room. I got a whoopin for that.”

I’m feeling a nice buzz, an’ I move in closer an’ put my arm around Cassie. She always says how
much she likes cuddlin. I’m tryin to ignore her flowery perfume an’ I wish she was someone else. But I guess I could live with this.

Now she’s gettin into a story about some rowdy customers, then she turns and kisses me, an’ I kiss back. I put my hands on her waist an’ reach around to grab her ass, an’ lift that little skirt. She’s wearin some kind a tights underneath.

She nuzzles into my neck. We kiss for a while, an’ when I start takin off her top, she takes me into her bedroom, where we kiss some more an’ take each other’s clothes off slow. I back her onto the bed. I’m touchin her tits, tryin not to think about how disappointin a woman chest is because everything’s so squishy – then I let my hand go down further. This part I don’t mind. I’m good with my hands. I work her until she’s shakin an’ moanin.

I feel like flippin her over, but she’s made her thoughts about that clear enough, so instead I lie on my back an’ she’s teasin me, playin with my dick but not really jackin me off, ‘cause I know she’s about to climb on top.

“You still takin the pill?” I ask. She says of course she is.

“I wasn’t sitting around all that time waiting for you,” she says with a little chuckle.

I can feel my dick startin to go limp – not a problem I ever had before. She might see it too, ‘cause she starts lickin an’ suckin, an’ pretty soon she’s gettin on top a me. She’s a sweet girl, she is.

I grip her ass an’ try an’ keep my mind on what we’re doin, but I close my eyes an’ think about Jack or Chuck, one or the other. She’s bouncin an’ I’m pumpin into her an’ I come pretty quick. At least I got the job done, I’m thinkin, but I’m ashamed a the queer thoughts. An’ I know they’ll probly never go away, not ever.

She climbs off a me an’ heads to the bathroom. I’m wonderin if I should stay or go.

“You stay the night, I’ll make you breakfast an’ take you back to the bar to pick up your truck in the morning,” she says when she gets back into bed.

She’s right. The whiskey’s still with me, an’ the wind’s still howling an’ the snow fallin.

I say “Mmm,” an’ that’s the last thing I remember ‘cause I fall asleep pretty soon after that.

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Sunday Dec. 2

When I wake up, my head’s splittin open, so I find some aspirin in Cassie’s bathroom, swish toothpaste around my mouth, take a shower an’ pull yesterday’s clothes back on.

She’s still not up, so I make coffee in her fancy coffeemaker.

When she does get up, she tells me she’s goin a cook me some pancakes an’ sausage. “I know you like the big breakfast on Sundays,” she says. “What do you got planned for today?”

“Just workin with the horses.” I’m hopin she didn’t have no ideas.

“I gotta study,” she says. Good.

I’m happy enough she doesn’t go for morning sex. After breakfast, she drives me to the Wolf Ears to get my truck. As soon as she parks, she turns to me an’ gives me a peck on the cheek.
“Well?” she says.

When I don’t say nothin, she says, “What about next weekend? Wanna go to a movie or somethin? Dancin?”

“Sure,” I say. “I’ll call you.”

*****

When I get home, Francine is waitin for me, hoppin mad, an’ she asks, “Where were you?”

“Out,” I say.

“Well, your boss called Regent into work at 6 this morning because he couldn’t reach you. I got so worried I came out here with him, and I called Chuck and Junior and I found out you were out with Cassie last night. Cassie?”

“Now Darlin,” I say. I put my arm around her shoulders an’ kiss her hair.

She pulls away from me. “I’m packing up my stuff and moving in with Regent until I can get my own place. I don’t want to cramp your style.”

Well, even after all the stuff I was thinkin about her not belongin here with me, that stabs my heart.

“Please don’t go,” I say. “You know I won’t be seein that Cassie again.”

“What about Chuck?” she asks.

This is a conversation I don’t want a be havin, but I say it anyways: “I’m fixin to make it up to him.”

“Well, I hope you do,” she says. I don’t know what to say to that, ‘cause she’s just a girl an’ she shouldn’t be worryin about what her old man is doin.

I call Stoutamire, an’ he tells me Stiv is sick an’ he couldn’t reach Tex either, so he called the boy in.

He don’t mention that he tried a call me too, an’ where the fuck was I?

*****

I go back out an’ find Regent in the barn loadin hay to feed the heifers.

He clears his throat, looks nervous. “Francine was really upset this morning.”

“Sorry I had her worryin,” I say.

I still don’t know if she’s stayin or goin. I sure feel bad I put her through all that frettin an’ all them phone calls.

I take Sparkplug out for a ride. When I come in for lunch, Francine makes me a sandwich an’ says she’s goin a try stayin with me, but she don’t want a ever see a whiskey bottle again. Nor does she want a hear I been out with Cassie. I don’t say nothin to that, my 18-year-old tellin me what to do with my life. Fact is, I probly need it.

*****
I walk into Mimi’s Cafe right at 2 an’ see Flo in a booth toward the back, no one else around.

“So, what’s this about?” I ask her after I sit down.

“Well, first an apology,” she says. “I’m going to talk about things that are none of my business.”

Well, she won’t be the first one. I’m just a little surprise ‘cause I hadn’t thought she was nosy like Lisa.

“Regent and I are pretty close,” she says. “Sometimes he tells me things he doesn’t tell Lisa. I just want to give you my two cents, and you can shut me up whenever you want.”

I look around, but sure enough, the nearby tables and booths are all empty an’ the waitress was behind the counter helpin other customers, an’ anyway, Flo’s voice is too quiet to carry.

“OK, say your piece,” I say.

“Well, first of all, what that college kid did was way out of line,” she says. “What I wanted to tell you, I’ve been to college and it can be a very liberating experience for a gay kid coming off a ranch. Sometimes the freedom makes the kids reckless.”

“I ain’t interested in bein liberated,” I say.

“You just want to live your own quiet life, right?”

“Sure enough.”

“Well, it’s not easy. Lisa and I’ve been together for 15 years, and believe me it hasn’t all been sunny skies. But choosing a life with her was the best thing I ever did, Ennis. Did Francine tell you I have a daughter?”

“No.”

“Chelsea is 24 and she’s a Mormon, lives in Utah,” Flo says. “We brought her up until she was 14, and then she found religion and moved back to Kansas to be with her dad, and she refused to see me. I couldn’t fight for visitation rights because she threatened to out us. She’s never been back to the farm since. She barely speaks to me now.”

That would be my worst nightmare – my girls shunnin me. An’ Alma had the ammunition to cut me off from them, but she never used it.

“I don’t have to tell you you’re lucky, do I?” Flo asks.

“No.”

“So your girls know and they still love you. And they know that Chuck makes you happy and that you just shut him out of your life. And they’re scared, because they think you’re drinking again and you’re just going to drink yourself to death.”

“Francine told Regent all that?”

“Please don’t blame her,” Flo says. “She thinks she can save you, but I’m here to tell you, Ennis, you need to save yourself.”

“Everyone’s goin a die,” I say. “Say I stay with Chuck. We could get killed, an’ then we won’t be around for our kids at all. Don’t think it don’t happen.”
“Of course it happens,” she says. “Lesbians get killed too. But it’s your life we’re talking about, your happiness. For me, once I knew Lisa, I wasn’t going to let her go. I have no regrets about her, Ennis. My daughter, yes, but not being with Lisa.”

“What makes you think I feel that strong about Chuck, or he feels that strong about me?”

“I’m saying in case you do, I want to tell you it’s possible to have a life together and not get killed. I grew up on a ranch. I’ve seen people, especially men, who would rather die of loneliness and broken hearts than change. You must have seen it too. But it doesn’t have to be like that.”

“So what are you sayin’?”

“People around here have been whispering about Lisa and me since we bought the farm 14 years ago. But not too many know the truth. My boss at the hardware store knows, and our gay and lesbian friends know, and of course our kids.”

I know Hi, the manager of the hardware store. He’s a friend a Gill’s.

“But you’re women …” I say. I cain’t picture anyone takin tire irons to a pair a women.

“So maybe some people cut us some slack,” she says. “They try to believe the aunt story. But my point is, you can live a quiet life and not attract attention. It’s possible.”

“Howzat?”

“Well, you have to trust that some people are gonna know, but they’re gonna keep your secret. Because they love you. Other people might know, or think they know, but as long as you’re not in their face with it, they won’t say anything. I’m not saying it’s right that you have to hide, or that you can’t just step out like straight couples, but it’s safer that way.”

“I’d never put my private business out there,” I say. “The bitch of it is, there’s no controllin what other people do.”

“Tell me, Ennis, how comfortable are you going out to bars in the first place?”

I don’t have to think hard. “Not too comfortable.”

“You’re an introvert, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

“You like to spend time alone, not a big party guy? You like to be one-on-one with people, or even by yourself? That’s an introvert. An extrovert thrives on being with other people, the more the better.”

“Well then I guess I am an intro-vert,” I say. Then I’d guess maybe Jack’s an extrovert, an’ Chuck too.

“I’m an introvert too,” she says. “So here’s the deal: don’t go to out to bars or in big crowds if you don’t want to. Lisa and I hardly ever even go out together. She did the 4-H and all the school stuff with her kids, she does the church social stuff. I don’t. We have a few friends we hang out with, at their house or our house. That’s it. No bars, no public scenes.”

It’s true, I hate goin out with a crowd, even it’s Junior’s house or Chuck’s, or Curt’s parents’, even though most a the people are nice enough.
“Uh, did Regent tell you who the other guy involved is?” I ask her.

“Your man friend?”

“Yeah.” That made me flinch, but I’m glad she didn’t say boyfriend.

“Regent told me who it is, but he didn’t tell Lisa,” Flo says. “And I won’t blab.”

“I know that,” I say. “Thing is, he likes goin out. He even sings in a band.”

“I bet he’d like to hang around inside with you at least some of the time,” she says. “Or maybe you’ll find you’re not right for each other. Wouldn’t you rather try it out than lose him?”

Only other person who ever talked to me this way is Bridget, an’ she pretty much said the same damn thing. I could shut this Flo down right here an’ now, I’m thinkin.

“I better be goin,” I say, gettin up to go.

“No, Ennis. Please.” I sit back down. She yells to the waitress for another coffee.

She starts tellin me about what she calls the “underground gay community of Central Wyoming” – some who hang around together, some who don’t.

“There’s a lot more support out there than you would imagine,” she says.

“I don’t think I wanna be part of no community.”

“No one will force you, and you can count on Lisa and me to be discreet.”

“I sure hope so.”

We have another coffee an’ she tells me about growin up on a ranch in Kansas. She got pregnant by a ranch hand when she was 16 an’ married him, then met Lisa when she was workin at a coop food store near Kansas State University.

She says Lisa grew up on an orchard in New Hampshire an’ she met Luc LaRoque, a French professor, at college.

When our coffee mugs are empty again, she says, “Some day I’ll tell you the whole story if you’re interested.”

“Sure,” I say. “I really should get goin.”

I pay for the coffee, an’ I thank her.

“You don’t need to think you’re buttin in,” I say. “Truth is, I don’t know what the fuck I’m doin. The whole thing scares the piss outta me.”

“You got my point, though, didn’t you?” she says.

“I did. Thanks.”

She says she’ll phone me later in the week to check how things are goin. She’s a nice lady. I still cain’t believe she got me talkin about the thing with Chuck. An’ I don’t know what I’m goin a do, if I’m goin a do anything at all.
Sorry

Sunday, Dec. 2

Drivin back to Signal, I’m thinkin I’ll call Chuck in a week or so, once he’s calmed down, an’ tell him I’m sorry ‘bout what happened, see what he wants to do about it.

Cassie, I gotta call her sooner, ‘cause I don’t want her showin up on my doorstep like she used a do sometimes.

When I get home at 4, Francine’s home an’ Regent’s still there.

“Listen, uh,” I say to them both. “I’m sorry about before, how I been actin all week.”

Francine looks at Regent an’ then back at me. “It’s OK Daddy.” She gives me a hug. “We’re gonna go pick up some steaks and other stuff for supper. Anything you need?”

So it looks like she’s back to stay, good for her. I tell her a few things to get at the store an’ give her a twenty. Then I think maybe I’ll call Chuck while they’re gone, no use waitin a week.

“I might not be home for supper,” I say.

“OK, we’ll get a steak for you and you can have it as leftovers,” she says.

As soon as they leave, I pick up the phone.

Chuck answers after eight rings, like he’d been decidin whether or not to pick up the phone.

“Hi … it’s Ennis.”

He waits a second, then, “Hi Ennis.”

Voice is cold, but still good to hear him.

“Chuck, I … I’m sorry.” There’s that lump in my throat again.

He waits a few more seconds. “So did you get physical with her?” he asks.

That catches me by surprise an’ I’m searchin to find the right words.

But he speaks first. “God damn you to hell, Ennis.”

No use lyin. “I cain’t tell you how sorry I am,” I say.

“Was it good?”

“No. Chuck …”

“Fuck you. FUCK you.”

Whoa, hadn’t expected that. “Can I go over there and we can talk?”

“What, now?”

“Yeah, now.”
“No, Ennis,” he says it like he means it. “You don’t just insult me and push me away and fuck some woman and then expect to come over here like nothing happened.”

“Please, Chuck. Please.”

“No.”

“OK,” I say, tryin to breathe an’ sound normal. “Just know I’m sorry … for everything.”

He doesn’t say a thing.

“Can I call you later this week?” I ask.

“I guess I can’t stop you,” he says. “I’ve gotta go.”

It’s all I can do not to go out an’ buy me a bottle, but Francine’ll be comin back anytime. Instead, I make another pot a coffee, an’ sit down with a mug.

So, what if I try an’ get back with Chuck an’ he won’t do it? That hadn’t occurred to me, not once. But why would he want a be with me anyways? I’m a hothead, stick in the mud – Flo said as much – no education, glorified ranch hand. Why would he want that?

He’s level-headed, like Bridget might say, works for the federal government, sings, plays guitar, knows just about everyone around here. Just about perfect, all except the queer thing. I’m no way near perfect, an’ not good company neither. I cain’t say I blame him.

Francine an’ Regent come back an’ I eat supper with ‘em. They’re talkin about rodeo mostly. No one mentions what’s goin on with Cassie or Chuck.

When there’s a space to talk, I say to Francine, “Honey, I don’t want you worryin about me no more. I’m goin a be all right.”

She says, “I sure hope so, Daddy.”

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Tuesday, Dec. 4

I put off callin Cassie all day Monday, but I figure I gotta do it today, before she calls me first.

I wait until 6 in the evenin, thinkin she might be at work. But no.

She’s in a great mood, asks how I’m doin.

I need to get it said as quick as I can. “Good, uh, it’s just …”

She waits for me to go on. I should a planned it out better.

“I just, uh, maybe we shouldn’t go out no more.”

I hear her breathe in an’ out, loud. “You serious Ennis? You know, you don’t get to just yank me around by a chain.”

“I sure am sorry,” I say.

“You didn’t really fool me anyways,” she says. “I could tell you had someone else on your mind.”
Fuckin hell, she put me an’ Chuck together. My heart is poundin, but I gotta stay calm.

“It wasn’t that, I …”

But she cuts me off. “She’s a lucky lady, whoever she is. I just hope you don’t hurt her like you hurt me.”

Whew! I don’t say nothin, not goin a lie.

“Like I said, I’m sorry.”

“Well, I gotta get ready for work,” she says. “And Ennis? Don’t call me again.” An’ she hangs up on me.

*****

Flo calls about an hour later. “So how are things going?”

“He’s pretty pissed off,” I say. “Won’t talk to me.”

“Don’t give up,” she says.

“No, I won’t. He might, though.”

“Fight for it, Ennis.”

“OK, I will. Thanks again for the coffee.”

“Let’s do it again sometime,” she says.

*****

Next, I call Chuck.

“You ready to talk?” I ask. You know something’s gone real wrong when I’m askin someone if they want to talk.

“Are you ready to hear what I got to say?” he says.

“Whoa there. How bad is it?

“It’s what you need to hear, Ennis.”

“What’s that?”

“We’re not doing this over the phone,” he says.

“I’ll go over there?”

“Not now. Come here Saturday afternoon.”

“Not before?” I ask. Why does this have to be some big formal occasion?

“Afraid not.”

“All right then.”
“Saturday at 3.”

“Can I bring somethin to make for supper?”

“No. I’ll see you then.”

Sounds real bad. I sit down at the kitchen table. No cigarettes, no whiskey. Wouldn’t fix nothin no how. He’d still be done with me an’ my bullshit.

Just like Jack. Or not just like Jack. I’ll never know if Jack really did give up on me or not.

In any case, here I go fuckin it up again, actin’ like the other guy’s got something wrong with him an’ I don’t. Actin like I don’t need it. Like I don’t need what I cain’t get from no woman. Cassie’s perfume an’ bouncin tits come to mind, an’ I feel like pukin.

An’ like Chuck says, no point wishin I wasn’t like this. That horse left the barn. I mean that horse was a wild mustang I never did have a hold of. Sure, I can fuck a woman. Nice to know, but not what I need.

I go in my room an’ take my pictures a Jack outta the drawer. One from his wedding, two from the rodeo. My old happy Jack, not a care in the world. I don’t feel like rubbin one out. What I feel like is cryin. I wonder if I could a made him happy if I’d a just said yes, we can try out this ranch thing. I bet his old man would a been glad enough for the help, queer or no queer.

Still, no goin back to the shouldas. I close my eyes an’ I think about Jack comin to me in that dream in the trailer. He said to live my life. Come to think of it, he said to get outta the trailer, an’ I did that. The other is the tough one.

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Saturday, Dec. 8

The days leadin up to today was rough. The ground froze, winter feedin started, an’ both Stoutamire an’ Stiv been sick. Tex, Regent an’ me worked long hours all week.

Lisa called on Thursday to invite me an’ Francine to Sunday supper. I know it’s gotta happen, so I said “yes” even though I’m dreadin it. Well, Lisa anyways.

“What about that young man of yours?” she’d asked. I said he’d probly take a rain check, maybe another time. Didn’t tell her I got no young man, no man at all just now.

*****

When Saturday finally comes, I get to Chuck’s just before 4.

He opens the door an I reach out to hug him, but he steps back. Bad sign. I stick my hands in my jacket pockets.

“I’m real sorry,” I say. I’m still standin outside ‘cause he’s in the doorway, hasn’t moved outta the way to let me in. His smile’s gone an’ his eyes ain’t sparklin. Looks like he’s hardly slept.

“You’re lettin all your heat out,” I say. “You think you could let me in?”

He opens the door wider, shows me into the front livin room where we never sat before. This ain’t goin very well at all.

“You want a beer?” he asks. That’s a good sign.
“Sure enough,” I say. I follow him into the kitchen, take my beer, then we walk back into the livin room, place that looks like nobody ever lives in.

I sit on a leather couch full a puffs an’ buttons, nothin like the comfortable one in back. He sits on a chair.

“So what do you have to say for yourself?” he asks, not in a friendly voice. He hasn’t cracked a smile yet.

“I’m sorry an’ I want a start things back up?” I say. I didn’t mean it as a question, just came out that way.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” he says.

Of course he knows what I mean, but I’ll beg if I need to, I got it so bad. I’m tryin not to sound like it though. “I want a have … a relationship. With you.” God, never thought I’d say such a thing to man nor woman.

“Oh yeah? Me an’ who else?” he asks.

“Just you.”

“Didn’t we say no women, Ennis?” He’s raisin his voice now.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“So what happened?”

“That night at the bar … that kid … it was so … fuckin … humiliatin,” I say. Never said that word before. “Jesus Christ. I felt like I just couldn’t go on like this.”

“Like in a relationship with a man? You’re going to have to spell it out for me, Ennis.”

“Yeah, like a queer, OK? But why’d he have to say it in the middle a the bar, huh?”

“He’s just a stupid kid,” Chuck says. “And by the way, Julie didn’t put him up to it. She didn’t even know it was coming.”

“No, I didn’t figure it was Julie. But Chuck, the boy can’t just go up to a man an’ ask him about homosexuals right in front a his ex-wife an’ his sister.”

“I told him that,” Chuck says. “But this isn’t about what he said. It’s about you taking your shame and your issues about being gay and turning on me.”

“I, uh …” Christ, this is hard. An’ I hate that word “gay,” like we’re a couple a fairies.

“Ennis, what did I do to deserve the silent treatment or the shit you said to me? How do you think it made me feel?”

“I wasn’t thinkin about you,” I say. “I was thinkin I don’t want a be like this, and maybe if we call it quits I don’t have to be.”

“And that’s why you kept Jack at arm’s length too? Because you didn’t want to be gay?”

Ouch. That hurts, a lot. “Now don’t you …” I’m havin a hard time talkin ‘cause I cain’t think neither. “He’s the one who …”
Chuck cuts me off. “From what I understand, he loved you and wanted to be with you and you
loved him too, but you pushed him away. And you can’t deny any of that, because you’re my only
source of information on this.”

“He wanted … I couldn’t …” For Christ’s sake I must sound like an idiot an’ my eyes are startin to
sting. Next thing you know I’ll be spillin out tears.

“Ennis, listen to me,” Chuck says. ‘I’d do almost anything for you; I’ll walk away right now if
that’s what you want, but if we stay together, so help me god, I need to know you’re in it too.”

“I’m here, ain’t I?”

“No, your body is here. We’re going to talk about our relationship today, and we’re not going to
kiss and make up. Then you can give it some time, really think about it.”

Now that’s a surprise. “Really?”

“Yes. We’ll go out for supper at the Knife’n’Fork, and then shoot pool at the Black’n’Blue Eagle.
The same date you took your waitress on, but we’re taking my car, and when we get back here you’re
not coming in.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

I want a say why any of it, but he seems to want this an’ I owe him one, so I don’t say nothin.
Thing I’m mostly wonderin about is why no kissin an’ makin up. Me an’ Jack always had sex, no
matter what else was goin on. Except the one time he drove up here after the divorce, but the girls
was there.

Not to mention, me an’ Jack never talked about our feelings, ever. True, he tried sometimes. If he
said as much as “I miss you,” he might as well a been talkin to the wind, ‘cause I wouldn’t say
nothin, even though I missed him right back.

“So we’re goin on a date?” I say.

“We’re just two buddies going out on a Saturday night, just like a lot of guys do.”

“Hmm,” I say.

“OK. I’ll get started,” he says. “Ennis, if you want to get back together, you need to make some
commitments and stick to them.”

I take a deep breath. I could get up an’ go right now, ‘cause I’m feelin itchy an’ pukey all of a
sudden. I could get up an’ go where though?

“Go on,” I say.

“The first is no more goddamn women.” He’s poundin’ it out on his chair. “Not one more. You
want to be with me, it’s just me.”

Whoa, just a few months an’ he’s asking for somethin Jack never asked from me, nor me from
him.

But I don’t have a problem sayin yes – hell, it couldn’t be more clear to me that Chuck is way
better than any woman. “I can agree to that,” I say.
“And I want you to tell me about you and the waitress. Was Jack was still around when you started seeing her?”

“He was.” I’m wonderin why we have to get into all this.

“And he was OK with it?”

“No,” I say. “Well, I come to find out he wasn’t. He thought I was goin a marry her or some damn thing.”

“How did you come to find that out?”

“What his ma told me, after he was gone. I’d already broke it off with Cassie by then anyways.”

“But you can see that was a wedge between him and you, right? And I’m sure Cassie didn’t know about him either.”

“Of course not.”

“Ennis, what I’m asking for here is a real relationship, with no one else coming between us. You think you can do it?”

“I guess.” He looks at me like he has questions, so I say, “Yeah, that’s what I want too, I guess.”

“OK,” he says. “The next thing is no silent treatment. I don’t care how mad you get at me or anyone else, you talk to me, goddamn it. You return my fuckin’ phone calls. You don’t walk out on me.”

Well, that’s just not my way. “I have to talk?” I say. “That ain’t how I do things.”

“I’m telling you if there’s two of us, it’s not all gonna be about how you do things.”

I’m not used to people talkin to me like that, ‘cept maybe a boss or a foreman. He’s got balls, I gotta say. Again, I feel like walkin out, even though what I want is right here.

“Well, I guess I’ll agree to it,” I say, “but you need to remind me if I forget.”

“Oh, I will,” he says. “And that’s it for me. Do you have anything to add?”

Ah, Jesus. Thank god he didn’t mention no ranchin up.

“Yes, I do,” I say. “I’m, uh, an intro-vert.”

“No shit.”

“I’d rather spend time alone or with you, just the two of us, not go out with other people.”

“I could a guessed that.”

“Family’s OK, but I gotta stay away from the big group scenes.”

“Did I pressure you into that?”

“You just did.”

“You mean the date tonight? No, before that I mean. Like the Saturday after Thanksgiving. It wasn’t me pressuring you to go out. I would have gone home with you if you’d said anything.”
“No, that was Bridget,” I gotta admit. “I cain’t say no to her.”

“That’s for you to deal with,” he says. “I can’t force you to go anywhere, and I wouldn’t want to. We can be as low key as you want. I just wanna spend time with you.”

I want a ask why, but instead I say, “You go ahead an’ spend time with your band an’ your poker friends when you want. We cain’t be together all the time, an’ I wouldn’t’ want it.”

“OK. We can discuss things like that and come to agreements, see?” he says.

“Sounds good,” I say.

A moment of silence, then Chuck says, “So those are the commitments.”

“Yeah,” I say. “You want a ring an’ a ceremony?”

He laughs. “Asshole! You’re making jokes about this?”

I laugh too. What I really want is to go over to Chuck, grab his face in my hands and kiss him until he’s beggin for more, but I gotta respect his rules for today.

I look over at him an’ I get the idea he’s thinkin the same thing. I look down, an’ he wears his jeans so tight that there’s no doubt. But he’s gotta make the first move today.

“What changed your mind?” he asks.

“About?”

“I get the silent treatment for a week, then I see you out with your waitress and the next day you’re calling me.”

“It was a conversation I had. With Regent’s Aunt Flo.”

“So you have a female confidante?”

“I guess.”

“Well, I talked to someone too,” he says. “My buddy Kirby Crick, owner of this house. He knows about me ‘cause he’s the inappropriate crush I told you about.”

I didn’t remember that. “He’s in Arizona, ain’t he?”

“He’s my best friend, Ennis. I don’t have anyone else to talk to except Julie, and that’s not right.”

“It’s all right. What did he say?”

“That you’re an irascible son-of-a-bitch, and if a woman treated him like that he’d be long gone.”

Goddamn it with the ten-dollar words. “A what? He go to college too?”

“Irascible. It means you have a bad temper.”

Huh. “So why didn’t you take his advice?”

“Because he’s so pussy-whipped he can barely walk most days.”

That gets us laughin, almost like old times.
“You cain’t be sayin you’re pussy-whipped,” I say. “Cause I ain’t no pussy an’ you ain’t no whipped.”

“No,” he says. “But you are an irascible son-of-a-bitch.”

“When provoked,” I say.

An’ we’re laughin more. No touchin, I keep havin’ to remind myself.

*****

We take Chuck’s horses out for a ride around the ranch, an’ get back just as the sun’s goin down. I want a ask him if we really have to go out on this date, but I figure I better not.

After we’re done groomin the horses, he says, “We’d better not go to the Knife an’ Fork smelling like this.”

Whew. “We could take showers,” I say.

“No, I’m not having you naked in my house,” he says, an’ we both laugh. But he got me thinkin about him naked, an’ him smellin like a horse. Cocktease is what he is.

“So you want me to leave?” I ask.

“We can have sandwiches here if you want,” he says. We go ahead an’ make tuna sandwiches.

We’re sittin down an’ eatin, when he says, “Did you miss me?”

There’s that word miss again, an’ I don’t know the difference between missin someone or lovin them, an’ I’d never say love, so maybe it’s easier to just go ahead an’ say I missed him.

“Sure,” I say.

“You thought about me.”

There go the butterflies, an’ my face turnin red. “Of course I did,” I say.

I keep hopin he’ll change his mind about the no sex, but he’s not sayin nothin or makin a move.

We finish our sandwiches an’ our beers.

“We could still go out an’ shoot some pool,” I say. “No one at the Black’n’Blue Eagle gives a shit how we smell.”

He says all right, an’ we go together in his car.

After our first game, which I win, we’re sittin at a table, an’ two girls walk up an’ start a conversation. Chuck knows ‘em from high school an’ he introduces me, but he don’t ask ‘em to sit down. They ask about Julie an’ he asks about their kids. One a them asks me if I got kids, an’ I say two girls.

Finally, Chuck says, “Well, ladies, Ennis and I are actually talking business, so unless you want to learn about leasing rights, you probably won’t be interested in what we have to say tonight.”

They ask if we want a play a game a pool with ‘em later, an’ he says no, we’re about to go anyways.
We finish our beers an’ leave.

On the way home, I’m watchin him from the side an’ my dick is gettin hard again. What’s the point a him playin hard-to-get like some girl anyways? I stop myself from sayin’ it, though, ‘cause it’s him callin the shots tonight.

When we get outta the car, he walks around to my side so I won’t try an’ walk him up to the door. We’re clearly not goin a hug, so I shove my hands in my pockets.

“I better be goin,” I say.

“You’re gonna think about things, right?” he says.

“Don’t need to think.”

“You do need to think.”

“All right,” I say.

He laughs an’ puts his arms around me. I hug back an’ I kiss his ear, an’ then he pulls away. “Don’t call me,” he says. “I’ll call you.”

I say, “Soon.”

*****

When I get home, I open the closet door.

“Jack, I swear,” I say, an’ this time I’m thinkin, I should a let you in like I’m lettin him in. I should a put down the sword an’ shield. I should a let you say them things you wanted a say, an’ I should a told you what I never did.

It’s all clear to me now, way too late.

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Sunday, Dec. 9

At 4, I’m gettin ready to go to Lisa and Flo’s when Chuck calls. He asks what I’m up to, an I say, “Talkin to you.”

“Wanna come over?” he asks.

I sure do, hadn’t expected him to call nearly so soon, but I tell him about my supper plans. “You could come too,” I say.

“No, this time I really don’t think I could keep my hands off.” Gives me this warm feelin an’ butterflies, him wantin me like that. Like I want him.

“Maybe I can stop by your place after?”

He says yes.

How did I go months an’ months between seein’ Jack, when I can hardly stand a day now? Either
I’m weaker or maybe I really did learn a lesson about thinkin someone’s always goin a be there, when he could be gone any day.

*****

I’m drivin Francine over to Lisa and Flo’s, but she’s goin a get herself a ride back home.

“Hey, do you think we could train Sparkplug for barrel racing?” she asks.

“Uh, I don’t see why not. He’s still young enough. So you’re really wantin a go rodeoin with Regent.”

“Just county fairs here in Wyoming,” she says. “Just a few weekends next summer.”

“I gotta ask Stoutamire for a patch a ground where we can set up barrels,” I say. “Sparkplug’s got the speed in him.”

“Thanks, Daddy.”

“An’ what does your ma have to say about it?”

“I haven’t told her.”

“Well, you mention it to your ma,” I say, an’ then we’re pullin in to Sweet Acres farm.

Lisa’s got the big hugs for us. “C’mon in and make yourselves at home!”

We sit at the big kitchen table, an’ Regent introduces his younger brother Argent. Flo’s not here.

Francine tells Regent about the barrel racin, an’ he says, “Thanks, Mr. Del Mar. Maybe the field behind the calving barn?”

“I’ll talk to Mr. Stoutamire,” I say.

“What’s this Mr. Del Mar, Mr. Stoutamire stuff?” Lisa yells.

“They’re my bosses, Ma,” Regent says.

Lisa looks at me, so I shrug my shoulders. “That’s what the hands call me.”

“Well, you can call me ‘Mrs. La Rocque,’” Lisa says to Regent, an’ she’s makin quote marks with her fingers. “Or Miss Lah-di-dah! I had no idea a ranch was so formal.”

“Mom!” Regent says, but him an’ Francine an’ Argent give a little laugh.

Lisa goes into the living room and yells up the stairs, “Flo!”

Flo yells “Just a minute,” an’ I’m glad to hear her voice.

“How’s my boy working out for you?” Lisa asks.

“He’s a good worker,” I say. “Trouble is, I don’t have much work for him, and when I do, he’ll be off to the rodeo.”

“You’re pullin calves in April?” Regent asks. “I won’t be on the road until May.”

“You want a help pull calves?”
“I want to be a rancher, so I want to learn every part of the operation.”

Lisa says, “I thought you were going back to college in January.”

“I am,” he says. “What do you think agricultural business is about, Ma? I’m learning how to run a ranch.”

“Maybe you could be there for brandin?” I say. “That’s the best week of the year, sometime in May. Ropin, wrestlin the calves. I could teach you a thing or two.”

“Sure,” he says.

Flo’s in the kitchen now an’ she asks Regent, “You know that’s when they castrate the steers?”

Argent an’ Lisa make faces, but Regent says, “So?”

“You raised calves on your ranch, Flo?” I say.

“We did. It was a small operation, and then my dad drank it all away,” she says. “What about you?”

“Small ranch, near the Utah border,” I say. I’m not goin a bring up what happened to my parents. “You think Regent is crazy?”

“Starting with the rodeoing,” she says. “But he’s always wanted to be a cowboy, since the day he was born.”

I look over at Francine, an’ she don’t look too happy.

Lisa gets to talkin about their farm, an’ then they serve meatloaf, mashed potatoes and carrots and parsnips. Lisa’s says she’s already missin Regent’s help on their farm, an’ now Argent’ll be goin away to college in the fall.

“Where do you think you’ll go?” Francine asks.

“Michigan, Indiana or Boston,” he says.

“Why so far?” Francine asks.

“It’s not Wyoming,” Argent says.

“Neither is Montana or Colorado, and they’re a lot closer,” Lisa says.

“Too close,” Argent says. “Anyway, their music programs suck.”

“You remember to find out about those scholarships,” Lisa says.

After supper, Lisa, Francine an’ the boys go into the living room to play Trivial Pursuit. I stay in the kitchen to help Flo clean up.

“I talked to him last night,” I say.

“And?”

“An’ I think we’re ready to start back up, least I hope so.”

“I sure hope it works out for you.”
“I’m goin over there after this.”

“That sounds hopeful.”

“That sounds hopeful.”

“Thank you,” I say. This is so strange, havin a woman friend I talk to about this stuff.

“Hey, call me some time and we’ll get together for a beer or a coffee,” Flo says.

I don’t know about that. “What if she answers?” I say.

“You’re afraid of her?”

“I guess.”

“I’ll call you,” Flo says. “She’s a handful, but she doesn’t mean any harm.”

After we finish up in the kitchen, I go into the living room to thank Lisa and let her know I’m leavin.

“You’re coming here for Christmas Eve,” she says.

“I’ll have to let you know,” I say. “See what my girls are doin.”

“You and your man,” she says.

“Don’t know what he’s doin neither.” Goddamn, it sounds strange to be talkin like this, like we’re a regular couple.

“Just us and Francine and you,” Lisa says. “It’ll be cozy.”

“Ma!” Regent says. “He said he’ll let you know!”

When I finally get outta there an’ into my truck, I’m so glad to be on my way to Chuck’s that my dick gets hard just thinkin about it. Like when I used a meet up with Jack, I’d be hard probly the last hour a the ride.
It’s almost 9 when I hear his knock at the door.

He’s standing there holding his hands out, palms up. It’s like he’s surrendering himself, which he damn well should be doing, and signing a peace treaty. I’ve never seen him vulnerable like this and I feel my heart jump and tears come to my eyes.

I walk right into his arms and we hug, hard, then he’s kissing my lips, neck, ears. I’ve got my eyes closed because I don’t want him to see tears.

He says into my ear, “I was a asshole, wasn’t I?” I can’t help it, I’m crying for real now.

When I can talk again, I say, “A real fucking asshole.”

He comes in and closes the door. “Well, I’m acceptin your conditions. So we’re done talkin now?”

“Commitments, not conditions,” I say. “We’re done talking for now anyhow.”

Next thing I know, he’s tearing off my shirt, luckily one with pearl snaps, and kissing my neck and shoulders and trying to put his hand down the back of my jeans. They’re too tight for that, so he does his quick-action thing with my belt and fly and then reaches his big hands around, grabbing my butt cheeks and pushing into me.

“I’d tell him to slow down, but I don’t want him to.

He’s kissing me and backing me up until we get to the bar between the kitchen and dining room, and then he turns me around and shoves me against a barstool and pulls my jeans down to the ankles.

“Wait here,” he says, and I feel ridiculous, but I wait. He dashes upstairs and comes back with the K-Y jelly. But before he puts it on, he moves me further out from the barstool so I’m just leaning my elbows on it, and he starts licking his way down my back and right into the butt crease. He pulls apart the cheeks and spits onto my asshole and then he’s licking all around and even inside.

“I’d seen this in the “Joy of Gay Sex,” which he doesn’t even know I have. It’s called rimming. But I’ve never felt anything like it, and I don’t think I’ve seen him this wild, not even that first time. It’s great to know he has more tricks up his sleeve. I’m thinking there’s only one place he could have learned all this – Jack.

While he’s flicking his tongue all around and in there, he reaches around and takes my dick in hand for a few pulls. “You ready?” he growls. He’s still dressed.

I’m enjoying the rimjob a lot, but I say, “You know I am.”

He opens his jeans and shoves them down, then slicks me up and himself too and he shoves in, and we’re as loud as we want to be. Usually he wants to jack me off when he’s in me, but this time he lets me keep my hand on my dick, while his hands are gripping my hips, and he says, “You tell me when, I can go any time.”
“Now!” I say, and he puts in two more thrusts and then we both yell and go off at just about the same time. He stays in me a few seconds, and then he pulls out slowly and staggers backward until he hits a dining room chair.

So we’re both standing there, jeans around our ankles, dicks spent, and we start laughing. Then he comes back and takes my face in his hands and kisses my lips.

“So you forgive me?” he whispers in my ear.

“Yes,” I whisper back.

*****

After we get dressed and clean up, I get us two bottles of beer from the fridge, and we sit down at the kitchen table. I tell him I have something to show him, and I go in the den and get the magazine Louis left behind when they visited at Thanksgiving.

I hand it to him.

“Rural Gays?” he reads from the cover. “What is this ‘The Advocate’ anyways? Who’s this guy?” He’s staring at the cover photo of a hot blond, shirtless under a black leather jacket, with a deep blue sky backdrop.

“It’s a gay magazine out of Los Angeles,” I say. “Look inside. There’s an article about a couple of guys in the Cascade mountains and another one about two lesbians who own a dude ranch in Montana that serves gay people.” I don’t mention the one about “Radical Fairies” in Tennessee.

He keeps staring at the cover.

“Open it,” I say. “I think you’ll find it very interesting.”

“Whyzat?” he says, but he opens it anyway, and starts paging through. There’s nothing too shocking in the first section, besides some ads showing shirtless men. Then he comes to the pink Classifieds section, to a page with heading “Personals” on one side and an ad for a VHS tape with a photo of a young man reclining, shirtless, with a “come hither” look.

“I cain’t read a goddamn thing without my readin glasses anyways,” he says, closing the magazine.

“Why don’t you take it home and read it there?” I suggest.

“What, an’ let Francine see it?”

“Wait,” I say. I go to the den and get the latest Riverton Ranger newspaper.

I come back and tuck the magazine into the newspaper so it can’t be seen.

“I’d like you to at least read the one about the mountain men,” I say.

He shoots me a look that I interpret as “I thought I told you not to talk about that shit,” but all he says is, “If you say so.” I like that he’s trying to please me.

He stands up. “It’s late. I gotta go.”

There’s something else I want to ask him. “Hey, can you get off work next weekend?”

“Probly could,” he says. “What was you thinkin about?”
“That trip into the mountains we never took,” I say. “We could go to Kerby’s cabin up near Dubois. Very rustic. I think you’ll like it.”

“OK, I’ll see if I can do it.”

I make sure he takes the newspaper with him.

*****

After he leaves, I pour myself a glass of brandy.

I’m wondering if I’m weak for taking him back, or if I’m strong for standing up to his bullshit. Not for the first time, I wonder how Jack could have put up with him – 20 years of almost having Ennis, but without a hope for a real commitment.

Just getting him to say he won’t fuck a woman was a such a challenge that I know it’s going to be a very long time before I can tell him what I really want.

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Friday, Dec. 14

I take the day off work and go shopping for supplies at the grocery store, J.C. Penney and Wind River Outfitters. I know the cabin is rustic, but I still want to be comfortable.

Ennis drives up at 6:30 and parks at my house, and we load Bluebelle and my gelding, Geste, into my trailer, and get on the road by 7. Kerby’s cabin’s only an hour from Riverton, but a world away.

Once we’re on the road, I ask him if he’s had a chance to read the magazine I gave him.

“Read some,” he says.

“And?” I ask when it’s clear he’s not saying anything more.

“An’, well.”

“I read most of it,” I say. “Anything surprise you?”

“Pert near ever’thing.”

“Like?”

“Like gay porn, Chuck? Gay dude ranches? Lonely heart ads?”

“Seemed to me a lot of guys were looking for cowboys,” I say, and I give him a little punch on the arm.

“Not to mention masculine guys, an’ boyish guys, an’ straight-actin an’ everything in between,” he says. “You think you’d ever get together with a guy that way?”

Seems like he read pretty thoroughly. “I hope I wouldn’t need to,” I say. “I’ve got my own cowboy right here.”

Now he punches me, but I keep my eyes on the road.

“What else did you read?” I ask.
“Well, looks like they’re findin a vaccine for that AIDS thing,” he says. “An’ that Kennedy brother that’s still alive says queers should vote for the Democrats. An’ it said there’s a gay an’ lesbian center in Denver, an’ 16 gay bars. Sixteen? How can that be?”

“Denver’s a big city,” I say. “You didn’t vote Democrat?”

“Didn’t vote. Never have.”

I open my mouth to say something, but I think twice and clamp it shut. I don’t ever want to shame him or imply he’s not smart enough, because he is smart enough and way more than that.

“What about the porn?” I say. “You know I have some magazines I got at that bookstore in Fort Collins?”

“You got ‘em with you?”

I like his enthusiasm, and I feel my dick twitch. “No, they’re at home. Maybe we could take a look at them sometime, and I could order some videos.”

“Only time I seen porn was one time with K.E. at a X-rated place in Cheyenne,” he says. “I guess the queer stuff is somethin else altogether.”

I reach over to touch his groin, and I find out he’s thinking the same way I am before he bats my hand away and tells me to stop foolin.

*****

The first thing we do when we get to the cabin is bring in firewood and get the fire going. Then we feed and picket the horses and bring in our gear in from the truck. I brought my guitar, and I see Ennis eying it.

“Yes, I am gonna get you singing,” I say.

He bakes cornbread from a mix and reheats chili he’d made yesterday. By the time we finish eating, the cabin’s finally warm enough not to see our breath. The stove and the fireplace in the main room are the only sources of heat.

We settle on a couch by the fire with our beers, and I take out a bottle of brandy. He says he’ll take a glass, but only one.

I ask him if he’s got plans for Christmas and New Year’s.

“Workin both days,” he says. “Probly go to Flo an’ Lisa’s on Christmas Eve – you’re invited, by the way. Maybe get together with my girls the day after.”

“I’ll probably spend Christmas Eve at my sister’s like we did when my mother was alive,” I tell him. “Maybe you and me could have Christmas dinner and spend the night together, just the two of us?”

He cocks his head at me. “Spend the night?”

“OK, the evening.”

“Don’t see why not,” he says. “It’ll have to be at the ranch ’cause I’ll be on call.”

“On New Year’s Eve, my band’ll be playing at my buddy Kent’s house,” I say. “We do it every
year. Queenie’ll probably be there with her new boyfriend.”

He nods, but doesn’t respond.

“I’d like you to come,” I tell him.

He takes a deep breath and lets out a sigh. “Now Chuck, you know I ain’t goin a do that.”

“Why not?” I ask, but I know damn well why not.

“Have you lost your fuckin mind?”

“I guess so.” I try to keep it light, but it hurts, even though I know he’s right. “What I meant was, I’d like it if we could be like other couples and just go places together.”

He’s shaking his head. “First, we ain’t nothin like other couples,” he says, “an’ I’d hesitate to even call us a couple. Second, remember that thing I told you about bein an intro-vert? It ain’t like I’m out there lookin for parties to go to.”

“You’re right,” I say. I’m not going to argue the couple thing, because words don’t really matter as long as I have him here with me, right? But I do wonder what he meant.

We’re quiet for a while, watching the fire, and then he says glumly, “Jack an’ me, we never spent not one holiday together other’n those Monday long-weekend holidays.”

I scoot closer and put my arm around his shoulders. “You know you can talk about Jack any time. I won’t take offense.”

He glances at me and goes on talking. “I take it back. We musta spent the one Fourth of July together up on the mountain that first summer.”

I waggle my eyebrows. “I bet there were fireworks.”

“We did see a few goin off on the ranches way down there,” he says, and he’s got that shy smile that I just fucking love because he knows I meant another kind of fireworks.

He grabs my hand and kisses the palm. “I’ll never get over him, but that don’t mean I ain’t happy with you.”

My heart is melting to hear such a thing from him. Jesus Christ, he’s full of surprises.

I get up and pour myself another brandy. I look over to see if he wants more, but he shakes his head.

I sit back down and lean on his shoulder. He turns and kisses my ear.

I put one hand on the side of his face and feel each feature – hair, ear, forehead, eyebrows, nose, cheeks, jawbone, mouth. Just this, I’m thinking. This is all I need.

He grabs my hand and sucks my thumb into his mouth, then pulls it out and flickers his tongue across the tip, then sucks it again.

“Oh my God,” I say.

He takes my thumb out and growls into my ear, “What do you want right now?”
“Anything?”

“Almost anything.”

“I want you to strip for me.”

He pulls back and looks at me cock-eyed. “The hell?”

“Yes, Ennis. Strip for me.”

He stands up and says, “Let’s make ourselves a bed out here by the by the fire.” The bedroom with two bunk beds has no heat source at all.

I take out a bedroll I’d washed earlier that week and we spread it on the floor, and over it, we put my brand new double-wide sleeping bag and open it out. I lie down on the impromptu bed while he takes out two pillows and puts on fresh pillowcases. He takes a tube of lube from his rucksack and tosses it on the bed, then lies down next to me and props himself up by his elbow. We’re both fully clothed.

He kisses me and starts to unbutton my shirt slowly, one button at a time, then opens my belt and jeans button, and pulls down the fly. He puts his hand on my briefs, feels my hard cock and just holds his hand there while we kiss some more.

“Now strip for me,” I say.

“Shit, I was hopin you might a forgot,” he says, but he gets up to make sure the door is locked and bolted, and all the drapes closed. Even though there’s no other cabin for miles around.

I prop myself up on one elbow and watch him.

He goes and sits on the couch and slowly takes off each sock, and to my surprise, twirls it before letting it fly. I laugh, all the more so because he’s about the least likely guy you could ever imagine acting campy like this.

He stands up and looks down at me, trying to look serious. He undoes the top button on his shirt very slowly, licking his lips. Then the next button, while he rubs his own crotch and sways his pelvis into his hand.

Again I’m laughing and just staring at him like I don’t even know him, because even though I asked him to strip, I hadn’t imagined anything like this.

He opens the next shirt button very slowly, and then the cuff buttons. After the next button, he starts to pull his shirt out of his jeans inch-by-inch, and again licks his lips and rubs his crotch and sways his hips.

“Very nice,” I say, putting my hand on my own bulging groin.

He opens the last two buttons of his shirt, and then takes it off and twirls it in the air before letting it go. Then he hugs himself and turns his back so it looks like someone else is holding him, just like we used to do in eighth grade or so, and sways some more.

When he turns back, he’s rubbing one hand on his groin and using his other thumb to flick his right nipple. Then he opens his belt, twirls and throws it, then unbuttons his jeans, something he usually makes very quick work of. He rubs himself again. By now I’m panting and my dick is begging to be set free.
Finally, he unzips his fly and gives his jeans a little tug, and they fall to the floor, revealing that he’s got no underwear on, and that big, beautiful hard-on. He takes it in his hand and spreads the pre-cum around the tip while he’s licking his lips.

“What now?” he says.

“Now I want you to fuck me,” I say. “Fuck me like you fucked that waitress.”

He looks confused for a second. “You mean face-to-face?”

“Yeah.”

He gets on his knees and pulls my jeans and underwear off, then parts my legs, pours lube on his hand and spreads it around my hole. Finally, he gently forces two fingers inside. Then he spreads some lube on his dick and spits into his hand and spreads it.

He slings my legs over his shoulders, and he’s teasing me with his dick, rubbing but not trying to shove in.

This is excruciating. “Come on Ennis, you’re killing me,” I say.

He moans and finally moves in and starts pumping. My cock is about to explode, but he’s going slower than he’s ever done, so I don’t grab myself just yet.

He leans over and kisses my lips, my cheek, my neck. Then he looks me in the eye and the look is pure sex. “Was that strippin what you was lookin for?” he rumbles.

“Way more,” I say.

He puts his hand loosely around my dick and his strokes start slow and loose, but as his thrusts get faster, he tightens his fist and picks up the speed. He’s grimacing and I must be too. Finally, he’s yelling, “Oh, Jesus, god, Chuck!” and he explodes inside me. That puts me over the top just a few seconds later.

He pulls out, and then lies down beside me.

He whispers in my ear, “Thank you,” and drapes his hand over me. I say, “Thank you,” but I think he’s already asleep.

I lie there next to him for a while watching the fire and watching his face. I love every wrinkle, every imperfection, every gray hair on his head. Mostly I like making him smile and laugh.

Eventually I get up, put a blanket over him, clean up the kitchen, change into my pajamas and climb in next to him so that he’s spooned up behind me.

If only I could do this every night. Go to sleep with Ennis, wake up with him.

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Saturday, Dec. 15

After an early breakfast, we saddle the horses and ride into the hills behind the cabin. It’s cold and clear, feels like the temperature is in the 20s.

I packed a lunch of ham sandwiches and a Thermos of coffee, which we stop and eat, staying on the horses. After lunch we go higher, past the snow line, neither of us saying much. It’s a postcard-
beautiful winter scene. Ennis had packed his shotgun in the saddle holster, but there’s no signs of elk or anything else. After an hour or so, we turn back.

*****

Ennis is lighting the fire while I’m making hot chocolate. It’s like a perfect domestic scene, and I feel like this whole thing is a dream.

Soon enough, we’re at it again on the bedroll, happy and mostly quiet. I feel the most relaxed with Ennis I ever have.

He insists on cooking – steaks, baked potatoes and Brussels sprouts, while I’m paging through old horse magazines Kerby left.

“I’m probably going to the stock show in Denver in January,” I say.

“Denver,” he says, like the one word signifies so much else.

“I mean, just to the show,” I say. “I’m gonna meet with Kerby and deliver two of the Quarter Horses to him, and I’m gonna man the Bureau’s booth for a while so I can expense the trip. You could come too.”

He grunts and says, “We’ll see about that.”

*****

After supper, we check on the horses and bring in more firewood.

We sit on the couch with our beers and talk about our daughters and ex-wives and siblings.

Ennis says he’s pretty sure Regent La Rocque is about to propose to Francine, and he doesn’t think the answer will be yes.

I tell him what Julie told me about Queenie – that her and her lawyer boyfriend she just met are already talking about getting married, and if she does we’ll sell the house and I’ll get half the money.

“You know, when Alma’n me split, I left her with a lot a debts,” he says. “Then the child support started. All my life, I never had a dime I didn’t owe someone, until just about a year ago.”

I know he’s just stating facts rather than looking for pity, but it has to be painful for him to talk about.

“But you’re saving money now?” I ask.

“Kind a work I’m in, I best be savin,” he says. “An’ that truck’s ready to go any time.”

“You’re going to wait her out?” I ask. I’ve got money saved too, from staying at Kerby’s all this time and not paying rent. But I know enough not to say anything that would hint at us putting our savings together someday.

“What I always do,” he says. “No point buyin a new truck when this one’s got a few miles left. Next time there’s a fix costs more’n $200 or so, I’ll ditch her.”

*****
I get out my guitar and play some Ian Tyson cowboy songs that Ennis doesn’t know, but he seems to like them. Then I move into Christmas carols, and pretty soon he’s singing too. I play “Blue Christmas,” which he sings Elvis-style.

He’s so good, and so out-of-character that my heart is beating fast and I feel like a teeny-bopper at a pop concert. We sing some more cowboy songs – “Mammas Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys” and then “Jambalaya,” whooping it up at the line “Pick guitar, fill fruit jar and be gay-o,” and then Ennis requests “Streets of Laredo” with the line “Once in the saddle we used to go gay,” and we laugh until tears come.

“Gay cowboys,” I say, and that gets the laughter going again.

Then Ennis wipes at one of his eyes and says, “If Jack could see me now …”

“What would he say?”

“I dunno … he could really make me laugh.” He takes a swig of beer and tries to look serious, then bursts out laughing again.

God, I love to see him like this, and I’m pretty sure it was Jack who brought this side out of him, and I’m grateful.

“Ennis, can I ask you something?” I ask.

“Sure.”

“How do you feel about me, about us?”

He glances at me, then looks down, clasps his hands together, shifts in his seat, unclasps. He opens his mouth and closes it.

And finally, “Chuck? Cain’t we just … ? You know I don’t wanna talk about that stuff.”

As if I haven’t already gone to far, “You know how I feel about you, don’t you?”

He grunts and purses his lips. But then he walks over and takes the guitar out of my hands and kisses me on the lips, then down the neck, and starts opening the buttons of my shirt. And so it goes.

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Sunday, Dec. 16

We get back to the Flying W at 4, while it’s still light out. Ennis takes Bluebelle out of my horse trailer and puts her in his own, and he’s about to get into his truck.

“Ennis?” I say. “I’ll have you know, this was the best weekend of my life.”

He cracks a smile. “Not the one at Stoutamire’s cabin, huh? After all the work I put into it?”

“Nah,” I say. “We hardly knew each other then.” And it’s true. I feel like I’ve just started peeling away his layers.

We hug for a second, and then he’s gone.

*****
Julie calls at about 7, and tells me she’ll be spending Christmas Day with Queenie, the boyfriend and Queenie’s parents. She already met the man when she was here for Thanksgiving and she reported that he was just OK, kind of an odd duck, but he treated Queenie well enough.

“Everything back to normal with Ennis?” she asks.

“Better than that,” I say.

She squeals, “Good for you, Daddy!”

Then she tells me about her English professor who lives with a female math professor and makes no secret of it.

“Do you think you and Ennis would ever move in together?” she asks.

And have to be honest. “Not if he’s got a say in it.”
Sunday, Dec. 16, 1984

When I get home, Francine an’ Regent are here makin’ supper. Francine tells me her an’ Junior cooked up a whole plan to have a early Christmas dinner at Junior’s next Sunday, ‘cause they’ll both be busy on Christmas Eve an’ Day.

I say it’s a nice idea, but Stiv an’ Tex’ll both be travelin, an’ Jannelle always wants someone on call since Stoutamire’s setback with his heart.

“You give them Junior’s number,” Francine says. “It’s only 15 minutes away.”

I guess she’s right, an’ I should be happy to be gettin any kind a invitation, after I didn’t bother seein my girls at all last Christmas.

Regent says, “My ma was hoping you’d come over to our place on Christmas Eve.”

“I’ll see if I can,” I say. I’m pretty sure I will. I just hope this isn’t shaping up to be another Thanksgiving, too many plans an’ too many people.

I go to bed early ‘cause I’m tired from the weekend, but then I’m up half the night frettin about the weekend I just had with Chuck. What’s botherin me is what he’s goin a think a me after I made such a damn fool a myself strippin off my clothes off like that.

Jack did it the one time when we was up there in the Absarokas in September one a the later years, an’ it was hot out for once, even at night. He said he’d seen it in a movie, an’ even then I remember thinkin maybe he seen it in some honky tonk in one a them cities he was always travelin to, an’ maybe the stripper wasn’t a woman neither. His moves an’ the teasin look on his face made me so hot my skin was burnin.

So when Chuck asked for it, I went ahead ‘cause I knew how from Jack, an’ the thing I wanted most this weekend was to make Chuck happy an’ make it up to him.

But now … now I’m thinkin what if he was jokin, an’ he’s laughin about it now. Jesusfuckinchrist. I hope to god he never makes mention of it again.

Monday, Dec. 17, 1984

Jannelle gives me a $200 Christmas bonus, an’ $100 each for Tex an’ Stiv. So I guess the ranch is doin better’n ever, ‘cause last year I only got $50, an’ I invested the whole thing in Old Rose whiskey.

I thank her an’ the old man, an’ they say I deserved it. For what, I cain’t say I know. For showin up to work? I’d thought $50 would cover that. This $200 is another story, but I’m not goin a look a gift horse in the mouth, like my ma used a say.

We’re doin the schedule for the next three weeks ‘cause a the holidays comin up. I tell ‘em that Stiv’ll be off after his Friday shift an’ Tex’ll be off after Saturday, an’ I’ll cover all the shifts until December 26.
Jannelle shakes her head. “And when are you going to celebrate Christmas, Ennis?”

“Ma’am?” I say.

She looks at me with those eyes like I’m an orphaned puppy. “You’ll be spending some time with your girls, won’t you?”

“Yes, Ma’am. In Riverton, after work on Sunday an’ Monday. I’ll give you their phone numbers so you can reach me if you need to.”

She says no, their son Dave will be comin in on the 23rd, an’ he can help his dad if anything comes up after my shift’s over.

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Friday, Dec. 21

I take off work early an’ head over to Higgins’ gift shop in Lander to buy Christmas presents. I got a long list this year. Besides Junior an’ Francine, there’s Bernadette, who’s comin over to my house with Tex for supper tonight; Flo an’ Lisa, where I’m goin for Christmas Eve; never mind Curt an’ Regent, who I don’t think I’ll get anything for, an’ Chuck.

While Linda’s helpin out another customer, I’m lookin at stained glass mobiles and window hangins.

“Ennis, honey, where were ya last year?” she asks as soon as the others have gone. “I don’t think I’ve seen you since you come in for your postcard. What did you end up givin your girls last year?”

“I, uh … ” No good way to tell her about last year, sendin checks an’ not even seein the girls.

“So what’s new?” she asks.

“Uh, Junior got married an’ Francine took up with a rodeo cowboy,” I say, glad enough to change the subject.

“Well, how about something for Junior’s home, and something in turquoise an’ silver for that little Francie? How old is she now?”

“About to turn 19.”

Linda lets out a little whistle. “Now look at these earrings. Her ears are pierced like Junior, right?” Linda’s the one who talked me into buyin the bluebird earrings that were such a big hit with Junior a few years ago.

“I’m pretty sure.”

“So you like these?” She’s got a pair a turquoise earrings that dangle. “And there’s a matching necklace.”

“Both,” I say. Probly the first time in my life I said yes before lookin at a price tag.

“OK, an’ for Junior? You were lookin at the stained glass. How about these birds?” She shows me a round window hangin with a red bird an’ a yellow one, something like the hangin that Bernadette put up in my old trailer.

“Good. An’ I’ll take that too.” I’m pointin to a hangin mobile with glass crystals. That’s for
“An’ a few more,” I say. “My, uh, sister an’ a buddy a mine.” Not my sister, but how can I explain Flo an’ Lisa?

“What does your sister like?” Linda asks.

“She’s arty.” Of course, she works in a gift shop herself. I don’t really know how arty Flo an’ Lisa are.

“Is she spiritual? I have these.” An’ she shows me a little fountain with water runnin through it; a chime with a mallet that she shows me how to use; an’ a tray a sand with a little rake. I cain’t see the point a none of it, but the fountain’s pretty enough. I’m picturin that for Flo.

“Fountain’s OK,” I say. “You got anything with roosters?”

“Oh yeah, roosters are still in.” She shows me some ceramic stuff.

“This one’s all right,” I say. It’s a pitcher shaped like a rooster.


“Yeah, he, uh, he did me a favor, so I want a thank him.” I’m not lyin neither.

“Guys are tougher, unless you know what they need,” she says. “You don’t want a give ‘em anything too personal. Now, everyone needs a calendar, right?” She’s got landscapes an’ dogs an’ cats an’ New York City, but none a that seems right.

“They give ‘em away free at the hardware store anyways,” I say.

“OK, does he have a VCR, or a betamax?”

“I think he’s gettin one,” I say. “A VCR.”

“Well, I have a few movie collections here … classics, Westerns, comedies …”

“Westerns would be good.”

She grabs a box with four video cassettes in it. “Will that be all?”

“How about a card?” I’m goin a send it to Jack’s ma, even knowin it’ll be too late, ‘cause she sent me one.

The whole thing comes up to nearly as much as I made in a week in my old ranch hand job.

Linda wraps up the gifts an’ I walk outta there feelin good for spendin a little money, for once.

*****

Tex an’ Bernadette are over here – she brought a beef casserole with crust on top an’ a pound cake with chocolate sauce for dessert. We’re eatin that an’ havin a coffee. I say, “Wait here a minute,” an’ I go get the gift.

Well, she loves it. “You picked this out yourself?” she asks holdin it up so the crystals reflect the light.
I say I had some help, tell her about Linda Higgins’s shop. I get out cards and we get to playin pinochle.

Then there’s a knock on the door. Shit, didn’t I tell Chuck I’d be havin people over tonight? An’ don’t he know better than to surprise me? But I realize Tex’s truck is parked over near the horse stables, not here, an’ maybe I didn’t tell him.

I open the door an’ it’s him all right. I step back so he can see in, see that someone’s here.

“C’mon in,” I say. I know how nervous my voice must sound. “We’re playin cards. You want a beer?”

He comes in. He’s already met Tex an’ Bernadette, so we settle in for four-person pinochle an’ play a few hands. She’s always got stories about her Indian grandmother, where they’re goin a go for Christmas, an’ her brothers an’ uncles an’ aunts.

It’s after 10 by the time they say they better be goin. Tex’ll be workin in the morning, an’ then they’ll be off to the reservation.

Once they’re gone, I ask Chuck, “So what’s this all about?”

“Sorry, Ennis,” he says. “I should have called. There’s supposed to be a lot of snow Sunday, so I’m leaving for Laramie tomorrow, and I wanted to see you tonight.”

My first thought is – weak of him, not bein able to wait a few days. But the truth is, I’m happy enough to see him myself, an’ I got no call to say another man’s weak when I got the same thing goin on myself.

“You’re lucky Francine’s over in Riverton tonight,” I say. “C’m’ere now.”

He feels good in my arms, an’ his hair smells nice, an’ I’m won over, like usual.

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Sunday Dec. 23

Junior an’ Francine go all out, cookin baked ham, sweet potatoes an’ green bean casserole an’ homemade coleslaw.

I’m watchin football with Curt an’ Regent.

Junior’s got the table set with candles an’ pine branches an’ even crystal wine glasses she got for a wedding gift. After supper, the boys clean up, won’t let me help ‘em.

The girls get me to open a present from them first – a electric coffee maker. They show me how to use it, an’ then we sit down with our mugs a coffee an’ pour some brandy in that her an’ Curt brought.

Junior’s sittin next to me, an’ she leans over an’ says, real quiet, “This is so nice, isn’t it Daddy?” I nod an’ muss up her hair.

Then the girls open their gifts from me, an they ooh an’ aah over them, all thanks to Linda.

They’ve got another present for me in a box, an’ I’m thinking this will be the usual shirts an’ gloves from my good practical girls.
Instead, I open the box an’ there’s a brown leather jacket, zip-up with pockets.

I shake my head. “This is too much.” I cain’t imagine what it must a cost.

“Daddy, that old corduroy jacket is about to fall off your shoulders,” Junior says.

But this ain’t no replacement for a work jacket. “What, you want me to wear this to work?”

“No, but when you go out,” she says. She looks like she’s askin a question, so I smile to show it’s all right.

“I’ll be proud to wear it,” I say, even though I don’t know where they think I’ll be goin. “Thank you girls.”

After the boys are done cleanin’ up, Francine’s got a little surprise. She gets out a guitar an’ plays Christmas songs while her an’ Regent sing. Her guitar playin is pretty basic compared to Chuck, but it’s good enough. With the snow fallin outside, it’s like we’re in some kind a Christmas movie.

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Monday Dec. 24

Stoutamire told me to finish up work by 4 an’ take the night off. I drive Francine over to Flo an’ Lisa’s in my truck ‘cause she don’t wanna drive in the snow, an’ she says she’ll stay over there an’ Regent’ll take her over to her ma’s tomorrow.

Lisa made us a meat pie she calls “tourtiere,” says it’s a French Canadian tradition she picked up from her husband. There’s pickled herring too, an’ Flo says it’s from her family’s German traditions. There’s all kinds a other food an’ probly a dozen kinds a cookies for dessert.

“You have any Christmas traditions, Ennis?” Lisa asks.

“Not so much,” I say, ‘cause I don’t remember any.

“Really? No traditions?”

I look at Flo.

“Feel free to tell her to shut up,” Flo says. “Leave him alone, Lisa.”

“What about your young man?” Lisa asks. “Where’s he tonight?”

“MA!” Regent yells.

“I’m just trying to get him to talk,” Lisa says.

“He’ll talk when he has something to say,” Flo says.

That makes me crack a smile, an’ I’m grateful to Flo. After that Lisa settles down.

After supper, there’s tree decoratin an’ singin French and German Christmas carols while Lisa plays piano an’ Argent plays flute. Of course I don’t sing, Flo neither, but I am enjoyin myself, even though I still think there’s somethin a little off about a pair a lesbians livin in a house with two kids.

When I see Flo goin back into the kitchen, I follow her to help clean up.
“Everything OK, Ennis?” she asks.

“Real good. What about you? You hear from that daughter a yours?”

“I left a message. I’m not holding my breath.”

“Sorry to hear it.”


After the clean-up, we sit in the living room to open gifts. Lisa an’ Flo both like what I got ‘em. Flo says she’ll put the fountain in the guest room an’ use it for meditatin. They give me a big basket with a tablecloth an’ napkins an’ all kinds a jams an’ honey. There’s apples from their trees in there too, an’ a box a home-made biscuits, an’ even a chicken pot pie. Real nice.

Francine got Regent some fancy rodeo shirt an’ chaps. He gets up an’ says Francine’s present is in the room behind the kitchen, an’ can she go back there with him. Flo an’ Lisa look at each other.

When they’re gone, Lisa says, “I think I might know what it is about.” I think I know too.

Flo says, “Well, don’t spoil the surprise.”

We’re waitin for quite a while, Lisa tellin us stories about spendin Christmases with her husband an’ his French Canadian family in New Hampshire. Argent says all he remembers of his daddy was singin the French Christmas carols on probly his last Christmas. He’s next to Lisa on the couch. She hugs him, an’ he don’t fight her off.

Finally, Francine an’ Regent come back, an’ I can see right away it ain’t good. He looks like he might a been cryin, an’ she looks like she seen a ghost.

She walks right over to me an’ says so only I can hear her, “Daddy, can you take me home?”

I say of course, an’ I get up. We pack up our presents an’ she gets her suitcase an’ we say our thank yous. Lisa an’ Flo are real quiet, an’ Regent’s already disappeared somewhere.

*****

“He proposed to me an’ I said no,” Francine says as soon as we’re in the truck. No surprise there.

“It’s OK, Honey,” I say. “No rule says you gotta say ‘yes’ just ‘cause someone asks.”

“It was such a surprise, Daddy!” she says. “We were going out and having fun, and I thought we’d go rodeo’ing together next summer, and all of a sudden he springs this on me. I don’t want to be some ranch wife!”

“That’s OK,” I say.

“So you’re not mad I said ‘no’?”

I look over at her. “Why’d I be mad?”

“I thought you’d say he was perfect for me.”

“No, Darlin. It ain’t up to me no-how.”

“Well, Mama’ll be happy anyways,” she says. “She never liked him in the first place, and she
always said he was too old for me.”

I almost tell her that sometimes parents are right, but I stop myself. Better she finds out for herself.

When we get home, she makes some kind a tea that helps you sleep – vile stuff if you ask me – an’ tells me all the things she wants to do, startin with quittin college an’ movin to New York.

I tell her I wish she’d finish college, an’ New York’s a big move, an’ I’d miss her.

She says where else is she goin a go if she wants to sing for a livin, an’ I got no idea. All I know is, she needs to run free.

“You’re a wild mustang,” I say. “It ain’t your time to settle down.”

“Thanks for seeing it my way,” she says. She gets up an’ hugs me.

It’s nice talkin to her like this, even if it ain’t so much like a fairy tale Christmas tonight.

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Christmas Day

Bridget calls at 6 on Christmas morning an’ says K.E. is spendin Christmas with the ex-wife Patti an’ the kids. I say good for him, keep him outta trouble.

“Ennis, he knows,” she says.

“Knows what?”

“About you. Marty ran into his girl at U-W an’ he spilled the beans, an’ then she called her dad to tell him.”

“For Christ’sake, Bridget! I thought you said your boy didn’t have no clue.” That fuckin’ Thanksgiving weekend just won’t end.

“Well, what’s K.E. goin a do about it anyways Ennis? Beat you up? You been kickin’ his ass since you was 15. Anyways, how are things goin with you an’ Chuck? He take you back?”

I say yes, but I had to sell my soul, an’ she laughs an’ tells me more about my great-niece who’s now 6 months old.

After we hang up, I think maybe I won’t call K.E. today.

Jack’s ma’s card said her an’ the old man would be at her brother Harold’s in Gillette for Christmas Day, so I’ll call her later in the week.

*****

I finish my work by 4, then go in to clean the house an’ get ready for Chuck. Stoutamire’s got quite a few cars parked over there, an’ I’m thinkin he’s got the whole clan gathered. Francine’s stayin over at her ma’s or at Junior’s.

Just about 5, I hear a knock on the door – barely hear it ‘cause the wind is howlin.

I throw the door open, thinkin Chuck’s right on time. But it’s Dave Stoutamire and his buddy Andrew.
“Hey Ennis, can we come in?” Dave asks.

“Of course.” I’m wonderin what this could be about.

The boys step in an’ I close the door an’ wave ‘em to the couch.

“You want a beer or somethin’?”

“No thanks,” Dave says. “We’re here for just a minute. You by yourself?”

“Uh …” I don’t wanna tell ‘em too much.

“My mom asked us to swing by and see if you had any dinner plans.” So she wouldn’t let it go.

“Uh, that’s real nice a her, but like I told ‘em yesterday at the meetin, I do got plans.”

“Your daughters?” Dave asks. Just what Jannelle had asked at the meetin, an’ I’d grumbled something back, not wantin to lie.

“Uh …”

“Well, she didn’t see any cars here, so she just wanted to invite you over for a drink or for dinner if you want.”

You have to drive partway off the main driveway to see if there’s anyone parked here or not. I like Jannelle, but I’m not likin I the buttin in.

“No, you tell her thanks, but I’m fine,” I say. It’s a funny conversation, so much bein said an’ not bein said. I know that they know what I know, an’ I could just come right out an’ tell ‘em what’s goin on, but I won’t.

Just then, another knock comes, an’ it’s gotta be Chuck, an’ there goes everything. Fuck.

I open up. He’s holdin two wrapped gifts – one big an’ one small – an’ a grocery bag. I step back so he can see the boys are here.

“Uh, hey Chuck, you know Dave and Andrew?”

“Hi guys,” he says, an’ he walks to the kitchen table to put down the things he brought.

“Oh, hi Chuck,” Dave says. I can see his eyes movin between Chuck an’ me. “We were just … hey Ennis, what if Andrew and me stop by for a drink later? Like around 9?”

“Well, uh,” I don’t know what to say, so I look at Chuck, but he’s just starin back at me.

“C’mon Ennis. They’ve got a houseful of my step-sisters and their husbands and kids over there, and it’s loud. No one’s gonna miss us.”

“Uh, OK …” I say. “Tell your folks thanks for the invite, an’ Merry Christmas.”

After they leave, I ask Chuck, “Was that OK?”

“Sure,” he says. “But Ennis, they’re gay, right? I’m not dreaming?”

I don’t want to be the one to “out” other people, but no use lyin. “You ain’t dreamin.”

“It’s my gaydar,” he says.
“What?”

“Just what it sounds like.”

He’s unpackin a whiskey bottle, so I say, “You take that back with you when you leave. I cain’t be left alone with it.”

“Tomorrow morning, right?”

“What?”

“When I leave?”

Part a me wants to say no, but hell, it’s Christmas. “Well, you know I gotta work tomorrow,” I say.

He kisses me on the cheek an’ says thanks. Then he tells me some news from Laramie – his older sister from California didn’t come – and says Queenie is now engaged to the lawyer. I tell him about Francine an’ Regent.

“Won’t that be awkward around here?” he asks.

But I tell him Regent’s goin back to college anyways, an’ Francine is sayin she’s movin to New York in a few months, whether or not that’s goin a happen. He says she reminds him a Julie, an’ he agrees she should sow her wild oats before settlin down to somethin like both of us did.

Supper’s goin a be the chicken pot pie I got from Flo ‘an Lisa, an’ some leftover side dishes. I set the oven to reheat the pie.

When I’m bendin over to put it in, Chuck moves in behind me, an’ right away I can feel his hard dick pressin on my ass. I get up an’ turn around.

He says into my ear, “I missed you, Cowboy. Can we get reacquainted before we start supper?”

“Don’t see why not,” I say, an’ we’re off to my bedroom.

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The potpie is delicious, an’ for dessert, we have a few cookies. I make coffee in my new contraption an’ pour a shot a brandy into each mug.

We take our coffees into the living room an’ sit on the couch, an’ then I go to Francine’s room to get his presents.

He wants me to open my presents first. He gives me a envelope, an’ in it is a certificate of completion for a shootin class at the Lander Firing Ranch. He says he’s now got a .38 in his bedside table.

“Well, I hope to god you never need it,” I say.

Next present is three books, all by a guy named Louis L’Amour.

“They’re Westerns,” he says. “I thought you’d like them.”

I tell him thanks, even though I don’t really know why he got ‘em. For years, I hadn’t read much at all ‘cause I needed readin glasses. But I read that whole Advocate magazine cover to cover, an’ at least I hadn’t forgotten how. I guess I’ll try these books, anyways they’re Westerns an’ they remind
Next I open the big box: A new leather belt, two pairs a Levi’s an’ two shirts, nice white ones with thin stripes. Under all that is a new canvas Carhartt jacket. Second time in my life that I remember getting a brand new jacket, an’ it’s just few days after the leather one from the girls.

Well, so much for not givin personal gifts. I don’t know how to take it. If it was fancy stuff, him tryin to dandy me up, I know exactly what I’d do. But everything he got is what I would a gotten myself, only new.

I say thank you, then ask, “You talked to my girls?”

Yeah, he knew they were getting me the leather jacket, an’ he knew I wouldn’t wear it for work.

“If you don’t like anything, or all of it, I can take it back,” he says.

But I’m goin a keep it. I remember Junior sayin one time that a gift reflects the giver and the receiver, maybe the time I gave her the bluebird earrings she liked so much. If I think about it that way, it’s like him sayin I’m OK the way I am, an’ who wouldn’t want a know that?

“No, everything’s fine,” I say. “You knew I wouldn’t wear them black shirts an’ black jeans like you, huh.”

“I can’t picture you dressed like me,” he says.

“Why you dress that way anyways?” I ask. I thought it a lot a times, just never had the opportunity to ask.

“You don’t like it?”

“Didn’t say that, just wonderin.”

“I guess it’s cause I don’t want to be just like everyone else,” he says. He reminds me so much a Jack sometimes that it hurts. Jack sayin he don’t give a flyin fuck. Me thinkin he damn well should.

“You don’t buy them pointy boots around here, do you?”

“No, I buy ‘em from a catalog.”

“So you really go outta your way not to look like everyone else.” I never knew if it was Lureen or Jack who went for them purple shirts an’ red vests, but I do know he cared how he looked. First time I seen him he was wearin brand new jeans an’ a new shirt to apply for a job as a sheep herder for Christ sake.


“Nope.” I want a tell him he looks real good to me, but I cain’t. “It’s just how you are,” I say. “Me, I’m always tryin not to stand out.”

“Well, you couldn’t hide from me,” he says, an’ he messes up my hair.

“Now you open up your present,” I say. I hand him the video movies. I can feel my face heat up from bein embarrassed that I didn’t get him something better, but there ain’t nothin for it now.

He likes ‘em well enough, says he’s goin a buy a video player sometime this week. If he’s disappointed I didn’t get something better, he’s doin a damn good job hidin it.
By the time Dave an’ Andrew get here at 9, all of us have had more’n a few drinks.

I invite ‘em to sit on the couch an’ I pull up a kitchen chair for Chuck an’ I’ll sit in my recliner. The youngsters sit just a few inches apart.

“I got beer, brandy or whiskey,” I say, an’ they all want whiskey, so I pour glasses for ‘em an’ get a beer for myself.

When I’m sittin down in my recliner, Dave says, “I guess you’re wondering what this is about.”

“Yeah, well,” I say.

“First, I wanted to thank you for not saying anything about that night,” he says.

I look over at Chuck, ‘cause I never told him about it.

“Anyway, I wanted to let you know my folks know about Andrew and me.”

“Really?” I say. I hope I don’t look like too much of an idiot, ‘cause he said it like it was no big deal.

“Yeah, my ma’s known for a long time, and I just told my dad last week when I told him I’d be bringing Andrew here for Christmas.”

“Huh,” I say.

“Of course it wouldn’t have gone well if you’d told him about the truck thing last summer,” Dave says. “So thank you. I wanted you to know, we’re out now, and he’s cool, or at least he’s being cool for my ma. He told my stepsisters that Andrew’s here because he didn’t have anywhere else to go for Christmas, and leave it at that.”

“Huh,” I say again.

Now it’s quiet, nobody sayin a thing. I look at Chuck, an’ wonder if he’s goin a say anything about us. He’s sittin quiet, not lookin at me. I can tell he’s not goin a say a fuckin word.

Then, “What’s you guys’ story?” Dave says.

Chuck’s lookin at me now. I give him a little nod. “Our daughters are busy tonight, so we got together to eat leftovers,” he says.

Dave waves a hand over the wrappin paper mess. “And exchange gifts. That’s nice.”

More quiet, an’ I’m figuring what the hell. I sit forward in my chair an’ clear my throat.

“Truth is, we’re … uh, together,” I say. “An’ don’t you say a word to your folks, either of ‘em.” Chuck cracks a smile, good thing ‘cause I didn’t know if he wanted me to say it.

Dave and Andrew are smilin too.

“That’s awesome,” Dave says.

“Whyzat,” I say.
“You’re like role models,” Andrew says, first thing he said all night.

“No,” I say.

“Yes, I mean look at you guys – you’re old, you’re out, you’re together, you’re not cruising truck stops, and you seem happy,” Andrew says.

“We ain’t out, for Christsake,” I say. “And what the fuck are you talkin about truck stops?”

Andrew looks over at Dave. “It’s where guys go to find sex.”

“What? In Wyoming?”

“Even in Wyoming,” Dave said. “You didn’t know?”

Chuck looks as surprised as I am.

“Never had no call to know,” I say.

“So how did you two meet?” Dave asks. “I don’t mean to pry.”

Silence. Then I say, “You tell ’em Chuck.”

“Well,” Chuck says, an’ he tells about meetin at his uncle’s ranch an’ then at Junior’s wedding.

“And that was it?” Dave says. “Sparks flew and you fell into each other’s arms?”

“Something like that,” Chuck says.

“How long ago was that?”

“Last June,” Chuck says.

“And before that? You were both married and had kids?”

“We were both divorced,” Chuck says.

I wonder if I should mention Jack, but it don’t seem to fit, so I ask, “Why all the curiosity?”

“I admire you guys,” Dave says. “Having a gay relationship in Wyoming – about the most hostile state in the union.”

He must not know about Texas, I’m thinkin.

“So do your kids know about you?”

“Yes, they do,” Chuck says.

“But you two each have your own place?”

“Yes, we do,” Chuck says. “What about you two? You live together in Denver?”

“We live in an apartment now, but we’re about to move into a rental house with a few acres, just outside of town,” Dave says. “You guys should come and visit us sometime. We’ll show you the town, take you to the bars.”

“The hell I’ll step foot into no gay bar,” I say.
“Why not?” Dave asks.

“I’ve been to Freddie’s,” Chuck says.

“That’s where all the guys from Wyoming go,” Dave says. “It’s the cowboy thing. Seriously though, the invitation stands, anytime you guys want to visit.’

“We might be going to the stock show in January,” Chuck says.

“Well, you’re more than welcome to stay with us.”

“Thanks, we might,” Chuck’s not lookin at me. “So tell us how you two met.”

“Well, we were at U-W and we were both on the rodeo team,” Dave says, smilin’ over at Andrew. “We were rooming together on a road trip to the University of Montana and, you know how it goes … We’ve been together for three years.”

“I remember your old man wouldn’t let you practice on the horses here,” I say. “He warned me to keep you away from the two- and three-year-olds.”

“He warned me not to mess around with you ‘cause you were a mean old cus and you’d kick my ass,” Dave says. “So I snuck.” We all laugh.

“I thought young guys like you two would be out living the life in the big city, not settling down,” Chuck says.

“That’s a gay stereotype, and I don’t think anyone in this room fits it,” Andrew says. Dave says, “Except maybe Chuck here. He looks like a peacock the way he dresses.”

I don’t like him talkin that way, but Chuck just laughs. “You guys know about the gay rodeo, right?”

Dave says they’re thinkin about competing; their event is saddle broncs. I still cain’t believe there’s a gay rodeo.

“Your folks know about you too?” Chuck asks Andrew.

“They, uh, I told ’em when we moved to Denver,” he says. “They said it’s a sin and Dave is no longer welcome in their house. I haven’t been back there since. They’re in Fort Collins, so we’re back and forth through there every time we come here.”

“That’s rough,” Chuck says.

I pour more whiskey, and they talk about their rodeoin days for another 15 minutes or so, an’ then Dave says they should be goin.

Dave asks if we’d want a shoot pool at Lonesome Lefty’s some night, an’ we settle on Thursday. We’ll meet at Chuck’s house for supper first.

We go to bed soon after the boys leave. We both had enough to drink, an’ neither of us makes a move for sex. We strip down to our underwear an’ get into bed, under the covers, lyin next to each other an’ not touching.

It feels kind a awkward, ‘cause why are we lyin here like this? But it feels good too, like we’re more’n just a fuck to each other, an’ we don’t gotta be all over each other all the time.
I roll over on my side to face him, an’ I put my hand on his arm. “Chuck?”

“Yeah?”

“This was a good day.” I don’t mention K.E., or the difference between the presents he got me an’ what I got him, or the question a whether I’ll go to Denver with him or not. ‘Cause it’s true, it was a good day, best Christmas I had in a lot a years, never mind all that.

“Yes,” he says, an’ leans in for a kiss. “G’night.”
Wednesday, Dec. 26, 1984

I wake up in a cold sweat at 3 in the morning. I’d been dreamin about Jack, a bitch of a nightmare where he’s runnin an’ I can’t catch him. I get up, take off my undershirt an’ put on a dry one, tryin to be quiet as I can so I don’t wake up Chuck. My head is poundin.

I’d been sweatin so bad the sheet is wet an’ I cain’t get back to sleep, so I get up an’ move to the couch, where I have to bend my knees sharp to lie on my side. I get maybe another hour a sleep, an’ I’m up again at 5.

I shave, take a shower, an’ make coffee in the contraption. I’m on my second cup when Chuck stumbles into the kitchen, unshaven, hair in every direction, wearin his clothes from yesterday. For a second, it feels normal, like he lives here too an’ he’s always gettin up an’ walkin into the kitchen.

“I’m havin biscuits an’ jam,” I tell him. “It’s the good stuff from Flo an’ Lisa.”

“Nice,” he says. “Like a British tea party. Are you OK Ennis? You must have been up half the night.”

“Nightmares,” I say.

“You get them often?”

“More’n I’d like.”

“You wanna talk about it?”

“Nope,” I say. “Nothin you can do about it anyways.”

He looks at me like he wants to say something more.

%%%%

Francine’s home when I get in from work at 6. She asks if Regent called, an’ I say no, but I haven’t been hangin’ around at home neither.

“He didn’t call Mama’s house either,” she says. “Good. I was worried he’d think I’m still going skiing with him.”

So I guess it’s really over for them, an’ she don’t seem to mind so I don’t say nothin more.

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Thursday Dec. 27

I head over to Chuck’s after work. Dave an’ Andrew are already there. Julie’s stayin at her ma’s house in town.

The boys brought chips an’ dip an’ beer. Chuck’s cookin’ steaks under the broiler an’ he’s got baked potatoes an’ canned corn. We’re havin a good enough time together. I’m thinkin back on something Flo said about havin a gay community, an’ this must be it. Jack would just shit if he
seen this.

Dave gets to talkin about when he told his ma that he liked boys, not girls, back in high school. “The weird thing was, I felt like she already knew. I guess you old breeders never told your parents.”

“Breeders?” I say.

“You know, breeding stock?” Dave says. “You guys are, me and Dave aren’t. We’ll never get married and have kids, but you two went ahead did it. Did you know the whole time that you’d rather be with a guy?”

That’s not something I’m goin a talk about with these young punks, but Chuck says, “I knew it, but I didn’t feel like I had much choice in the matter.”

Dave says, “The one time I tried it with a girl back in high school, it was like there was nothing there. I tried thinking about this ranch hand I had a crush on, and even that didn’t work.”

I almost feel like pukin ‘til I realize it couldn’t a been me, ‘cause I wasn’t workin for Stoutamire back then.

There’s a bit a quiet, then Dave says, “If you guys don’t want to talk about your breeding days, I get it.” And he starts tellin us about the house he’s movin to with Andrew.

“I really want the two of you to come see us in Denver,” he says.

“If you’re serious, I’ll stay with you when I go to the livestock show,” Chuck says. “I’m hoping Ennis here will come too.” He’s lookin at me.

“Might do that,” I say. “If I can get some time off.”

The boys get to tellin us all about Denver, places they’d want us to see. It’s almost 9 before Dave mentions headin over to Lonesome Lefty’s to shoot pool.

“Not me,” I say. “I gotta work in the morning.”

“How about you, Chuck?”

“Nah, I’ve got work too,” he says.

After they’re gone, I say to Chuck, “I thought you took the whole week off. You could a gone, you know.”

“I know,” he says. “I wanted to be with you. I thought we could have more fun here.”

“That’s me, barrel a fun,” I say.

“You are,” he says. He punches my arm. “More so than you know.”

We clear up the dishes, an’ then head up to his bedroom, where he’s hung a piece a fake mistletoe over the bed. The fool. He didn’t need a do that.

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Friday Dec. 28
Junior calls at 6 to invite me to Sunday supper, an’ she asks would I be comfortable invitin Chuck too. I tell her it’s her house, but she says, “You know what I mean, Daddy.”

Well, it’s just her, Curt, Francine, Julie – what’s that, six of us? So I say it’ll be fine.

*****

Next, Flo calls. She asks how Francine is doin, an’ I say fine. It’s true, an’ what else am I gonna say?

“Regent’s not doing so well,” she says. If she’s goin a try to get me wrapped up in all that, she’s got another thing comin.

“That so,” I say.

“Anyway, that’s not why I’m calling. Lisa and I would like to have you and Chuck over for New Year’s Eve. We’ll have a few other people here too, folks we’d like you to meet.”

Right. Queers, I bet. “Yeah, well, I ain’t the party type myself and Chuck’s busy,” I say.

“No one would have to know about you … ”

Of course they’d know, why else would I be there?

“I don’t reckon I’ll be goin,” I say.

“Not everyone there is gay, you know. I’d really like you to come. It starts at 9.”

“Anyways, I doubt I’d make it all the way to midnight ‘cause I’ll probly be workin New Year’s Eve an’ the next day too.” A lie. I already got Regent an’ Tex scheduled.

“Well, what are you doing tonight?” she asks, throwin me for a loop.

“What?”

“Tonight. Lisa took the boys skiing near Casper for the weekend. Are you busy?”

“Me? I … I was just gonna watch ‘Dallas’ …”

“Can I join you?” That’s right. She watches it too. But hang out with a woman? She’s not … I mean, what would Chuck say? How to say no? She was so nice an’ no-bullshit that time we had coffee.

“OK, come on over. I hope you like beer, ‘cause that’s all I got.”

“Would you want to come here?” she says. “I’ll fix you something if you haven’t eaten already.”

Well, how’d I get roped into this one, I’m thinkin after we hang up. I call Chuck.

When he answers, I ask how he’s doin, which gets him on edge first thing, ‘cause I never call for no reason.

“Everything OK Ennis?”

“Sure. Listen, Chuck? You playin poker tonight?”

“That was my plan,” he says. “But if you want to …”
Am I askin him or tellin him? I don’t gotta ask no one’s permission, do I? “I thought I should let you know I’m goin over to Flo’s tonight, watch Dallas.”

“Lisa and Flo’s?”

“Well, Lisa and the kids aren’t there, so it’s just Flo.”

Silence. “Just you and Flo?” He sounds like he’s makin an effort to keep his voice normal.

“We’re friends, Chuck. You know that.”

“You, with a woman friend? Ennis?”

“Well, you know, she’s … she’s not nearly as pretty as you.” It’s out before I get a chance to think about it.

A pause. “Ennis, did you just say that?”

“Wha-- ?”


“Thanks. She invited us to New Year’s Eve too. They’re havin other people there too.”

“Shit, I wish I could go.”

“You do?”

“You’re going, right?”

“Me, a party full a people I don’t know?” I thought he knew me better.

But he just laughs. “Come on, Ennis. I bet you’d have fun.”

*****

All day at work, I’m thinkin how this time alone with Flo is goin a be awkward. I buy a 12-pack on my way over.

But once I get there, it’s almost as natural as bein with Junior. Flo can sit with quiet, don’t need to be yakkin every second.

She serves up somethin she calls honey-baked chicken with rice, green beans an’ almonds on top. I show my appreciation by havin seconds, an’ I ask for the recipe.

“You cook?” she asks like it’s a surprise.

“Well, a man’s gotta eat,” I say.

Flo laughs an’ says she’ll write down the recipe.

“Dallas” won’t come on for another half-hour, so she starts tellin me about growin up on a cattle ranch in Kansas where her dad worked, an’ her ma died when she was just 9. I tell her about my folks. She says I remind her of her Uncle Henry, who lived in the hut right next door to her and her dad.

“Whyzat?” I ask.
“It’s your looks and how you carry yourself and how you have a sense that there’s a right way and a wrong way to do things,” she says. “You know, Regent really admires that about you.”

“Well, thanks, I guess,” I say. “I thought you meant …”

“He was gay? He was. He’d drive two hours to Wichita for one weekend every month. It was the only time he dressed up and shaved, and he’d put stuff in his hair to flatten the curls.” Stuff in his hair, that sure ain’t me.

“How’d you know he wasn’t seein a woman?” I ask.

“I always assumed it was,” she says. “My dad would always ask, ‘So, what’s her name, Henry? When do we get to meet her? When’s the wedding?’ And he’d joke that she’s a city mouse and he’s a country mouse, or that she’s so ugly she’d scare us off, or that he was afraid she’d take one look at my dad and that would be it. Well, he died when I was 14, got thrown from a horse, and I was the one who went through his things. I found a photo of him and another man, and on the back it said, ‘To Hank, xox, your city mouse, William.’ I took it to my dad, and he said, ‘Oh, Willie. He’s the man Henry used to go see in Wichita.’ All I could think of was how lonely that must have been for Henry. I hope my dad had a way to find this William and tell him about Henry’s death.”

“That’s a hell of a story,” I say. “You think your dad was OK with it?”

“We never said another word about it until years later, when I told my dad I was leaving my husband for Lisa, and he said, ‘You always did have a bit of Henry in you, didn’t you?’ I took it as a compliment.”

So I tell Flo about Rich and Earl, but not the part about my daddy takin us down to see Earl. I don’t tell her about Jack either.

“Did you know you were gay when you were a kid?” she asks.

It’s too complicated to explain, so I say, “I didn’t know it until last year, after my … buddy died.”

“Were you in love with him?” she asks, point blank.

“I guess that was it,” I say, an’ she looks like she’s waitin for more, but I ain’t sayin more ‘cause it hurts too much to think about it after hearin about the uncle.

She’s on a roll, so she tells me more about her life, like bein molested by a ranch hand when she was 13 an’ too terrified to tell anyone, gettin pregnant with another ranch hand when she was 16, marryin him, an’ startin to work at the food co-op in town, where she met Lisa.

“It was love at first sight,” Flo says, but nothin happened for a long time. Lisa was married to Luc La Rocque, a French professor at Kansas State, who was dyin a cancer at the time. Regent was 2 an’ Argent was a baby an’ Flo made extra money by helpin in the house an’ takin care a the boys, bringin little Chelsea along.

When Luc died a year later, that’s when Flo put the moves on Lisa, even though Lisa fought it for a good long while. I would a thought it the other way around, but what do I know about women?

Flo’s happy to go on an’ on with me not sayin much, an’ that’s OK ‘cause I ain’t about to tell my life story. There’s parts I ain’t never told to no one.

She says when Lisa finally let her move in, she left her husband an’ took her little girl along too. Lisa was workin at the college an’ Flo took some psychology classes at night.
“Just enough to make me dangerous,” she says. “I’d thought about being a high-school counselor.”

I can picture that, an’ I’m wonderin if the female counselor Chuck went to see in Casper was anything like Flo.

But, Flo says, then things started to get bad with nosy neighbors, an’ someone at Chelsea’s school, an’ anyways Flo missed livin on a ranch an’ Lisa wanted some land to plant fruit trees like she’d grown up with Back East. Somehow they found the farm near Riverton an’ moved there with the story that Flo was Lisa’s sister-in-law.

“And I don’t know a word of French,” she says. “But you probably don’t know a word of Spanish either, do you?”

I tell her there are a couple a words I remember from my dad’s dad, like the names he had for Bridget, K.E. an’ me – cariña, cabrón an’ mijito. But he died before my folks did, an’ K.E. got his room an’ I got our tiny room to myself. I don’t remember his wife nor either a my mama’s folks, who’d come from Chicago to see us only once or twice accordin to Bridget. We never went there.

“So where did his folks come from?” she asks.

“Mexico,” I say. “My grandpa’s grandparents.”

“My dad’s folks came from Germany, and he still had a bit of an accent we used to tease him about,” she says. “Ach, glean out zee barn!”

“My boss still has that too,” I tell her.

Up ‘til now, the only folks I ever talked to about the name Del Mar, were my girls an’ Jack, ‘cause he asked. Usually I tell people I don’t know how I got it, not wantin to start a conversation. But Flo, I don’t mind talkin to.

She goes on with her story, says once they got to Riverton, she got the job at the hardware store an’ Lisa started teachin GED at night. They got the farm goin, first sugar beets, then honeybees, chickens an’ orchard fruit when the trees got big enough. Then Lisa started makin jam to sell. Flo does books an’ helps with whatever she can an’ helps Lisa sell stuff at the farmer’s market when she’s not workin herself.

“It’s a nice life,” she says.

“Tell you what,” Jack’d said that last time. “We could a had a good life together, a fuckin real good life. You wouldn’t do it, Ennis.” An’ I’d said everything mean an’ hateful except what I should a said, “I wish we’d a tried for that, Jack. Maybe we still can. We’re not so old.”

I look over at Flo, hopin she’s not readin anything on my face. She’s a nice-lookin gal, I’ll give her that, with her short hair an’ bright eyes.

“An’ you got no regrets?” I say.

“Just Chelsea,” she says. “But … Oh! I didn’t tell you. She called the day after Christmas. She’s having a baby in June. She even invited me for a visit after it’s born.”

I put up my beer bottle to her glass an’ we make a toast. “To you bein a grandma.”

And then it’s time for Dallas.
We’re quiet durin the show. After, we agree that the plotlines are gettin ridiculous. She asks if I want another beer, an’ I say OK, I don’t have to work tomorrow.

We play a few hands a gin rummy, then she says, “Ennis, do women hit on you?”


“More so when I was younger,” she says. “Once in a while a guy in the hardware store will ask me out, and I’ll just tell him I’m trying to get back with my ex.”

“I cain’t use that one, not with Alma runnin around,” I say.

“You could say your ex-girlfriend,” she says. “And you know what? You and I could go out for a drink once in a while, get the tongues wagging.”

“Maybe so,” I say, but I wonder if Chuck would approve. No, that don’t make sense. Why wouldn’t he?

“You have more allies than you think,” she says. “That’s why I really want you to come to our New Year’s Eve party, even if Chuck can’t make it.”

That ain’t goin a happen, but I say, “How many people are goin a be at this party anyways?”

“Hmm … maybe 15 including me and Lisa and the boys.”

“I’m not much for parties, huh,” I say.

“Me neither,” she says. “You can stick close to me, and I’ll for cover you if you want to make a quick exit. Come on, Ennis. You’ve got nothing to lose.”

True, I don’t have as much to lose now that my girls know about me an’ I found out about my boss’s son bein the same way. Still, most folks out there would be more’n happy to …

I tell her I might give it a try. She gives me a hug. I never in all my life pictured myself havin a woman for a friend.

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Sunday Dec. 30

Chuck calls to ask if he can come over after Junior’s tonight, but I have to tell him Francine’ll be home, so no.

“You can’t ask her to stay in town?” he says.

I say no, I sure cain’t. “I’m not goin a boot her outta her own home,” I say. What’s he thinkin anyways?

So he says he’ll ask Julie if she can stay at her ma’s.

Chuck’s already at Junior’s when I get there. She’s still got her Christmas stuff up, an’ I get this feelin again a bein part a somethin real nice, an’ bein happy that Chuck’s here with us. She’s servin chicken with Spanish rice, peas an’ a salad, an’ Julie made a carrot cake for dessert.

Chuck asks Curt about his work in the oil fields near Gillette, and Curt tells a few outrageous stories about the antics his work buddies pull.
Then he says him an’ Junior are thinkin about movin up there to Gillette, get more time together.

I look over at Junior, an’ she’s lookin right at me. Goddamn, I sure hope they don’t move. I’m still tryin a make up lost time with my little girl, even though she’s grown an’ married.

“IT’s workin out OK for us now,” Curt says. “I got Christmas off, but I worked Thanksgiving and I’m working New Years, and that kind a thing takes a toll.”

He looks over Junior. “Once we figure out where we’re gonna live, we’ll start thinkin about having a family,” he says, runnin his hand down her cheek.

I can see the blood rushin to Junior’s face. I clear my throat, wishin she wouldn’t have to be so embarrassed in front a her daddy.

Chuck takes us out of it by tellin her how good the food is, an’ the conversation gets on to different things.

After supper, Chuck takes out his guitar an’ gets ‘em singin in the living room, an’ I help Junior clear the table.

She asks, “You doing OK, Daddy?”

“Sure, why not?” I say, but I know just what she’s talkin about, her an’ Curt movin away.

She walks over an’ hugs me, an’ I kiss her hair.

“We need to get together more, just us two,” she says.

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Later, back at Chuck’s house, he says, “So will you go to Lisa and Flo’s party?”

“I might,” I say.

“I really don’t mind if you do,” he says. “I’m pretty curious myself. You want to get together New Year’s Day?”

I tell him I’ll be workin ‘til 5 or 6, an’ I’m the on-call guy that night. But he’s pushin, so I say I’ll see if I cain’t get Francine to stay over at Junior’s. The girls an’ Julie had been talkin about a party they’ll be goin to New Years Eve – Junior an’ Julie’s friends, so Regent won’t be there. Curt’ll be gone, so maybe Junior wouldn’t mind the company.

“I really wish you and me could be together on New Year’s Eve,” Chuck says.

“It’s not that important, is it?” I ask, ‘cause isn’t one day pretty much just like the rest?

“What I mean is, I wish we could go like any other couple,” he says. “I wish I could introduce you as my new boyfriend.”

There he goes. “That’ll be a cold day in hell,” I say. “Where do you get this stuff anyways?”

He puts his hand on my cheek. “You have no imagination at all, do you Ennis?” he says.

Jack’d said the same thing more’n once, an’ I never took it as an insult.

“What’s the point in imaginin things?” I ask. “The only place either of us’ll ever live is right here in the real world.”
I used to imagine what if my folks wasn’t dead, an’ then what if Jack wasn’t dead, an’ it never got me nowhere good.

“Well, at least at Lisa and Flo’s you can just be yourself,” Chuck says. “I’ll have to play this bachelor-and-looking thing at the party I’m going to, and have all these people trying to set me up with someone. I’m so fucking sick of it, Ennis, you can’t imagine.”

I bet I can. How many times have guys on the ranch tried to get me together with some friend a their wife, or someone whose husband died or left ‘em?

But there just ain’t no way around it. We cain’t be goin to no parties together.

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New Year’s Day, 1985

I wake up on Flo an’ Lisa’s couch. It’s almost 6:30 in the morning an’ I should be at work already. No one else is up, so I sneak out, drive home, heat up some coffee an’ have a shower. I’m at work by 7.

I cain’t remember how much I drank. I do remember doin shots, laughin a lot, an’ even dancin. It was probly the craziest night a my life, more like the kind a night I imagine a teenager has.

I don’t usually mind the cold, but today the temperature is below zero, an my head an’ my body hurt like hell. I go through the motions, an’ cut out at 4 to lie down for a little shut-eye.

I wake up when someone’s poundin on the door.

“You look like hell,” Chuck says when I open the door an’ let him in.

“I feel like hell,” I say. “C’mere.”

I pull him close an’ smell his hair. This feels good, bein back in his company.

“What time did you get home?” he says, pullin away.

“I stayed there an’ come back here this mornin. You?”

“I got home around 2, but I didn’t have much to drink.”

“I drank way too much an’ I’m payin for it today,” I say. “How was your party?”

“Same as usual. People liked the band. You’re the one who went to the interesting party. You tell me.”

I get us beers, an I say, “Well, I met a lot a homos.”

Chuck punches me. “Stop saying that word. Anyone I know?”

“Sure,” I say. I take a meatloaf Junior gave me outta the fridge an’ turn on the oven. I take out potatoes an’ start to scrub ‘em. I don’t know what to say, don’t wanna out people like they say.

“Well?” he asks.

“A course, none a this goes anywhere,” I say. “An’ if you run into any a these people, you don’t say a fuckin word.”
“Of course not. You don’t have to tell me that.”

“OK, you know the younger bartender at the Black’n’Blue Eagle?”

“Tommy? No way.”

“Yeah. He’s single for now, I guess. Used to have a guy livin with him at his ma’s old place. He was real friendly, an’ he asked me if I was seein anyone. I wanted a punch him.”

“And?”

Shit. “An’ I said well, yeah, an’ … he asked if it was you. I hope you don’t mind, I said yeah.” Chuck looks more pleased than pissed.

“Really Ennis? You really did?”

“Sorry, I …”

“I’m not sorry,” Chuck says. “I’m proud of you. You are seeing me, right?”

“I guess,” I say. “I wouldn’t think you’d like it up on every billboard. I sure wouldn’t. Anyways, I never would a figured Tommy. I kicked up a fuss there one time an’ he wrestled me to the ground an’ threw me out.”

“You hear what you’re saying, Ennis?

“What?”

“If you wouldn’t have figured Tommy for gay, why do you think anyone would think you were?” What the hell? “Chuck? If folks see us together too much, they’ll know. Shit, he knew.”

“You asshole. He didn’t know until you told him.”

Well, Tommy did say he was mighty surprised to see me there at Flo an’ Lisa’s. I almost could a got away with sayin I was one a the ladies’ straight friends. Don’t know why I didn’t. Anyways, we still gotta be careful, I’m not that stupid.

“Anyway, he’s not your type,” Chuck says, with a bit of mischief in his eyes. “He’s too rugged.”

“You’re rugged enough,” I say, even though it ain’t how I woulda described Chuck. Tommy’s bigger’n me, taller an’ probly 50 pounds heavier, an’ he don’t have the thin waist or the tight ass I like in a man. Wait, Jesus Christ, am I really thinkin like that? What happened a bein a tit man or an ass man?

“Who else was there?” Chuck asks.

“You know Dr. Timonen the vet?” Chuck nods. “His buddy is a lawyer in Cheyenne. Gourmet cook. He brought some real good food. Not everyone was queer. Flo’s boss Hi from the hardware store was there with his wife. Everyone else there, I never met before.”

“Tell me about them.”

“Well, let’s see,” I say. I put the food in the oven an’ we head to the couch with our beers.
“Two woman school teachers; they live together. A professor from Central Wy; he’s with a guy who sells insurance an’ they live together in town. Lisa an’ Flo’s hairdresser, I swear to God, and his boyfriend, he’s a waiter at the fancy restaurant at the Grand Hotel. Young guys, our girls know ‘em, you know that?”

“I knew Julie had some gay friends and she and Junior went to the prom with them, and they were at Junior’s wedding.”

“Yeah, they’re the ones. They’re a coupla characters, one of ’em wearin makeup. Makes me real nervous to think about young guys livin out in the open like that. An’ one rich older lady, Camellia, she owns a dude ranch near Jackson. I guess her partner died not too long ago. She came with her sister who’s straight, an’ sister’s husband. That’s it.”

“That’s a lot more than I ever knew about,” he says. “I still can’t believe you went.”

“I cain’t either, but that Flo can be pretty persuasive.”

“You just can’t say no to a woman, can you?” he says.

“I’ve said no to a lot a women,” I say, “even left some cryin, an’ I’m not proud of it.” But he’s right in a way, too. I’m like putty for my girls an’ Bridget.

He wants to know more about the party, so I tell him about Flo stickin next to me the whole time like she said she would, Lisa playin piano, an’ people singin, an’ then people dancin to country songs that Flo put on.

“You didn’t dance, did you?” he asks with a little smirk on his face.

I’d been hopin he wouldn’t ask. “For a few minutes.”

His eyes go wide. “No way, with who?”

“Flo.” Not with no guy, but the guys who came in couples did dance together, strange as it looked.

Now he jumps to his feet. “Jesus Christ Ennis! And you stayed there overnight?”

“Chuck, please.” I stand up to an’ put up my hands. “I was drunk, and you know goddamn well she don’t have nothin for me!”

“Goddamn you to hell Ennis!”

Then I finally notice he’s jokin, tryin a keep a straight face, so I play it up.

“I’d make a move on her, but that Lisa scares the shit outta me.”

Then he chuckles, an’ grabs me into a headlock that I get out a quick enough, an’ I wrestle him down to the couch.

He lies down an’ shows me a space to sit between his legs.

I lean over an’ say in his ear, “I’d give you what you deserve right now, but I don’t want the supper to burn.”

Then I sit back up, best as I can. “Tell me about your party. You met Queenie’s new guy?”

“Yeah, he’s all right. Kind of a pipsqueak, like 5-foot-7. Tall enough for her anyway. I wish them
well. I hope he treats her right, better than I did.”

“Uh,” I say. I don’t know much about how his marriage went, but if it was anything like me an’ Alma …

“Oh!” he says. “That’s the other thing. Alma and Bill were there. She asked about you.”

Christ, what now? “Asked what?”

“She asked where you were. I said I didn’t know. Then she said her boys were over at Jeannie’s for the night, or Jeannie would have been at the party too. She said I should call Jeannie some time.”

I don’t know what to make of it. I could see Jeannie took a likin to Chuck the two times I seen her ask him to dance, an’ it never bothered me. But I cain’t help wonderin if Alma’s startin to figure things out for herself about me an’ Chuck, or maybe one a girls said something.

“Alma an’ Monroe don’t usually go to these parties, is that right?” I ask.

“No, it’s mostly guys from my class at Riverton High. Monroe’s not from here and Alma’s from a few years later.”

An’ she never graduated neither, thanks to her daddy takin ill an’ her havin to get a job, but I don’t say it.

Chuck is movin his fingertips along my back, which I don’t mind so much. “You know it’s getting harder to hang out with my old gang since I started up with you.”

I turn to look at him. “Wyzat?”

“Because when I’m with them, I wish I was with you,” he says. “And every time one of them says ‘faggot’ or ‘homo’ I want to shove my fist down his throat. I never noticed before how much they say it, worse than the guys I play poker with. It’s like they’re a bunch of scared little pussies.”

“Just like the ranch hands,” I say. “It’s just how guys are.”

“Yeah, right,” he says. “I think I’ll go to Lisa and Flo’s with you next year.”

“Mmm,” I say. I lean over to give him a kiss. “I think our supper’s ready.”

*****

After supper, I make coffee an’ put shots a brandy in our mugs.

“I can’t have that and drive home,” Chuck says.

It’s not true an’ he knows it, but even I can tell he’s sayin something else. “You don’t need a drive home,” I say. “As long as you can get outta here by 6:30 tomorrow morning.”
Forty-One Candles

Friday Jan. 4, 1985

“Daddy, do you ever think about moving away from here?”

“Once or twice,” I say. “Why?”

Junior’s settin the table, fancy tablecloth an’ cloth napkins with rings around ‘em that she sure don’t need to put down just for me, but I guess she wants to.

“I mean, what if Francine moves to New York and I move up to Gillette with Curt?”

“I guess I’d be lonely,” I say. “I’d sure miss you a lot, but Gillette’s not so far we couldn’t get together once in a while.”

“Well I’d hate it,” she says. “Being away from you and Ma and any friends I have left here. What’s the point in moving, if he’s working 14 days on, seven days off anyway?”

“You been talkin to Curt about this, right?”

“He says he could save four hours each way, every two weeks. But Daddy, both our families are here!”

“You two need to work that out with him,” I say. “Movin away is a big deal. Your ma hated it when we moved up to a ranch near Lost Cabin when we was first married.”

“I’m sure we’ll figure something out,” she says.

She’s quiter’n usual during supper. She made lasagna, enough for me to take some home for later in the week, an’ it’s real good.

“You don’t need to keep cookin all this stuff for me,” I say. “I can put a frozen lasagna in the oven just as easy.”

“Frozen lasagna! Daddy!”

“I mean, it ain’t nothin like yours.” I give her a wink.

“I should hope not.”

“What I meant to say, I sure appreciate everything you do for me.”

Finally, I get a smile out of her.

She tells me about the New Year’s Eve party she went to with Francine an’ Julie, says Francine got drunk but didn’t make too much a fool of herself an’ Junior drove her home before she could get into real trouble. She says they had more fun back here with Julie, havin a slumber party.

Girl talk. I tell her I remember when they were little, they’d make me play tea party with ‘em an’ they’d teach me manners that I’d keep messin up, elbows on the table, slurpin the Kool-Aid.

“Remember the time Ma was working late and we made cookies, but we forgot to put the sugar in?” she says. “And you ate some anyway and pretended they tasted perfectly fine?”
I got another one for her. “You remember the time you an’ Francine gave your dolls an’ teddy bears a bubble bath, an’ we had to take the bears downstairs an’ run ‘em through the washer an’ dryer?”

She seems to be feelin a lot better by the time “Dallas” comes on.

*****

When I get home, Francine’s watchin TV, probly first time she’s been home on a Friday night since she moved in. She asks if we can talk an’ I say of course, let me get a beer first.

Then she lays it out for me: she’s goin a get a certificate to teach horse-ridin from the college, then get a job somewhere near New York City teachin equestrian somethin like some friend a hers did, an’ save some money, an’ then try out for Broadway.

“So no barrel racin?” I ask.

“No, I’m done with rodeo,” she says. “The idea of traveling around as Regent’s wife? It stopped being fun even before it even started.” She says “wife” like some girls would a said “whore.”

“Well, rodeo life can be tough,” I say, “not that I ever done it.”

“I’m sure working on a ranch all year is a lot tougher,” she says, an’ I don’t know if she’s talkin about me or about what Regent was plannin for her.

“Well, there ain’t no need to settle for somethin you don’t want,” I say.

“I still can’t believe Regent and me were together all that time, me thinking it was one thing, and him thinking it was something else altogether.”

“That can happen,” I say. I’m sure it happens all the time, two people not havin the same idea about how things are goin a be.

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Jan. 5, 1985

I go into Signal for some errands an’ a haircut, first time in too long, an’ I tell the barber to take a lot off ’cause I’m not likely to come back soon. Tex strolls in, says Bernadette refused to cut his hair ’cause he’s finally makin some money an’ he might as well look decent.

He says how about if they come over to my place tomorrow night an’ she’ll cook me supper, ’cause their place is too damn small for the three of us to eat inside. I say sorry, I’m busy, don’t say I’m goin over to Junior’s for my birthday.

But why not have ‘em too? “Hey, I’m goin to my daughter Junior’s house for supper,” I say. “Why don’t the two a you come over?”

Tex says Bernadette would like that, an’ she’ll cook something to bring along with ‘em.

When I get home, I call Junior an’ she says no problem, the more the merrier. She’s tryin not to act surprised, I can tell.

*****

I’m gettin ready to go over to Chuck’s around 4 when I get a call from him, askin if he can take me
out for my birthday.

“Like the Knife’n’Fork or the Grand Hotel,” he says.

“I dunno, Chuck … we’re celebratin at Junior’s tomorrow.”

“This is for just the two of us.”

“Guys don’t go out an’ eat together to celebrate their birthdays.”

“No one’ll know why we’re out. I wanna have a special dinner with you, and I don’t wanna cook.”

“That so,” I say. Why does he always want a go out? But that’s him, I guess, an’ like Junior says, the gift’s gotta suit the giver an’ the receiver.

So I say, “OK, but it won’t be no damn Grand Hotel.”

*****

I put on one a my new shirts Chuck gave me, an’ a pair a black jeans I bought at the Goodwill a few years ago an’ didn’t hardly wear, my newer boots an’ hat, an’ my new leather jacket.

Chuck whistles when he opens the door. He’s wearin his fancier duds too an’ lookin mighty fine. In less than a minute, though, we’re tearin each other’s clothes are off an’ they’re strewn from the front door to his bedroom, ’cause we can’t keep our hands off each other.

We’re both in too much of a hurry, but neither of us says to slow down, so before you know it I’m slammin into him an’ then we’re both yellin our comin – oh my God, holy fuck! We collapse on the bed an’ just lie there for a few minutes.

Then Chuck says, “All those years, I wanted this so bad, I never pictured it half as good as it is now.”

Huh? “Whaddya mean?”

“I mean I wanted to be with a man, but I could never have imagined you, Ennis. Having you just a few miles away, at the other end of a phone call, coming over here like this.”

It is nice, a whole lot better than the deal I put on Jack, once or twice a year. Only thing is, a way bigger chance a gettin caught now, what with everyone around us knowin what’s goin on.

“You ever think, the reason the preachers raise hell about men lyin with men is ‘cause it’s so good?” I ask. “Anyone who tries it won’t go back the other way?”

He pulls away an’ an stares at me. “You think that’s what happened to you?”

“There really wasn’t any goin back, though god knows I tried. So I’m thinkin, is it just a matter a tryin it an’ then you’re doomed forever?”

“I don’t think so,” he says. “I think some people really are straight, and others not so much.”

We lie there a little longer, then he’s cleanin up in the bathroom. I go down an’ gather up all the clothes. When he gets outta the shower, he says, “Why not the Grand Hotel, Ennis?”

“I didn’t wear no tie,” I say.
“You can borrow one of mine.”

*****

How do I let myself get talked into this shit anyways? I felt outta place enough comin here with Cassie the one or two times, but now I’m here with this flashy good-lookin man, neither of us wearin wedding rings.

When the hostess asks if we have a preference where we wanna sit, Chuck says we want privacy. I wish there was a trapdoor in the floor I could drop into.

“You’re tryin a kill me,” I tell Chuck once we’re sittin down.

He just laughs. “Relax. Two guys making a real estate deal would have asked for privacy.”

He tells me to order anything I’d like; it’s on him. I decide on the T-bone.

Then, wouldn’t you just know it, our waiter comes over an’ it’s the girls’ friend Brian, one a the guys from Flo an’ Lisa’s party, the one who wasn’t wearin make-up thank God. I’m just dreadin what he’s goin a say.

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“Hello Mr. Del Mar, hello Mr. Ausman.” A nod, no big fake smile. “I’m Brian, your server for the evening. Can I interest you in a cocktail to start?” No wink even, good for him ‘cause I probably would a belted him one.

Chuck orders a whiskey sour an’ I ask for a Bud.

When the kid comes back with the drinks, he’s got a candle that he puts down and lights it with a lighter. I’d seen this at other tables on our way in.

We go ahead an’ order.

“Your eyes are twinkling in the candlelight,” Chuck says when Brian’s gone.

“I’m warnin you,” I say, tryin not to smile.

He’s starin in my eyes, an’ I’m starin back, an’ his eyes are like shiny blue steel, so I say, “Yours too.”

I get the butterflies back in my stomach, always surprisin to me how strong this thing feels sometimes. Like first settin eyes on Jack when we’d meet up in the mountains, or watchin him sleep away the morning.

“What I wanted to talk about is the stock show in Denver,” Chuck says. “I gotta bring some horses down and meet Kerby. So how about you and me spend a few days at the show?”

“How long?”

“Drive down there on Thursday and come back Sunday.”

“Your truck?”

“Of course. And I’ll be pullin a trailer.”

“Stay with Dave an’ Andrew?”
“Sure, unless you want to get a hotel.”

“That would cost a arm an’ a leg. You sure the boys really want us stayin there?”

“I can find out in one phone call.”

“An’ how do we fill our time?”

“We go around the stock show, go to the rodeo if you want, hang around with the boys, go out to Freddie’s.”

“What, boy,” I say. “I never said I’d go to some …”

“Fifteen others to choose from, according to that magazine. I bet Dave and Andrew know where they are.”

“No way we go to more’n one.”

“Anyway, ask Stoutamire if there’s anything he wants you to look at,” Chuck says. “There’s every kind a stock – pigs, sheep, breeding cattle, horses, stock dogs, everything.”

Chuck orders us both Black Forest cake for dessert, somethin I’ve never had, but it’s damn good, cherries an’ chocolate. An aphrodisiac, Chuck says.

When we get back to his house, he takes out his guitar an’ sings “Happy Birthday,” then asks if I wanna sing a few more songs with him.

“One or two,” I say. I don’t know about him, but I’m ready for another roll in the hay.

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Sunday, Jan. 6

I wake up to the smell a bacon, an’ at first I don’t know where I am. Of course, it’s Chuck’s bed, what I let him talk me into last night.

I hear him on the stairs an’ then there he is at the doorway.

“Hey, sleepyhead.” I look at the clock – it’s nearly 8. He’s got these dark drapes so you cain’t see whether it’s night or day.

“Son of a bitch, I never sleep in this late,” I say, jumpin out of bed. “We’re burnin daylight! Shit!” I can hear the wind is blowin strong, an’ sure enough I open the drapes to a near blizzard.

“You got somewhere to go?” he asks. “Come on down for bacon and pancakes.”

While we’re eatin, he says, “Why don’t we just spend the day together and then go over to Junior’s?”

“Doin what?” I ask. Truth is, I’m not in a hurry to get into my truck an’ drive through the snow anyways.

“Well, I bought that video player, not that I’ve plugged it in yet,” he says. “We could watch some movies. I’ve got the Westerns you gave me and some other tapes I ordered in the mail.” He gives me the eyebrows.
“You didn’t,” I say.

“Of course I did.”

*****

After we go out to check his horses, he sets up the machine to play “David and Conrad.”

I’m lyin on the leather sofa an’ he’s sittin on a leather La-Z-Boy. I look around, an’ everything about this scene is strange. Me bein here at Chuck’s after spendin the night. The leather furniture an’ the fancy color TV an’ VCR machine. Me lyin here in the middle a the day. David an’ Conrad about to come up on the TV. Chuck’s foolin with the machine like it’s all normal. Well, it is normal in a way, an’ strange an’ special in other ways.

“Can you give me a hand with this?” he asks. I get my glasses, an’ between lookin at the instructions an’ checkin to see which wire goes there, we finally get the thing hooked up. He puts the tape in an’ it starts showin a lot a words, not gettin to David an’ Conrad yet.

Chuck says, “Hey, you wanna smoke a joint before we start?” Well, I can see things are only goin a get stranger.

“You got weed?” Only time I smoked it was the time with Jack. All I remember was feelin hungry an’ horny.

“Julie gave me a few joints. I’ll get them.” He stops the tape.

We smoke a joint. I say I ain’t feelin nothin, so he out pulls another, an’ I get up to get a beer.

But now I’m feelin it, wobbly on my feet, head a little dizzy, so I sit back down.

“You OK?” he asks.

I take a few deep breaths, get back up. “Yeah, I’m goin a get a beer, want one?” He says OK.

When I get back, he says, “You sure you wanna smoke another joint?”

“Sure.” He takes another out of the plastic bag an’ lights it up.

“So when did you start smoking weed?” I ask.

“I used to smoke pot with Kerby, back when he was single and I was unhappily married,” he says. “We were high when I made a pass at him the one time.”

“Ah, the inappropriate crush,” I say, ‘cause I remember him talkin about it before. “What happened?”

“We were sitting back here watching football, drinking and high as a kite, rememberin old times, and he was getting all sappy and telling me I was the best friend he ever had. I guess I took what he was saying and how he was looking at me the wrong way, and I moved in close to him, and I tried to kiss him.”

“Shit, what did he do?” And why is this turnin me on, thinkin about Chuck comin on to some other guy? These new jeans are tighter’n my work jeans, an’ they’re feelin way too tight on my dick, but I don’t wanna readjust an’ interrupt his story.

“Yelled like he’d seen a bear,” Chuck says. “Asked me what the fuck I was doing.”
“An’ you said?”

“I said I was sorry, I didn’t know what got into me. He just laughed and called me a homo, and then I said, ‘No, really.’ He looked at me, and I thought he’d hit me or kick me out of his house, but then he said, ‘Oh, that explains a lot.’”

I’m wonderin what it must a been like that time for Jack, grabbin my hand. The whole summer could a gone by and I’d never a been the one to start anything. If I hadn’t a been so drunk that night, I don’t know how it might a gone, except I sometimes think that if I’d a put a stop to it that first time, I probly would a come back lookin for it later anyways.

“Come here,” I say, an’ I pull Chuck closer. I reach over an’ rub the back of my hand on his crotch, an’ sure enough he’s got the same thing goin on as I do. “You’re such a homo,” I say.

“Stop,” he says, pullin my hand away. “Let’s watch the videotape.” He puts it in an’ starts it up an’ I lean back an’ open my legs to make room for him on the couch.

So it goes like this: Conrad or David is in bed naked, spread eagle with a blanket over his midsection in what looks like a log cabin, not much light but enough. Then we see the other one who has a beard, in the doorway to the bedroom wearin a robe, lookin in an’ touchin himself. After a while, he walks into the room, an’ the guy in bed opens his eyes an’ takes the blanket off, an’ he’s got a big, hard dick.

The other one takes his robe off, he’s hung good too, an’ he climbs on top. He’s got their dicks side by side, an’ he’s pumpin an’ rubbin an’ kissin the one on the bottom all over his neck an’ ears an’ mouth. Bottom guy’s got his eyes closed the whole time an’ his hands caught up in the blanket, not touch the other one.

Meanwhile, Chuck an’ me still got our clothes on, but I feel like all the blood in my body is goin into my dick. I pull him closer so I can massage the bulge in his jeans an’ he can grind his butt into me.

David an’ Conrad keep at it, an’ then the one on the bottom is grabbin his hands all over the other one’s ass, an’ the one on top is jackin him off. Then he’s got both dicks in his hand an’ the noises are gettin louder, an’ then they’re both comin with loud grunts. He keeps rubbin the dicks for a while, gizz all over, an’ they’re still kissin when it ends. It lasted no more’n 10 minutes, but it sure had its effects.

Chuck turns so he’s facin me, touches his hand on my jaw an’ says, “You should grow a beard, Ennis.”

“The hell,” I say. I take his face in my hands an’ kiss his mouth, an’ then we’re grabbin butts an’ pullin off clothes. His breath is coffee an’ weed, an’ his hair smells like horses an’ the shampoo he uses.

“Let’s go up,” he says.

“You first,” I say. “I’ll be up in a minute.” He turns off the TV an’ heads upstairs an’ I put the ashtray an’ beer bottles in the kitchen.

When I get to his room, I see he’s lyin down, eyes closed, blanket over him. He’s got the lights off, only light comin in the windows. Same idea I had, nice.

I stand in the doorway an’ clear my throat, an’ start rubbin’ my dick. He opens one eye, then closes it again. I walk in an’ pull the blanket off him, an’ sure enough he’s hard an’ ready. I take off my
clothes, climb on top an’ start kissin him, dicks lined up an’ pumpin away.

“S-l-o-w,” he says, eyes still closed. “It’s a spiritual experience. Close your eyes and just feel.”

I close my eyes, an’ we keep goin. I climb off for a second to get the lube, spread it on both of us, an’ we go on with the slow torture. It’s buildin up to the point I think we could go all the way over the edge, but he says, “OK, put him in now,” so I pull off, get his legs up over my shoulders an’ push in as slow as I can stand. I can feel every one a his muscles grabbing an’ lettin go as I go in an’ out.

He says, “You’re filling me with your goodness, and I’m accepting your gift,” like he’s some kind a guru or maharishi or something.

I almost laugh or tell him to stop bullshittin, but instead I shut up, close my eyes an’ keep it slow. Every nerve is sparkin, movin from my dick through the rest a me. I lean down for a kiss, but instead, I lick around his lips, his nose, an’ over his cheek with two days’ growth, feelin sparks now from my tongue too. Then I’m lickin right into his ear. He’s squirmin an’ makin louder moanin noises, just what I like.

I whisper, “You grow the fuckin beard,” an’ he starts laughin. We kiss again, an’ we both pick up the pace. Then he’s beatin himself off in time an’ yelling, “Not much longer … uh!” Just two more thrusts, an’ I’m comin too, an’ I hear myself yell, “Oh God, Jack!” like it came outta someone else not me.

I get off Chuck quick, look to see how he’s takin it.

He just starts laughin again, an’ says, “Don’t give me those puppy eyes, Ennis.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

He fluffs up my hair. “No need. I took it as a compliment.”

Nice a him, I’m sure most people would be mighty offended after half a year or however long it’s been.

“Hey, I’m hungry as a horse,” he says. Me too.

We go down an’ heat up some beans an’ pour ‘em over toast, then sit down to eat.

“So how did you like the videotape?” he asks.

Well, I was surprised how fast an’ how hard it hit me, seein two guys like that, but I don’t wanna say too much. “Not too bad,” I say, “You?”

“I thought it was unbelievably sexy.”

“You must be gay,” I say, an’ he punches me.

When we’re done eatin, the snow’s stopped, an’ I get up an’ say I’m leavin ‘cause I got things to do before goin over to Junior’s.

He gets up an’ puts his arms around me. “This was nice, Ennis. I’m not allowed to say I love you, am I?”

“No, you’re not,” I say. “But yeah, it was good.” We hold on for a long time even though we’ll see each other again in a few hours.
When I get home, Francine is puttin icing on a cake. She gives me a “Happy Birthday” an’ a kiss, then she says K.E. called, woke her up this mornin at 6:30.

Christ. I take a shower an’ go see my horses, an’ think about what K.E. is gonna say an’ what I’ll say back. When I get back in, I call Patti’s number, but get no answer.

Francine is drivin us to Junior’s ‘cause my truck is actin up, an’ it’s then I realize that Tex an’ Bernadette don’t know nothin about me an’ Chuck, an’ I don’t want ‘em to either.

I don’t say nothin to Francine or Junior, an’ everything seems OK ‘cause Chuck an’ me would never touch each other in front a other folks anyways. Junior cooked a roast beef with mashed potatoes an’ roast beets, an’ Bernadette brought a casserole with squash an’ cheese, an’ there’s spice cake that Francine made, a real fine meal.

Bernadette’s a great story-teller, Francine always has plenty to say, an’ Junior puts in her two cents now an’ then, so there’s lots to talk about without me or Chuck or Tex sayin much.

My gift from the girls is a painting of the three of us done by Junior, from a wedding picture I’d never seen, with frame bought by Francine. It’s real nice, with a kind a light like we’re in heaven. Not just that, it’s the three of us together – not something to take for granted ‘cause I almost wrecked that more’n once.

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Monday, Jan. 7

Jannelle says she’s about to close the books on ’84, best year since 1979, an’ we’re doin better than the rest a the sector, partly because a diversification an’ integration, whatever all that means.

Turns out that means another pay raise for me, $25 a week, even though when she says it, Stoutamire makes a face. I say, “I don’t know what I had to do with it,” but I don’t think either a them heard me.

They’re OK with me takin the two days off for the stock show an’ lookin for a new herdin dog.

After the meeting, Stoutamire’s headin into town, an’ Jannelle says to me, “He’s going to brag about his profits to his ranching buddies, and someone’s going to try to steal you away from us. And besides, you earned it.”

“How did you learn about ranch bookkeepin’?” I ask. Stoutamire’d said she studied nursing an’ that’s how he met her, when she was helpin take care of his first wife who died. The wife did the bookkeepin before Jannelle, but I get the idea she didn’t get as involved in makin decisions, or have as many opinions, or at least kept ’em to herself.

“I read up on it, and I took extension classes, and I taught myself,” she says. “You know I’m a Master Cattleman myself? Do you to want learn the bookkeeping? I can teach you.”

“Well, why would I need to know that, if you’re the one that does it?”

“You think you’ll be here forever? I hope you will, but you never know what’ll happen next. If you go looking for a new job as foreman, having bookkeeping skills couldn’t hurt.”

Is she tryin a tell me somethin? I ask, “Is Mr. Stoutamire doin OK?”
“He’s a lot better than he was,” she says. “You noticed he quit smoking? Hasn’t had one since before Christmas. He’s fine.”

“Well, good for him,” I say. Almost two weeks, that’s a great start.

“You let me know if you want to learn about doing the books,” she says.

The old man knows about my lack a schoolin, but I don’t want a tell her. I don’t want a make a fool of myself neither, so I don’t say nothin but “OK, thanks.”

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Thursday, Jan. 10

Flo calls askin if me an’ Chuck want a go out for drinks an’ maybe shoot pool on Friday night. It’ll be a foursome with her an’ Lisa. I tell her he plays poker on Friday nights, an’ she says how about Saturday at the Black’n’Blue Eagle.

“You sure?” I ask. “I mean, what will people think?”

“Who cares? We can hang around with anyone we want.”

“I guess.”

I say I’ll ask Chuck, get back to her.

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Saturday, Jan. 12

I’m out ridin the horses most a the day, an’ when I come in around 4, Chuck calls. He’s havin trouble fixing the rain gutters at Kerby’s house, says it would be good to have another hand an’ another ladder.

I pack up an extension ladder from the ranch shop, an’ head over there. There’s a lot a swearin an’ yelling, an’ a trip to the hardware store, but we get the gutter and downspout fixed an’ sit down for a beer.

“That was a lot better than trying to help my old man a fix something,” Chuck says.

“Me too,” I say. “He was pretty hard on K.E. an’ me.”

“I couldn’t do anything right,” Chuck says. “And the way my dad was, he always made me feel like I wasn’t man enough. God, I hated him.”

First I heard Chuck speak like that.

“My old man was more of a perfectionist,” I say. “Used to make us undo things we’d done not to his likin, an’ then redo it two or three times or whatever it took ‘til it was just right.”

“That’s where you get that,” Chuck says.

“What?”

“Needing to get things right. It’s actually a good thing. Once you did it right, did he laid off?”
“Yeah, I guess.” I’d never thought of it as a good thing, even though I know my dad taught us an awful lot about ranchin, huntin’ an’ fixin’ things.

“My old man would yell at me, then curse and do it himself, and then bitch for weeks about how I fucked up,” Chuck says. “If I ever did get it right, not a word from him. You know, I tried so hard to please him and nothing worked. Get a college degree? So what. Get a job with the federal government? Oh well. Be a leader in the 4-H? Not good enough. It was always, ‘Why don’t you go to church anymore? Why don’t you have another kid?’”

Reminds me of Jack’s miserable excuse for an old man. I put my hand on Chuck’s arm.

“You know, you’re better than that,” I say. “You’re a good man. It’s his loss for never seein that.”

“Thanks Ennis.”

I’m seein something sad in Chuck’s eyes. “Not that my old man was perfect,” I say. “He beat the shit out of us when he was drunk, an’ he took us to see a corpse once, the old guy they killed ‘cause he was gay. I told you about before.”

“You mentioned it happened, but you never said you saw the corpse! Jesus Christ Ennis.”

“It’s part a the nightmares I get, him an’ Jack.”

“I’m so sorry,” Chuck says, so I say, “Don’t be. It ain’t your fault.”

*****

We drive over to Lisa an’ Flo’s in Chuck’s truck ‘cause he’s got a back seat, an’ then over to the Black’n’Blue Eagle.

Everyone already knows each other, but this is the first time we’ve all been together like this – like two couples is the best way I can say it. Feels kinda sneaky.

An’ of course, our waitress has to be Alice, who’s polite as ever but I wouldn’t say friendly, don’t call me by name like she usually does. I almost wish I could tell her what’s goin on, ‘cause she must think I lied to her when I didn’t.

Chuck says all them years in the 4-H an’ he had no idea about Flo an’ Lisa, an’ Lisa says the same thing about him.

“How did you two get together?” she asks.

The place isn’t busy, so when Chuck looks over at me, I give him a little nod, an’ he tells the bare bones a the story. Then he asks, “What about you two?” So Lisa tells their story, most a which I already heard from Flo.

Turns out Lisa was from New Hampshire, an’ she met Luc La Rocque the French professor when they was both students at some college near Boston. They got married an’ moved together to Manhattan, Kansas for his first teachin job, never meanin to stay. Then she had one boy, then the other, an’ then Luc got sick, an’ the rest I’d heard from Flo.

“Anyway,” Lisa says. “Flo and I have an announcement to make.”

I see Flo look at her, while she waits a few seconds to make it more dramatic.

"We're getting married!" Lisa says. I look around to see if anyone is looking at us.
“Of course it’s not a legal marriage, but my sister knows a minister in Boston who blesses lesbian and gay couples, and we’re gonna fly him out here for our big Memorial Day party, and have a little ceremony.”

“Yes, a little ceremony,” Flo says.

“We were gonna announce it Christmas Eve, but then Regent and Francine stole our thunder.”

Chuck says, “Congratulations!” an’ makes a toast.

“You guys should have your relationship blessed too,” Lisa says.

“The hell,” I say.

Chuck says, “We’re already blessed as far as I’m concerned.”

“Anyways, we want you both to be there,” Lisa says.

I’m thinkin May is a long ways off, but Chuck says, “Of course.”

Lisa says, “So Ennis, what did you think about the big break-up? Do you have any perspectives?”

It takes a minute for me to realize she’s talkin about Francine an’ Regent. “I guess not,” I say, ‘cause I don’t wanna talk about my girl behind her back, an’ it’s none a my business anyways.

“Well, I’m just going to say that for a boy brought up by two lesbians, he’s got some really old fashioned ideas about women,” Lisa says. “He took it really hard when she said no. He wouldn’t talk to us for a few days, and then he took off for Laramie weeks early just to get away. I could have told him she’d say no, but he never asked me. How’s Francine doing?”

“Fine,” I say.

“Lisa,” Flo says in a quiet voice. “He doesn’t want to talk about it.”

“Let him speak for himself,” Lisa says. “You don’t? Just tell me this, was it a surprise to you?”

“Lisa!” Flo says, an’ she turns to Chuck. “You put us on the list for a pool table, right?”

He says he’ll go check, an’ I get up to go to the men’s room, even though I don’t need to.

When I come back, Lisa’s talkin to the gay bartender. Flo an’ Chuck are talkin about Argent goin to some college back East to study music next year, someplace Chuck’s heard about. Pretty soon, the pool table’s ready an’ it’s Flo an’ me against Lisa an’ Chuck. We beat ‘em two games outta three.

When we drop the ladies off back home, they all say we should do it again sometime. I’m not so sure about that.

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Sunday, Jan. 13

I’m in my own bed ‘cause even though I was at Chuck’s ‘til 2, I don't wanna get him used to me stayin over.

I cain’t figure out if it was a dream or a nightmare. I was sittin in my ma’s kitchen cuttin pits outta cherries, an’ my dad came in an’ said one a the neighbor boys got hurt an’ I needed to help wrestle
down the calves for the brandin. My ma said I was too young, that K.E. was barely old enough, but my dad said he needed me an’ no use coddlin the boy.

Next thing, I’m out there with K.E. an’ the men, an’ Jack’s there too, a boy like me, an’ then K.E. is whoopin the shit outta Jack, fists poundin away, Jack’s nose bleedin an’ I’m tryin a get over there but my body won’t move.


“You were yelling ‘Stop! Stop!’” she says.

I get up an’ make coffee.

After eatin two pieces a toast an’ drinkin two cups a coffee, I pick up the phone to call K.E.
Someday

Chuck P.O.V.

Thursday, Jan. 24

The Ferrises help me load the two Quarter Horses Kerby wants, and I head out to pick up Ennis. It’s a cold, windy day, but there’s no snow and the sky is clear.

We’re on the road by 8, planning to stop by Bridget’s house in Cheyenne for lunch. On the way back, we’ll stop at my sister’s. I have a feeling Bridget’s will go better.

Ennis is quieter than usual, no more than grunts. I ask him if he’s OK, and he says yes, so I turn on the radio. A half-hour later, he says he talked to his brother last week. I turn off the radio and wait for more, but nothing.

Finally, I say, “And?”

“An’ he’s still a fuckin asshole,” he says.

Maybe five minutes go by, so I turn the radio back on.

Ten minutes later, “He gave me this shit about ‘Love the sinner, hate the sin’ an’ he said we’re still brothers but he don’t want me around his kids. Most a which I never met anyways. What’s that supposed to mean, ‘we’re still brothers,’ huh? We ain’t been brothers for years, maybe never.”

I say I’m sorry to hear about it.

“An’ get this – he’s goin a pray for me. Well, I guess that won’t be at the church where he was a deacon ‘til he fucked someone’s wife an’ got found out. An’ I’m a sinner? Fuck him,” Ennis says, and sets the radio volume high even though the static is almost drowning out Conway Twitty.

I find a new country station that’s coming in clearer. I don’t hear from Ennis again until he’s reading directions to his sister’s house off a scrap of paper. He says she moved since he was last here over 10 years ago.

Bridget lives south of downtown in a split-level house with a two-car garage. There’s one car in the driveway, so I’m a bit surprised when a man our age with his arm in a sling answers the door. He hugs Ennis and says he hasn’t changed a bit, and Ennis introduces him as his brother-in-law Peter, me as his buddy Chuck. Peter says he’s been off all week after being injured at work Monday.

Bridget dashes down the stairs to greet us, “Baby Brother! Chuck!” and hugs us both, then ushers us into the dining room where she’s got a tray of fruit and one of vegetables with dip laid out.

“Aw sis, you didn’t need to …” Ennis starts.

“You shut up,” she says. “It’s not like you come by here every day.” She turns to me, “It’s been 10 years or more!”

We all sit down. Peter seems comfortable, not at all ill-at-ease. He says to Ennis, “So you got yourself a foreman job,” and Ennis talks to him pretty easily. So Peter must know.

Bridget takes drink orders, then motions me to follow her through a swinging door to the kitchen.
“I’m so glad you two got back on track,” she says. “You know, you’re the best thing that ever happened to him.”

I don’t know what to say because to my mind, Jack was the best thing, the one who brought Ennis out of his jail cell in the first place. I’m still trying to break him out of the penitentiary.

So I say, “Ennis is a great guy,” and she says, “Yes he is,” and then starts asking about his girls and Julie. I give her the updates and ask about her kids.

“You know about Marty blabbin to K.E.’s daughter right?” she says. “I’m real sorry about that. Ennis talk to K.E. yet?”

I say yes, and it didn’t go well, and maybe she shouldn’t bring it up over lunch. We pour the Coke into glasses with ice and bring them into the dining room.

Peter is telling Ennis about his job at a leather factory and the injury, which wasn’t too bad, but he appreciated the week off.

Bridget serves us salad and quiche, which Ennis says he’s never had, but he likes it. At a lull in the conversation, Ennis asks Peter, “Would you mind tellin me about Earl and Rich? You worked for ‘em, right?” I recognize the names as the gay men from his hometown.

Peter asks Ennis what he wants to know, and Ennis says, “Whatever you can tell me. About how they lived, not how Earl got killed.”

Peter says Rich started working for Earl’s dad when he was a teenager and he just stayed on, and moved into the house after the parents died.

“What did people think?” Ennis asks.

“I once heard someone in town say they were fairies,” Peter says. “So I asked my parents, and they said they were confirmed bachelors, and why shouldn’t Rich live in the house, big as it is, if he’s the one holding the ranch together. That was true. Earl kept the books and he cooked, but you didn’t see him out there doing much work. Rich worked all day, ate breakfast and lunch with us, but he had supper with Earl.”

“What did the other hands have to say about it?” Ennis asks.

“Some of them joked, never in front of Rich, but no one ever saw a thing. He’d always call Earl ‘Mr. McAlister’ and Earl would call him ‘Mr. Wilson’, very formal.”

“What about the neighbors?” Ennis asks.

“Some avoided them, like your dad, but mostly they were friendly, I think. Rich would take a few of us to branding days on other ranches, and folks would come to theirs. Elsie Heinrich would help Earl cook that day.”

Ennis says he and K.E. helped wrestle down calves at a few brandings, but they never went to one over there. “I remember the two of ‘em goin into town together, or sometimes just Earl, ‘cause we’d see ‘em an’ my dad would always pass some remark, like cocksockers or fairies. Never said nothin to their face.”

“I remember Earl would go to church by himself,” Bridget says.

Peter says, “That’s because Rich worked every single day. I never knew him to take a day off. He
must a been 65 years old an’ he worked harder’n most a the hands.”

“You ever find out what happened to him after he left Sage?” Ennis asks.

Peter says he moved north to his roughneck job soon after that, but he remembers his parents saying Rich had gone to live with his sister near Cody.

Bridget says a family in town who she cleaned house for told her that Earl’s family was rightly angry about Rich taking all the stuff when he left, but they never brought the sheriff in.

This is the first I’ve heard any details about the two men.

Peter looks to me and Ennis, and says, “Are you two fixin to ranch up together?”

I can see Ennis flinch. He doesn’t even look over to me when he says, “Hell no. Like we want that to happen a one of us?”

Ugh. I wish Peter hadn’t brought it up.

But Bridget goes on. “What if you moved somewhere else?”

“An’ leave our girls behind?” Ennis says. “Any place we move, people would figure it out. Two guys ranched up together? You just don’t do that.”

Bridget looks at me. “What to do you think, Chuck?”

I say, “Same,” but I can’t put any energy into it because I’m dying inside. I guess hearing him say it to someone else only makes it more real.

“You guys could be worse off not livin together,” she says. “Think about it.”

Ennis says more gently than I thought he would, “That’s enough now, Bridget.”

And she drops it. She and Peter start talking about their granddaughter, and we finish off lunch, not too quickly, and sit in the living room for another Coke. We’re in the front hall getting our hats when Bridget asks Ennis if he talked to K.E.

“I wish your boy had never opened his damn mouth,” Ennis says.

“I guess he thought Stacy would know enough not to say anything to her daddy, but she’s some kind a evangelical born-again an’ she wanted him to pray for you,” Bridget says. “I’m real sorry.”

“K.E. never paid a fuckin dime a child support for that girl, an’ I’m the sinner she needs him to pray for? Christ!” Ennis says. “I tell you, Bridget, I’m done with him. Done.”

“C’mon Ennis, he did take you with him after I got married.”

“The fuck!” He’s really angry now. “Took me with him? I remember you two sayin that if you put me up for adoption, it’d just be some rancher who’d put me to work. Bridget, you got any idea how much better that would a been? I’d a got three squares a day, an’ a regular place to sleep, maybe could a finished high school even. An’ if they did pay me, the money would a been mine.”

Bridget draws in a quick breath like she’d been struck, and brings her hand to her mouth.

Peter says, “Calm down, Ennis. You’re scaring her.”
Bridget says, “I’m fine. You go on, Ennis.”

So he does. “I’m not blamin you, sis, I know you tried a keep it together. But that fucker K.E. stole my money, all his crazy investment schemes. I was just a kid. Such a smooth talker he was, always goin a get double your money back. Remember the knives? Remember the moonshine?”

“How he ripped me off too,” she says. Her voice is breaking. “Peter, you remember how mad you got?”

“You were fuckin adults!” Ennis says. “And you were dumb enough to say yes. You think he asked me? It’s not askin when a kid cain’t say no for fear a bein left alone in the middle a nowhere!”

She’s crying full out now. Peter puts her arm around her and says, “He done you wrong, Ennis, but you gotta get over it.”

I see Ennis’s nostrils flaring and his jaw working, deciding if he’s going to bolt out of there or try to fix it somehow.

After what seems like at least a few minutes, with everyone just standing there staring at him, his face relaxes and he says, “Sorry Sis,” voice soft. “Like I said, I ain’t blamin you. I wouldn’t a brought up any a this if he hadn’t a pulled that ‘we’re still brothers’ shit, an’ callin me a sinner. I’m your brother, not his, sanctimonious son of a bitch.”

“Well, I should a known he was takin your money an’ takin advantage a you,” she says.

He walks over a few steps, puts his hand on her shoulder and kisses her hair. “You had your own family to worry about. Anyways, it’s just money, right? Really, I’m over it. I’m doin fine now, ain’t I?”

“Sure enough,” she says, still sniffing.

“Aw, come here,” Ennis says, taking her in his arms. I get déjà vu, like I’ve seen him do this with Junior or Francine, or maybe me. Bridget goes up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek. He says something into her ear that I can’t hear.

Then he fluffs her hair, shakes Peter’s hand and says, “Thank you both for today. Peter, thanks. Bridget, we’ll talk some more.” She says yes, hugs him again, says thanks for stopping by, and we’re off.

*****

Denver’s just over an hour from Cheyenne, and Ennis barely says a word most of the way. He’d never told me much about K.E., and I’d never spent much time imagining what his life must have been like after his parents died. Grief, I can understand, just barely, but not at all for a kid just hitting puberty.

The feeling of being absolutely abandoned … no wonder he had that haunted look when I met him back on my uncle’s ranch. No wonder he was so devastated when Jack died. No wonder he was so scared of his girls rejecting him if they found out about him.

All this hits me so hard I feel like crying. I just want to stop the truck, scoot over the seat and hug him and hold him and tell him everything’s going to be all right, but I’m smart enough to know that’s not how to handle an Ennis.

Suddenly, he turns down the radio and speaks.
I didn’t know we’d get into all that old history, sorry.”

I clear my throat. “Don’t be sorry. All families are like that.”

“I wasn’t even mad at Bridget, an’ I made her cry,” he says. “I’m such a shit.”

“It’s OK, Ennis. She’ll be fine.”

“Not like she can go back an’ change anything, any more’n I can.”

I feel bold, so I say, “Ever think maybe some of that stuff needed to be said, even if it hurt?”

He snorts. “Sounds like something you must a heard in your psycho-therapy,” he says. “I never been one to pick the shouldas an wouldas off a the scrap heap an’ take another look. No point.”

“Well … ” I start, but I don’t finish.

He’s quiet for a while, then he says, “How about Earl an’ Rich, huh? Fifty years, Chuck. That’s a long fuckin time.”

“We’d be 90 something,” I say.

“Sure, we’ll be 90 one way or the other if we live long enough, but that don’t mean we’re goin a ranch up together. You know that, right?”

I feel my heart sink. “Right.”

After a while he says, “K.E. better be happy he’s in Montana, ‘cause I got half a mind to track him down an’ beat the livin shit outta him.”

I didn’t get any further than Psych 101, but I’m sure all this anger is good for him. Then something occurs to me.

“Ennis? Why didn’t you take off and get your own job once you were 16, and leave K.E. behind?”

“Huh!” he says. “You remember me back at the Bar Eight, I was shy to the point a scared shitless. Not just scared a K.E. but the whole fuckin world. I could no more a gone out on my own than I could a laid a golden egg. Christ, you think I don’t talk much now?”

This is blowing me away, hearing Ennis talking about himself like this. “I do remember,” I say, because it’s what I remember most about him, his silence. “So it wasn’t ‘til K.E. got married that you stopped tagging along with him?”

“That’s right, when I got that sheepherdin job.”

“And then … Jack?” I say.

He turns and puts his hand on my arm. “You know we don’t have to talk about this.”

But he doesn’t sound angry or threatening, so I say, “No, please go on. I’m interested. So you could function better after the summer with Jack?”

“Well, at least I could open up my mouth to talk. An’ then gettin married, I goddamn well had to go out an’ get myself a job. A lot a jobs, as it turned out.”

“So if you were that shy, how did you meet Alma? Didn’t you say you were engaged when you
went up to herd the sheep?”

“Oh that,” he says, shaking his head. “She was at K.E.’s wedding, an’ shy as she was, she come over an’ talked to me, said I looked lonely. Then she started invitin me to church stuff an’ to movies on Friday or Saturday night, an’ next thing I was buyin her a ring. Then the ranch closed an’ I seen the ad for Brokeback, an’ I thought it might be a way to make some money.”

I want to hear more, but we’re exiting I-25 and I need to pay attention because we’re almost there.

“Hold that thought,” I say.

“Nah, forget it,” he says. “You don’t wanna hear this stuff anyways.”

“Yes, I do. I would have stopped you if I didn’t want to hear it.” Like that would ever happen.

“Well it’s all long gone anyways, an’ who cares? You sure as hell cain’t change it.”

So I drop it. To me, there’s nothing more interesting in the world than the mind of Ennis Del Mar.

*****

We find the barn where Kerby told me to drop off the horses, and I go in to fill out paperwork while Ennis helps a guy unhitch the trailer and take the horses to the drinking trough.

Then we head over to the show and walk around looking at horses and cattle and booths at the trade show. I have to meet Kerby at 5 at the Quarter Horse Association booth, and Ennis finds a stock dog demonstration that starts at 4:30, so we agree to meet at 6 near a barbecue place that looks good.

*****

Kerby and I go to a makeshift on-site bar and order beer.

He says I look good – “Having a boyfriend agrees with you, I guess.”

I tell him to shut up, but I can’t help thinking how lucky I am that it’s OK to be exactly who I am with my best friend.

“Do I get to meet him?” he asks, and I say maybe. Ennis would have to think it was by chance, not that I’d set up a show-and-tell.

Then Kerby drops the bomb I’ve been waiting for: he’s selling the ranch in Riverton and moving the Quarter Horse operation to Arizona, and the Ferrises are going along with him.

I thank him for letting me stay there free for four years, not that I hadn’t offered to pay rent many times.

“You help sell the place and we’ll call it even,” he says. All he’s really asking for is for me to keep the house clean and ready for the Realtors to show people around, so no problem.

We shoot the shit until almost 6, when I have to go meet Ennis.

“Why don’t I just walk over with you?” Kerby says. What the hell.

*****
Ennis is sitting at a table in front of the barbecue place with a paper bag on the seat next to him. I can see him squinting when he sees me with Kerby. We walk up and I introduce them.

Ennis stands up and shakes his hand and says, “I’ve heard a lot about you.” Thank God Ennis said it first.

“You too,” Kerby says. “Looks like you really are the cowboy Chuck told me about.”

Ennis gives me a dirty look, but he says, “Are you havin barbecue with us?”

Kerby says no thanks, he’s gotta find his wife in the show jumping area, and they’ve got dinner plans. Kerby and I try to make plans for later in the weekend, but we can’t match up. I know Ennis would like him if he got to know him.

After Kerby leaves, Ennis just chuckles and says, “Pussy whipped, huh?” No recriminations, good.

When we’re sitting down with our food, I tell him that I’ll have to move off the ranch in a few months. I hope the timing will work out with Queenie getting married and moving out of the house in town.

“So you’ll be livin around the block from Alma an’ Monroe?” he says. “Don’t think I’ll be goin a see you over there.”

“We’ll work it out,” I say.

“Well, none a my business where you live, anyways,” he says.

None of his business – I want to shake him.

“What’s in the bag?” I ask.

“A shirt for Francine, for her birthday,” he says. I go to grab the bag, but he takes it back and pulls out a turquoise cowgirl shirt with fringe and beading, not as showy as a barrel racer would wear.

“I figure if she’s goin a New York, she should take a little bit a cowgirl with her,” he says.

I tell him I bet she’ll like it, and we better get going, because we’re supposed to meet Dave and Andrew at the rodeo.

*****

Dave says he’s tired and they have to work tomorrow, so would it be OK if we left before the bullriding, and that’s fine with the rest of us. Ennis drives home with Dave, and Andrew rides with me to give me directions.

I can’t believe how far we have to go, all the way across the city before we get to the boys’ house on a few acres a bit east of town. Denver is even bigger than I thought.

Dave shows us around, then walks us up to our room and says the bathroom in the hall is ours too because they have their own in their room. I look over at Ennis and he’s beet red, embarrassed by something or other.

“We’ll be up at 7 and we’ll make you breakfast,” Dave says. “We’re heading to bed now, but you can go down and watch TV if you want.”

After he’s gone, I close the door. Ennis sits on the bed and says, “You don’t feel too weird here? I
mean, two queers visitin two queers?"

“I’m OK with it,” I say. “Did you bring the K-Y? I forgot mine.”

“I brought it, but you think it’s OK? Messin up their sheets?”

“We could do something else that wouldn’t …”

He lies back on the bed and I climb on top and kiss him. We end up in a 69, not making a sound, which is strange, but intense too.

Afterwards, he pulls me onto my side so he can butt up behind me, how we usually sleep. Well, usually is an exaggeration because it’s not usual at all.

I say, “I feel like we travelled far today.”

He says, “About 350 miles, I reckon. But I’m supposed to figure out some kind a hidden meanin in them words, ain’t I?”

“We came a long way?” I say.

He tickles my tummy like he does sometimes. “From Wyoming all the way to Colorado. Riverton to Denver.”

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Friday, Jan. 25

Our hosts are both working and I’m stuck at the BLM booth all day, so Ennis has the day to roam the show, which he says he won’t mind at all, looking at all the different kinds of horses and cattle and watching how people show them.

The booth is mostly dead, so I get to talking with the BLM guys from Colorado. One is in an office that covers the whole eastern part of the state, completely flat. The other works west of Fort Collins. The job is basically the same, except the one in the mountains deals more with National Parks and the Forest Service.

Then Ennis comes by to go for lunch, and he’s got brochures and lots of talk about show horses. I’m glad he’s having fun.

Back at the booth in the afternoon, I take out a pad of paper and start doing some figuring.

Three columns: Plan, CWA and EDM.

In the first column, I list ideas for getting out of Riverton – where too many people know us – such as transfer to another BLM district in another state, buy/lease a horse or cattle ranch, move near Denver, open a dude ranch etc. In the CWA column, how I would make a living. In the EDM column, how Ennis would, and what he’d say about the plan.

I let my imagination go. The bottom line for me is I think we should move away and start from scratch somewhere else where people don’t know us. I’ve got money saved and I’ll have more once we sell the Riverton house. I don’t think Ennis has much saved or he’d put some of it into a new truck. It’s possible he took out a big loan at some point to pay child support, and he still owes.

I know Ennis would be most comfortable on a working ranch and I’m pretty confident he could get the thing going himself. Or he could go to work for someone else while we save more for our own
place. Near Denver sounds good to me because I know there’s a gay community there, but Ennis has said even Cheyenne is too big for him, “All them houses an’ buildings an’ cars, an’ people goin from one to the other.”

The dude ranch, that’s pure fantasy. I worked on one for three summers in college and I loved everything about it – taking the guests out, setting up camp, singing cowboy songs at the camp or in the lodge at night. Of course, Ennis would hate all the hospitality stuff, but he’d get to manage a small herd of cattle and a dozen or more horses.

I have to look up a few times to talk to people coming by with questions, but I end up writing a couple of pages of ideas.

*****

We meet our hosts at Taverna Roja, a Mexican restaurant. Ennis and I don’t know much about Mexican food, so we let the boys order. Ennis likes the food, me not so much.

We stay for a few beers, and Dave and Andrew tell us all about Denver and their plans to tour us around tomorrow, including a visit to Freddie’s. Dave says it’s too wild on Friday nights, but we could go somewhere else tonight or just go home and drink.

Ennis says let’s go home, which I knew he would.

Dave opens a 40-ounce bottle of Canadian Club. I notice Ennis is sticking with beer. Between Dave and Andrew, Dave is the talker, and he’s telling tales about Freddie’s and some of the other 15 gay bars in Denver.

Then he says out of the blue, “The hands at my old man’s ranch never had a clue about you, Ennis. You know about the gay lead hand we had a few years back?”

“No …”

“Guy named Rye Winton?”

“Don’t think so.”

Dave says, “When I was 14, I was out riding by myself on my old man’s ranch and I came upon Rye getting his dick sucked by this college kid named Nick, in the trees by the creek. That’s how I found out I was gay. I got a huge boner that I took care of right there, jeans still on.”

Andrew and I snicker. Ennis’s brows furrow.

Dave goes on. “That night after supper, I said to Nick: ‘I wanna do you like you did Rye today.’ And he said, ‘I didn’t do nothin; you’re crazy.’ And I said, ‘C’mon, let me suck you, or I’ll tell my daddy.’ The next day him and Rye both took off, and I hadn’t said a word to my old man.”

“So why did you threaten him?” I ask.

“I was a little brat,” Dave says. “Anyway, I fantasized about Rye for the next few years, and when I was 16 or 17, he came back to work for my dad. I got him alone and told him I wanted to be his boy, and he told me to fuck off, that even he wasn’t stupid enough to touch the rancher’s son. I cried myself to sleep quite a few nights. Then I started going to the truck stops.”

“Christ!” Ennis says.
“Where else was I going to go?” Dave asks. “Anyway, a few weeks ago, who do I see at Freddie’s but Rye, and I bought him a drink.”

Andrew snorts and says, “And didn’t suck his cock.”

“No, I didn’t,” Dave says. There’s some kind of tension between them, I can feel it.

“Which brings me to another matter,” Dave says. “Ennis, you should know that my mother knows about you.”

“The fuck?” Ennis says. “Didn’t I tell you …”

“She guessed,” Dave says. “And relax. She’s totally cool.”

“How’d she guess?” Ennis asks.

“On Christmas, when we went to your place? She’d wanted us to stick around at the house because she doesn’t get along with my stepsisters. When we got home that night, she’d waited up and she just kept asking questions, did you know about me and Andrew, how did you feel about it, since when are we such great friends, and why were you alone on Christmas anyway, because she knew your daughters weren’t there. I said you weren’t alone, and she said, ‘Who’s with him then?’ and when I wouldn’t answer, that’s when she guessed.”

“Why didn’t you tell me all this when you was still in town?” Ennis asks. “Why wait ‘til now?”

“I didn’t know how you’d take it,” Dave says. “And anyway, it didn’t matter because I knew she’d never say anything to you or the old man.”

“Well, I wish to God you’d a told her you were goin someplace else on Christmas,” Ennis says. “You know she’s tryin a get rid a me?” I look at Ennis; it’s the first I’ve heard any such thing.

“What? No way,” Dave says. “She told me more than once she didn’t know what they would have done without you when my dad got sick.”

“So why’s she wantin me to learn how to keep books?” Ennis says. “She told me you never know what’ll happen. What’s that supposed to mean?”

I have to step in here. “Ennis, didn’t you say they had a great year and she gave you a raise? Wasn’t that your second or third raise since you got the foreman job?”

“I guess,” he says. “But that don’t explain why she’d want me to learn the books.”

Dave says, “Well, she told me you’re really sharp, but you dropped out of high school. Maybe she just wants to give you more skills in case anything does happen to the ranch.”

“You sure your dad’s goin a be OK?” Ennis asks.

“How can anyone be sure?” Dave says. “He’s 62 years old. At least he quit smoking.”

“Huh,” Ennis says. “An’ you talk to your ma about every little thing?”

“I’m a mama’s boy,” Dave says. “I talk to her every Sunday, and she tells me what’s going on around the ranch. She definitely is not trying to get rid of you.”

Ennis shrugs.
“You still don’t believe that some people are OK with you being you being gay?” Dave says.

“Boy,” Ennis says, “I lived a little longer’n you an’ I know a thing or two you don’t. Most a the world don’t welcome guys like us with open arms.”

Ennis saying “guys like us” sounds to me like a huge step forward.

“I’m not stupid,” Dave says. “You don’t think I’ve been called a faggot, and a homo, and been gay-bashed?”

Ennis says, “Gay bashed?”

“I got beat up pretty bad one time in a park near the U-W campus.”

“Shit!”

“I was lucky,” Dave says. “Another time I looked at a guy the wrong way at the truck stop near Lander and he pulled a gun on me.”

“How old were you?” Chuck asks.

“What, 18?” Dave says. “I know I’m lucky that worse didn’t happen, like some disease or the sheriff nosing around there. They made a big bust a few years later, caught a schoolteacher.”

Andrew walks over and puts his hand on Dave’s shoulder. “I hate it when you talk about the truck stops.”

Dave says, “Well, it happened, and anyway, I’m alive to tell the tale.”

*****

At around 9, Ennis excuses himself and goes up to bed – tired out by dealing with people all day, knowing him.

An hour later, I undress in the dark room. He’s on the right side of the bed as usual, but he’s got his back to the middle of the bed. I climb in behind him and put my arm around his waist. He waits a few seconds, then takes my hand and moves it down. He’s half-hard, so I grab hold and squeeze and release, feeling him getting harder.

“Ennis? You up?”

“I am now.”

He turns toward me and whispers into my ear, “I got a towel so we won’t mess up no sheets.”

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Saturday Jan. 26

Andrew cooks us pancakes from scratch and sausage with homemade applesauce.

“Sorry if I was dominating the conversation last night,” Dave says. “When I get to hang out with my fellow homosexuals, I get a little too talkative sometimes.”

Ennis snorts.
“Don’t let him fool you,” Andrew says. “He never stops talking, period.”

“It’s just nice to be able to talk about homosexual things with other homosexuals,” Dave says. “Do you guys have gay friends up in Wyoming?”

“A few,” Ennis says. “I ain’t gonna name names.”

“Of course you know about the veterinarian, right?” Dave says.

“Yeah,” Ennis says. “But please don’t tell me how you know about him.”

*****

Dave takes us around Denver to see the sights – the oldest bar in town, the state capitol, a house where the Unsinkable Molly Brown lived – then we drive 40 miles west to Red Rocks Park to see an amphitheater built into a stunning rock formation.

As we’re walking the trail, Dave says the two of them came to an Elvis Costello concert here last summer – “spectacular” – and the two of us should come back next summer and we’ll all see Willie Nelson. I say that sounds great, but Ennis is walking ahead and he doesn’t look back.

Andrew made a picnic lunch, so after walking a trail, we lay down a tablecloth and sit on the ground to eat. It’s a glorious sunny day, temperatures in the 60s or so.

After we eat, Dave and Andrew lie on their backs on the tablecloth and put their hats over their faces. Ennis walks a little ways downslope and sits, then lies down, arms crooked behind his head, and looks at the sky. I look up too; the sky is perfectly clear and a deep blue you wouldn’t usually see in January.

I walk over to him and ask, “What are you looking at?”

“Sky,” he says. “It’s the same sky as in Wyoming, ‘cept no wind. We’re up this high, an’ no wind.”

I lie down right next to him and I feel him shudder, but he doesn’t move away. We lie there a while longer, just looking up at the sky.

After a while, we all get up and walk back to Andrew’s car.

I have to put in a few more hours at the BLM booth, and Ennis wants to go back to the stock show anyway, so the boys drop us off and say they’ll pick us up later for supper.

Ennis is off to a horse training demonstration and to get a card from a cattle dog guy. When he comes back to meet up with me, he tells me about the horse trainer, someone who used the same techniques his dad had read about in American Horseman and had taught him and K.E.

“My dad taught us good,” Ennis says. “You don’t whip a horse to get ‘im to do what you want; you talk to ‘im. That’s what this trainer guy was tellin the folks, an’ some a them was mighty surprised.”

“You could train people to train horses,” I say.

He lets out a snort. “Sometimes I wish I could train people.”

*****

Dave and Andrew pick us up at 6 and we go out to a steak house, Ennis and me paying.
“So we’re off to Freddie’s after this?” Dave asks.

Ennis knows damn well that’s the plan, but he growls and says he doesn’t think he’ll go along, and maybe we could drop him off at home.

“That’s way out of the way,” Dave says. “Anyway, what’s the worst that could happen if you go to a gay bar? Some guy tries to pick you up?”

“Worse’n that, the cops bust up the place an’ throw us in jail,” Ennis says.

“That doesn’t happen here,” Dave says. “Come on, Ennis.”

Ennis grunts in the tone I know to mean OK.

At Freddie’s, we’re greeted at the door by a sweet young guy in shiny new cowboy gear. We find a table not too close to the dance floor. The place is nearly empty, and Dave says we’re really early. There’s no music other than a jukebox in the corner.

We put in an order for a local beer on draft that the waiter recommends.

“So what do you think?” I ask Ennis.

“I dunno … you seen them two over there?” He nods his head toward the bar where two men are kissing with their hands firmly around each other’s butts.

“Yeah.”

“Reminds me a David an’ Conrad,” he says. It takes me a second to remember, the guys in the video.

“An you seen the one in makeup?” he says, head indicating the other direction. I hadn’t seen, so I look over at a tall slim blond, hair like a heavy metal band guitarist, chatting with a chunky guy in a leather vest – no shirt – and leather pants.

“It takes all kinds,” I say.

“Shit, I must look like a tourist,” Ennis says.

“You mean you look straight?” Dave says. “Look around, Ennis. Most of the guys here look straight.”

“Sure enough.”

He doesn’t look out of place at all. As we drink and talk, the bar starts to fill up, and around 9 a guy with a microphone gets up to make announcements – a drag night coming up, an AIDS group meeting and a square dance competition. Then the lights go down and the music and disco ball get going. It’s upbeat country tunes with a DJ.

Immediately, the dance floor starts to fill, and Dave and Andrew get up to dance and quickly disappear into the crowd. The music is loud enough that conversation is difficult, so I scoot around the table to sit right next to Ennis. He pulls back a bit; god forbid we should touch each other here in a gay bar.

I decide to throw caution to the wind. I lean over and say into his ear, “Ennis Del Mar, may I have this dance?”
He turns to look at me. “I cain’t dance worth a shit. You know that.”

“A slow one?”

“Don’t make no difference. I got two left feet.”

Somehow I had the impression when we were planning this trip that his willingness to go to Freddie’s meant he’d be willing to dance too. I’m pretty disappointed, at the same time kicking myself for getting my hopes up. But maybe with a few more beers in him …

Ennis is content to stay quiet, something I’ve learned to do with him, so we sit and drink and look around. Eventually, Dave and Andrew come back to the table, and Dave starts telling stories he’s heard about Freddie’s and another gay cowboy bar that closed. Ennis looks as relaxed as if we’re at Lonesome Lefty’s back in Signal. Which is not to say totally relaxed.

We have another round, and then Dave gets up, says, “Just a minute,” and walks toward the men’s room.

Time passes, and Dave isn’t coming back to the table. At first Andrew is talkative, then he gets all quiet, and then he seems a bit agitated, consciously trying out new topics, first asking us if we’ve been back to Lonesome Lefty’s lately, and then asking me what I do for the BLM.

So I tell him about my job, dragging it out a bit, and he tries to look interested. Actually, he does look interested, which I’m thinking is a great skill for a newspaper reporter.

Finally, Ennis breaks the spell and asks, “What happened a Dave?”

I try to give him eye signals to lay off, but he’s waiting for an answer.

Andrew hesitates and then says, “We each live our own lives,” and Ennis’s eyes go wide as comprehension sets in.

I ask Andrew about his job, and he tells me about the police beat and the crazy things people do.

When Dave finally comes back, I notice that Andrew won’t look at him.

Ennis gets up and says he’s gotta see a man about a horse. “Men’s room safe, or should I go outside?”

“You’ll be fine,” Dave says.

As he’s walking along the bar, I see a light-skinned black guy about our age stop him in his path, as if he knows him. The man is about Ennis’s height and just as skinny, wearing a hat pulled low. I would expect Ennis to step aside and continue on his way, but instead he stops and chats.

And chats! I see Ennis turn toward us and point out the table, and then he turns back and chats a little more, and then the guy steps to the bar and gets a pen and paper and writes something on it, before Ennis finally moves on to the bathroom, by himself, and the black guy takes a seat on a bar stool.

When Ennis comes back, I ask him what that was all about.

“Godammedest thing,” he says. “I’m goin to the can an’ he stops me an’ asks if he can buy me a drink. I take a good look at him an’ it turns out he’s Reginald from the ranch I was at before Stoutamire’s. He was only there a few months, but who’d forget him?”
“Did he recognize you?” I say.

Ennis looks away and mumbles something.

I persist. “What did you say?”

“Said I recognized him first.”

Dave and Andrew have been listening. “So he just walked up to you and asked if he could buy you a drink?” Dave says. “Like a pick up line?”

“Wasn’t that,” Ennis says, but he’s blushing pretty bad.

The rest of us laugh. “Some people would take it as a compliment,” Dave says. “He’s pretty hot.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Ennis says, trying not to give the merest hint of a smile.

"You gave him your number?" I ask.

"Said he could stop by Stoutamire's if he's up that way looking for a job in the spring."

"A blow job, or a hand job?" Dave asks, and Ennis goes red, and says, "You're an asshole, you know that? but then laughs along with the rest of us.

Then Patsy Cline’s “Crazy” comes on, apparently a big hit here, and Dave and Andrew are back up dancing.

“At first, I wanted a smack that Reginald,” Ennis says out of nowhere.

“Why?” I ask.

“You heard what Dave said, he was tryin a pick me up.”

“Look around, Ennis,” I say, “That’s what probably half the men here are doing.”

“I know that,” he says. “An’ that’s what I was thinkin, it could a been you. Could a been Jack for all I know. I bet he went to places like this. I cain’t believe I’m here. How’d you get me here anyways?”

“Crazy” is over, and “I Fall To Pieces” starts up. I grab Ennis’s hand and hold onto it, even though he’s trying to pull it away. “This is us,” I say. “Nice and slow.”

“Oh for Christsake,” he says, but he gets up and lets me pull him by the hand onto the dance floor.

We each put one hand around each other’s waist and hold our other hands together in the air waltz-style. At first we’re pretty far apart, a lot farther than he held himself from Junior that time, and he’s looking everywhere but at me. He’s got some sense of rhythm, but I’m definitely the one leading.

“Ennis,” I say. “Relax. Nobody here but the two of us.” And he looks around, and then fixes his eyes steady on mine.

Gradually, I feel his body loosen and his eyes get kind of dreamy. I feel like I’m melting right here on the dance floor. He draws me in closer and puts both his hands around my waist. He leans in and hums and nuzzles my hair.
“This is all right, isn’t it?” I ask.

“Mmm,” he says. The song morphs into “You Were Always On My Mind,” and we just keep dancing.

But after a minute or so, I feel him tense up, and then he says, “These words are too damn sad.”

“You wanna sit down?” I ask.

“Naw,” he says. “I can take it.” And even though he pulls me in a little closer, I know his mind is somewhere else.

*****

As more and more people pack into the bar, the smoke gets thicker and the noise louder, and my head starts to ache. When Dave asks if we want another round, I ask if he wouldn’t mind leaving, and everyone else is OK with that too.

Back at the boys’ house, Dave offers us a brandy to top off the night. Ennis says sure, but I say my head is pounding and I’m just going to turn in.

I don’t know how much longer Ennis stays up, but when he gets into the room he says “Chuck?” and I startle awake and groan.

“You feelin any better?” he asks.

“No, gotta sleep,” I say.

“OK,” he says.

Some time later, I wake up and see he’s got his back to me. When I move in behind him to spoon up, he reaches his hand around and grabs my ass.

“So you’re feelin better now?” he asks.

“Still sleeping,” I say.

“So get offa me,” he says. “You don’t get to tease me like that.”

A while later, I hear him mumbling in his sleep. I sit up to look at him, and he’s facing me, maybe sleep talking.

I lie back down and I’m trying to get back to sleep when I hear it. “Ah – oh – a-a-aah” and his body is convulsing. What the hell? A heart attack? Or?

He jumps up out of bed, hand to his crotch.

“For Christsake,” he says. “I gotta clean up.”

“A wet dream Ennis?” I’m awake now, laughing. “At your age?”

“See?” he says. “This is what you do to me.”

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Sunday Jan. 27
We don’t have to be in Laramie until noon, and I feel like I hardly got any sleep last night, so when I wake up and my watch says 6:45 and it’s still dark out, I just turn over and go back to sleep. Of course Ennis is up already; he can’t help himself even when he’s on vacation.

At 8:30, Dave knocks on the door. “Chuck? Andrew’s making bacon and eggs. You want some?”

I say sure, and scramble into my clothes and head downstairs. When I walk into the kitchen, Ennis has his reading glasses on, and doesn’t look up from the newspaper.

I put in my order with Andrew, pour myself a coffee and sit across the table from Ennis, who’s still not looking up.

“Good morning Mr. Del Mar,” I say.

He shoots me what looks like pure hatred and nods. “Chuck.” And goes back to reading, jaw clenched. The boys and me get to talking about the new president, George Bush, and then the subject shifts to AIDS.

“It’s bad,” Dave says. “That DJ last night? Every few weeks he’s got an announcement about someone sick or dying.”

The whole time, Ennis is reading the paper very deliberately, every story, every page, looking up once in a while when Andrew or Dave says something, but never at me. I finish my breakfast and say I’m going up to shower.

When I get out, I see that Ennis has packed up his stuff and stripped the sheets. I get dressed and pack my bag and head downstairs.

We thank our hosts and they tell us we’re welcome to come back any time, but Ennis’s silent treatment toward me continues into the truck. We drive over to the barn near the show to pick up the horse trailer. We get out and hitch it up, then head onto I-25, not a word said.

Finally I say, “You want to tell me what this is all about?”

Silence.

“C’mon, Ennis. We’ve got five or six hours ahead of us.”

“So turn on the damn radio.”

I don’t, so after a few minutes, he clicks it on.

I click it off.

“Do you remember we said no silent treatment?”

“So we gotta talk for five or six hours? Bullshit.”

“Well, you gotta say something.”

Silence.

“Talk, Ennis.”

Nothing.
“You said you had a good time at Freddie’s. Did something happen this morning?”

Silence.

“Surely to god you’re not pissed at me because I had a headache last night.”

Nothing.

“Fuckin talk to me, Ennis.”

Finally: “Chuck, your middle name starts with a W?”

“Yeah …”

“What is it?”

“Walker. Named for my mother’s family. Why?”

“Nice to meet you, Charles Walker Ausman. C.W.A., for short, right. I go by E.D.M. myself.”

Oh, shit. “Ennis … you read …”

“Yes I read your fuckin notebook. Idea. C.W.A.? E.D.M.? When in the hell were you goin a tell me about your stupid ideas anyways?”

“Not right away.”

“Not right away. What, you got plans for me I don’t know about?”

“Do you always snoop in other people’s notebooks?”

“You left it in the fuckin living room an’ Andrew asked if it was mine. I opened it an’ that ‘E.D.M.’ caught my eye.”

“Shit. Let me explain.”

“Explain.”

“OK, I told you about my meeting with Kerby, and I need to move out. I need to make a change.”

“So, move. Make a change.”

“I want you to be part of it.”

Silence.

“Ennis?”

“Why would I need a be part a your change?”

“I …” Should I do this? Yes, I’ve got to. “I want us to be together, to build something together.”

“God damn it, Chuck.”

“Why not?”

“Why not? When did I say I wanted a make a change?”
“Just some ideas I was going over,” I say. “Dreams, I guess. Forget about it.”

“No, you listen,” he says. “I got the best job I ever had in my life. I’m livin in the nicest fuckin place I lived since I was a boy. I got my girls nearby. Why would I wanna change anything?”

I take a deep breath. I could let it drop, but I won’t.

“Let me explain my thinking,” I say. “Nothing is happening in a hurry. I’m staying at Kerby’s house until the ranch is sold. I’ve got a job with the federal government that I’m not going to up and quit, and I’ve got the house in town I can live in and pay off Queenie. But I’m not going to lie, Ennis. I don’t see you and me going on dates and staying over at each other’s house once in a while 5, 10, 20 years from now.”

“So put a stop to it right now,” he says. “Do whatever the fuck you want. I never gave you no occasion to believe I’d be willin to go along with any a this other stuff.”

“Ennis, I’m seeing two different issues here. My living quarters and our life together.”

“What I’m sayin is, one a those two things may be changin, but the other ain’t. You need a new place to live; get one. I don’t. Our life together is just fine.”

“You don’t want anything more?”

“No!”

I feel my heart sink in my chest. “OK, let’s stop talking about it.”

“No, I need you to hear me loud and clear,” he says. “I spent 16 years not talkin about this with Jack, an’ I thought he got the message, but ‘parently he never did, least he never accepted it. So I need you to know, goddamn it, Chuck, I am NOT goin a ranch up with you or any other guy. What we got here is fine. We live nice’n close, not like one of us is way down there in Texas.”

God, he’s such a fucking asshole sometimes. I say, “I can’t believe Jack put up with this for 16 years.”

“I don’t know why he did,” Ennis says. “I never gave him no illusions.”

“I know why he did,” I say, my voice catching like I don’t want it to.

Ennis turns his face to look out the passenger window, turns on the radio, finds a country station, and we drive on for an hour, through Fort Collins and to the outskirts of Cheyenne before he finally speaks.

“We gotta stop at one a these rest areas, huh.”

We see a sign for a McDonald’s at the next exit, and Ennis goes in and comes out with a cup of coffee, even though we’d packed a Thermosful in the morning.

When the truck is moving again, he turns off the radio.

“I hurt Jack an’ I put him through hell, I know that now,” he says. “When I tell you what ain’t gonna happen, it’s nothin personal. I’m tellin you ‘cause I don’t want you comin back to me years from now tellin me our life together ain’t been satisfactory.”

Nothing personal? God damn him.
“Ennis, I’m not asking for any promises,” I say. “Not today anyway. I love every minute I get to spend with you and if that’s all I get…”

“That cain’t be,” he says. “Every minute?”

“No, it’s true. Even when you’re difficult.”

“Me?” He’s laughing at himself, always a good sign. I hit him on the arm, but what I really want to do is beat some sense into that stubborn head of his.

*****

When we get to Martha’s house in Laramie at 11, I don’t see Julie’s car, but she’s the one who answers the door. She must have walked over; it’s not too far from campus. She hugs me and says “hi” to Ennis, and then says to me, “Daddy, there’s trouble.”

Before I can ask what, Martha too is at the door. She looks Ennis up and down, smiles and puts out her hand for a shake. “This must be Ennis,” she says.

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am,” he says, shaking her hand and taking off his hat. This is one of the things I like about him, I remind myself – good manners to smooth the rough edges.

She invites us in, and when we’re seated in the kitchen with mugs of coffee, I say, “Julie says there’s some kind of trouble?”

“Well, I’m real sorry to have to tell you guys,” she starts, looking from one to the other. “Joe says Ennis isn’t welcome in our house. He’s at church now with the boys, and they’ll be home in a half-hour or so. You can stay, Chuck.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing, that she told her oaf of a husband – a second generation state trooper, about as dumb as they come – about me and Ennis.

“Why in the hell would you tell him?” I say, voice raised, at the same time that Ennis stands bolt upright, shoving his chair back.

“Gimme the keys, Chuck, an’ tell me what time I should come back to get you.” He turns to Martha. “Nice to meet you ma’am.”

I get up. “No, I’m going too,” I say. “I’m not staying here.”

“I’m real sorry,” Martha says.

Julie’s already got her coat. “I’m going with you Daddy.”

Martha turns to Ennis. “Nice to meet you. I’ve heard nothing but good things from Chuck.”

He grunts something. He’s already got his hat on and the door open, and then he’s gone.

“What the hell, Martha,” I say.

“Well, I had no idea what Ennis would be like,” she says. “I felt like I should warn Joe just in case.”

“Just in case he was a real faggoty faggot?” I ask. “And now that you met him, you feel like he could cut the mustard?”
“Really, I’m sorry. We had to think about the boys, what kind of influence, you know? You could stay for lunch and try to talk to Joe.”

“Like hell,” I say, and then I’m gone too.

Ennis is in the driver’s seat, so I climb into the passenger side and Julie scoots over. Ennis is breathing hard. I give him the keys and directions to the main street that will take us to the campus.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Nothin a be sorry for,” he growls. “You didn’t do nothin.”

I ask Julie, “Honey, do you know what happened?”

“Just that I got there maybe 10 minutes before you did, and Aunt Martha told me Uncle Joe wouldn’t allow Ennis in the house because he’d be a bad influence on the boys.”

Ennis is clenching his jaw and shaking his head.

“Let’s just forget about it and have a nice lunch,” I say. “We’ll go to the sandwich shop near your dorm.”

Ennis doesn’t say a word the rest of the ride or once we get into the shop, except to order a BLT and a coffee.

Julie is chattering about school. Ennis wolfs down his sandwich and gets up suddenly.

“I’m goin out for some fresh air,” he says. “Give me 15 minutes an’ I’ll be back, huh?” He grabs his jacket and he’s gone.

“Daddy, I’m so sorry about Uncle Joe,” Julie says. “Why would Aunt Martha tell him anyway?”

I tell her I don’t know why either, that Kerby and me stopped by plenty of times over the years, back and forth from the stock show. Why did I have to tell Martha about me and Ennis in the first place?

Julie mentions she saw Marty last week at a party, that he’s hanging out with an artsy stoner crowd now.

Then something occurs to me. “You went out with him one time after Thanksgiving weekend, right?”

“Yeah, I told you it was a disaster. We’re not into the same things at all.”

“Did he mention anything about a cousin who goes to U-W?”

“Yeah … he said she’s a born-again Christian Bible-thumper. Why?”

“Well, it turns out he told her about me and Ennis and she told her dad – Ennis’s brother – and there’s hell to pay.”

“Oh shit, Daddy,” she says. “This is real bad, but I had a part in that. He asked me about you and Ennis – he had guessed from something Louis told him – and I didn’t deny it.”

It’s like this whole thing has spun out of control, just like Ennis is always worried about.
Her eyes get glazy. “And then you guys get this today. I’m sorry it’s so hard for you.”

“Well, no one said it would be easy,” I say. I look at my watch – it’s been 25 minutes since Ennis left.

At half an hour, Julie asks, “Should we send out a search party?”

“No, he needs his alone time,” I say. I order another coffee and a piece of pie for her.

Another 15, 20 minutes pass, and I’m about to go out and start looking for him, when he comes in and apologizes, says the campus is so complicated that he got lost. Not likely.

*****

“I can’t tell you how sorry I am about my brother-in-law,” I say to Ennis after we’ve dropped off Julie and when we’re on the road again. He’s driving.

“Why you apologizin to me?” he asks. “I never even met the guy an’ he’s judgin me. He’s the stupid fuck who should be apologizin.”

That’s my Ennis, angry again.

“I wish my sister hadn’t told him,” I say.

“Yeah, well. I guess you never know how people are goin a take it.”

“I should have known Martha would pull something like this after the fire-and-brimstone speech. It’s really disappointing. At least Barb isn’t like that.”

Then Ennis startles me by reaching over and putting his hand on my arm. I jump and he takes it away. I don’t know how to ask him to put it back.

“What kinda guy is this husband anyways?” he asks.

“Typical cop, big burly guy. Doesn’t say much. I don’t think I’ve ever spent a minute with him without Martha there.”

“Well anyways. I guess you’re still welcome in their house by yourself.”

“It’ll be a long fucking time before I step foot in there again.”

Miraculously, Ennis puts his hand back on my arm and rubs it back and forth.

I feel like crying – all the emotions of the last few days and this morning, and his brother, and my sister, and now him making this move.

“What were you thinking about on your walk?” I ask.

“Findin my way back to that coffee shop,” he says.

“No, for real.”

“I was thinkin, first time in my life I been told I’m not welcome in a man’s house that I never met before. You know, I spent most a my life dreadin somethin like that was goin a happen. Runnin away from it. Nightmares about it. An’ you know what? Fuck it. Like I was gonna pull down your pants and suck your dick in front a his fuckin kids?”
I chuckle.

“What’s so funny?”

“You.”

“I’m serious. Chuck, I took another look at myself. Don’t laugh, but here’s what I saw. I’m queer. Still hard to say that, gay or whatever, but so the fuck what? I go for guys. Specifically, you. Specifically, Jack. But what else am I, Chuck? A hard worker, a taxpayer, a law abidin citizen for the most part. Wasn’t the best husband, but I paid my child support an’ I still got my girls in my life. Even my ex-wife is talkin to me. So who am I hurtin? Who gives a rat’s ass how I get my rocks off?”

“You really believe that?”

“I’m comin to believe it. Look at Andrew and Dave. Good people. Flo and Lisa, all their friends. Me an’ you. Good people, Chuck. So why cain’t we live our lives like everyone else? Live where we want, how we want?”

Is this Ennis talking?

“What are you saying?”

“I’m sayin … Chuck, someday, when the time is right, when the situation’s right, if you’ll still have me, it’s goin a be the two of us, you an’ me, in our own place. I don’t know when that’ll be, nor where, but it’s goin a happen.”

I grab his arm and shake it. “What?”

“You heard me. Someday. If you still want it.”

I feel tears filling my eyes, and I pull out my handkerchief. Of course I don’t want him to see me crying, but I can’t help myself.

He clears his throat, puts his hand back over my arm and says, “So.”

Now I’m bawling my eyes out, a whole lifetime worth of tears, it seems.

When I can finally talk, I say, “It might not look like it, but you just made me the happiest man in the world.”

“Well, I doubt that,” he says.

“I want to kiss you.” I’m leaning over while he’s pulling away.

“Get offa me!” he yells. “I’m tryin a drive in snow here.”

“You’re blowing my mind!” I say. “I don’t even want to ask what changed your mind.”

“I already told you anyways. And like I said, not right away. I still got Francine livin with me, and I still got the best job I ever had. An’ a boss who probly wouldn’t fire me for what I do after work.”

“But someday is so much better than never,” I say.

“Yeah, well never is what I gave Jack,” he says. “An’ look where that got him … an’ me … Shit, sorry, we’re supposed a be talkin about you an’ me now.”
“Ennis, I meant it when I said you can talk about him whenever you want. I still mean it.”

“You know you remind me of him?”

“Oh yeah? How so?”

“Persistent asshole. An’ a dreamer too.”

“Both positive qualities, as far as I’m concerned.”

“An’ you’re both short.”

“Six feet isn’t short in most places,” I say.

He snorts. “Huh!”

I want to scoot closer, but I know he won’t have it.

“Hey,” he says. “I’m plumb talked out. Can we turn the radio back on?”

“Sure.”

And now he’s humming along to some of the songs, and even singing along very quietly. I could listen to him forever, but when we’re about a half-hour out of Lander, I have to speak up about something that’s still bothering me.

“Ennis? You said someday if I still want it. Why wouldn’t I want it?”

He heaves a huge sigh.

“Look at me,” he says. “You seen that bar full a men. It’d be real easy for you to find someone better.”

Where in the hell did that come from?

“You’re what I want, Ennis. Why would I want anyone but you?”

He mumbles, “Dunno,” and starts gnawing on his lips as if he’s nervous, not looking at me.

“Me neither,” I say. “There wasn’t a guy there who turned my head the way you do.”

He looks me up and down, getting a total eyeful. “No one turned my head neither. But you sure? I mean, you wouldn’t want someone more sophisticated, better education? Better job? Nicer clothes, spends more’n $5 on a haircut? Better dancer maybe? Someone can talk without stumblin over every word?”

“E.D.M.,” I say. “Don’t be a fuckin idiot.”
Sayin the Same Thing Over an' Over

Sunday, Jan. 27

It’s 6 by the time we get back to Signal, an’ I let Chuck come in for supper, even though Francine’s car’s here. She ends up cookin us canned beans an’ corn, pork sausage an’ applesauce. Me an’ Chuck each have a beer an’ she has a Pepsi.

She says Regent was home over the weekend an’ they got together for coffee. He wanted a get back together, but that was a no-go for her ‘cause he’d think she might change her mind about marrin him someday, an’ that just ain’t goin a happen, she says.

“You know I’ll be 19 on Wednesday.” I say yes I do know, an’ she says she’d be honored if I’d take her out for her first legal drink, so we make plans to go to the Buckhorn Bar for supper. Chuck looks at me, an’ I say, “Chuck too?” Francine says, “Of course. Daddy! He’s family!” Chuck says he’ll work late an’ meet us there.

Francine calls Junior to invite her, an’ then says she’ll be goin over to Junior’s tonight ‘cause Curt’s away again. I know she’s clearin out to give Chuck an’ me space, an’ I appreciate it.

As soon as she’s gone, Chuck is attackin me like a horny dog on a bitch in heat. No, wrong example …

Anyways, he pulls me up outta my chair an’ pushes me to the wall an’ smooshes up my face with his hand, smashes his mouth into mine, wet, tongue all over the place. I ain’t sayin just a minute, slow down, an’ I ain’t tryin a take over myself, ‘cause I kinda like this, a little different from the usual. For once I’m glad Francine’s got the heat high enough to grow tropical plants in here.

He’s makin animal noises as he opens the buttons on my shirt while I’m tryin a unbutton the cuffs. Then my shirt is flyin off an’ my T-shirt an’ he’s lickin an’ suckin at my tits an’ openin my jeans. Next he’s on his knees takin me in, an’ I’m fuckin his mouth, so good, an’ I’m makin noises too ‘cause we can, now that we’re here an’ not at someone else’s house.

I let it out with a loud “uh” an’ then I go at him, same way, even though I’m kinda puttin on a act bein hot’n’horny, ‘cause I don’t get goin again this soon, not at my age anyways.

After, we’re cleanin up in the bathroom at the same time, an’ I’m thinkin this is the way it’s goin a be when we move in with each other, sex any time an’ then doin little things together like cleanin up. I’m tryin not to catch his eye.

“OK if I stay here tonight?” he asks.

I’d like him to, but I say, “An’ drive your truck to work tomorrow with the trailer hitched on?”

“I’ll leave it here and pick it up after work.”

“But you ain’t movin in here,” I say quick. “You know that, right? Too awkward, you bein the BLM man.”

He stares at me before speakin. “But you thought about it?”

“Crossed my mind.”
He reaches over an’ pulls me in for a kiss. “So you’re totally serious about this idea of us living together?”

Is the man an idiot? “That’s what I said, didn’t I? Christ, Chuck, don’t you be like a woman always needin a man to tell her the same things over’n over.”

“You just …” he starts, but he don’t finish, so I don’t know what he was goin a say.

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We settle in on the couch to watch TV, a James Bond movie, one with Roger Moore, but Chuck says he’s seen it an’ it’s pretty good.

The phone rings an’ it’s Andrew, tellin me he followed my advice an’ told Dave he wasn’t goin a put up with no more foolin around with other guys. Me an’ Andrew’d had a little talk this morning when our sleepyhead buddies was still in bed, an’ even though I probly shouldn’t a done it, I let him know my thoughts on the subject. He hadn’t even tried to pretend that what Dave was doin was OK with him.

He goes over the argument – Dave sayin this is what gay men do, it’s not like they’re married an’ all that – an’ the discussion about AIDS, an’ him tellin Dave that he loves him, first time they spoke of such things. He says Dave’s now thinkin over the whole thing.

“Don’t you back down,” I tell him. “If this is what you want, you got every right.”

He says he’ll call me later in the week.

“What was that all about?” Chuck asks, an’ I tell him what I’d asked Andrew this morning, if he was OK with what Dave was doin at the bar, an’ what he’d told me, that he wasn’t OK at all.

“You amaze me,” Chuck says.

“Whyzat,” I say, cain’t help rollin my eyes.

“I wouldn’t have said a word to Andrew.”

“It didn’t bother you none?”

“I figured it was none of my business.”

“An’ you’d be right,” I say. “But remember Dave sayin you an’ me was role models? It works both ways. I wouldn’t want you thinkin I’d stand for nothin like that. I wouldn’t.”

“I wouldn’t either,” he says. “Male or female.”

“I know,” I say. I do know. We got that.

“Anyways, Andrew coulda told me to butt out, but he didn’t. It seemed like he was glad enough for someone to talk to.”

*****

After the movie, we head for the bedroom.

“I’ll be gettin up at 5,” I say. I take off my shirt an’ jeans an’ sit on the bed to set my alarm.
“OK,” Chuck says. “Can you lend me a clean shirt for tomorrow?”

So I get up an’ open the closet door, not thinkin, an’ there are the Brokeback shirts. Jack. I pick out one my newer shirts, an’ close the door as quick as I can.

I hang the shirt on the doorknob. “Here you go,” I say, an’ Chuck thanks me. An’ I’m wishin he weren’t here at all, ’cause tell you the truth, I feel like cryin.

I get into bed on the side with the alarm clock.

“I’m exhausted,” I say, by way a tellin him no more sex tonight.

He kisses me on the cheek. “Good night, Ennis.”

But it ain’t a good night at all. It’s hours lyin awake thinkin about everything – Jack askin me to ranch up with him when the girls was just babies, Jack comin to me after Alma left, thinkin it was high time, an’ me turnin him away again. Both of us goin back to each other year on year for just a week at a time. Him lettin other guys touch him ‘cause I wasn’t there. Christ! He coulda gotten AIDS an’ given it to me. Him takin those damn shirts down the mountain in the first place an’ puttin ’em together at his mama’s house.

What I would do to get them years back, but what kind a bullshit is that, anyways? No one gets do-overs, not exactly, anyways.

But you do get second chances, I’m thinkin. Alma got a chance with Monroe, an’ that seems to be goin good enough. Jannelle came to Stoutamire after his wife died. Tex got a second chance after goin a prison. Fuckin K.E. has gotten an’ wasted more chances than I care to think about.

I look at the clock an’ it’s 2 already, so I reset the alarm for 5:30 an’ when I lie back down, I look at Chuck in the moonlight. This is my second chance, an’ I’m goddamn lucky, I know it. How many queer men are there in all a Wyoming anyways? How many who’d know about bein married an’ havin kids an’ workin on ranches? How many as nice-lookin as Jack or Chuck, not that any a that matters, but …

I lie on my side an’ put my arm over Chuck an’ he squirms just a little, but then it feels just right.

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Monday, Jan. 28

At the meeting, Stoutamire mentions that Stiv gave notice he’ll be quittin in two weeks, goin’ a train on fixin ski equipment near Jackson where his girl is workin. The old man says we should start lookin for someone with calvin experience, but we don’t really need anyone until the heifers start droppin their calves, late March anyways.

“What about that La Rocque boy?” he asks, an’ I say he’s at school in Laramie at least until the end a May.

“But you think he’d be good?” Stoutamire asks.

More’n good, I say, “An’ he’s gettin a college degree in agricultural management.”

The old man snorts. “That don’t mean a thing. Some a them college boys, they don’t know their ass from a hole in the wall.” Jannelle coughs an’ I catch her eye an’ she’s tryin not to laugh. It is pretty funny hearin him say such a thing with the German accent.
“No, well,” I say. “Regent, he’s the real thing anyways.”

Then Stoutamire drops the bombshell I’d been wonderin about.

“Ennis, you know the ranch is doin real good. Jannelle an’ me have been talkin, and I’m nearin on 64, an’ we’re thinkin of maybe sellin the ranch and movin to New Mexico where her folks are.”

So, there goes the foreman job an’ the house, an’ fuck it, I’m thinkin. I guess it’s time to be movin on, but I surely wasn’t ready for it to come so soon.

“The thing is, we want to sell it as a going concern, a turnkey operation,” Jannelle says. “My friend Kelsey, she’s in real estate, she says there are these gentleman ranchers out there wanting to buy a ranch and not knowing a thing about how to run one.”

“OK …” I say, though I got no idea why they’d bother tellin me all this.

“So we’d want you and Tex to stick around and we’d offer you as part of the deal,” Jannelle says. “That’s why I want to teach you the books, make you even more valuable.”

“Of course, it could go either way,” Stoutamire says, “but even if we sell to someone who knows all about ranching and plans on runnin the place himself, you learn the books an’ you know as much as any a these college kids. If he don’t wanna keep you, at least you’ll be able to find a new job easy enough.”

“So you want me to stick around until you sell the place?” I ask. “An’ how long after that?”

“That would be up to the new owner,” Jannelle says. “If he wants you, he’ll make it worth your while. And we’re willing to pay what it takes to keep you here until we sell.”

I ain’t goin a tell ‘em that what they pay me now is just fine. An’ it don’t seem to me like I got any decision to make, the way they laid it out, so I say, “I ain’t goin nowhere.”

Jannelle an’ me set up times for my bookkeepin lessons. Tuesday and Thursday after work, she’ll give me supper, an’ then we’ll sit down to the books.

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Wednesday, Jan. 30

The Buckhorn Bar is busier’n I thought it would be when me an’ Francine get there at 7 an’ sit down with Junior an’ Chuck.

We all order our burgers an’ beers, except Junior orders a Coke, an’ somethin about that catches my attention. When I look at her I know right away what it is, same kind a glow I seen on Alma the very day she told me we’d be havin a baby. I get a warm feelin inside, but I know better’n to say anything.

Junior tells the waitress to let Bernadette know we’re here, an’ to come out an’ say “hi” when she gets a chance.

Francine likes the shirt I got her just fine.

She says Alma started her G.E.D. classes at Central Wy, an’ Lisa La Rocque is her English teacher. Junior tells us about the two classes she’s takin– another art class an’ a French cookin class, along with Bernadette.
“Don’t tell me the Buckhorn Bar is going all fancy,” Chuck says, but Junior says Bernadette’ll be goin for a job at the Grand Hotel in Riverton an’ after that she’s aimin to open her own place.

Francine says she needs to learn to ride English-style so she can teach it when she moves east, an’ could she try out on Bluebelle? I say she’d have to retrain the horse first, an’ even Bluebell might not take well to a new saddle an’ bein made to jump an’ do tricks for no reason at all like they do. Francine says she hadn’t thought a that, an’ maybe she’ll have to practice at some other stable.

I’m a little surprised to hear her plans on movin east are still on ‘cause Francine don’t usually stick to nothin very long.

Chuck says his buddy Kerby found the spread he was lookin for in Arizona, an’ the Flying W is closin in March, with the stock an’ the Ferrises who keep ‘em packin up an’ movin south too. He’ll be pullin a four-horse trailer on the 15-hour trip, an’ after that the ranch an’ house’ll go up for sale.

“Think you’d want to go along to Arizona, Ennis?” he asks, right in front a the girls, so I say I might, depends if I can get the time off, an’ he says I’d only need to take a Friday an’ the weekend an’ I’d be a big help to him sharin the drivin.

Bernadette comes out a the kitchen an’ sits down with us. Her an’ Junior are plannin a big French dinner at the end of their class, all of us invited.

“What’s this French food like anyways?” I ask. She’s already got me eatin Indian curry an’ Chinese stir-fry.

“You’ll love it, Daddy,” she says. “Snails and frog legs and duck liver.”

“Ugh,” Francine says.

“You need to be more sophisticated than ‘ugh’ if you’re moving to New York, young lady!” Junior says, an’ we all laugh.

When it’s time to go, Chuck leans over an’ asks, “Can I stop by tonight?” an’ I have to say no ‘cause Francine’ll be home. He starts to say something, then shuts his mouth.

I ask him if he’s OK, an’ he says, “Sure, Ennis,” but his face says something else.

Francine an’ me drove here together in her car, so she’s drivin me back.

“Daddy, did Chuck want to come over tonight?” she asks on the way home.

“Uh, no,” I say, an’ I hate to lie, but what else would I say?

“Well, just to let you know, it’s fine with me, if he does come over and I’m home,” she says. I got nothin to say to that.

*****

Andrew calls later an’ says Dave agreed to at least try things on his terms, an’ he even apologized.

“Still didn’t mention love,” Andrew says. “But thank you so much, Ennis.”

I say naw, I probly shouldn’t a butted in in the first place, but he says, “Give yourself some credit. You helped me out and I’m grateful.”

An’ that’s the weirdest fuckin thing, me helpin someone out when I don’t know what in the hell
I’m doin myself most a the time.

But I do know this: If I’d a had the guts the day we come down Brokeback Mountain to do what Dave an’ Andrew are doin, an’ Jack an’ me could a made promises to each other same as “forsaking all others” like me an’ Alma did in front a that minister, well then …

Of course, no goin back. Goin forward instead.

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Friday, Feb. 22

Still no official word from Junior, even though a fool could see her glowin’. I was there last week for supper, an’ neither her nor Curt said a thing.

Me an’ Chuck been talkin on the phone just about every night since Denver, exchangin thoughts on one thing or another. I never been a talker, much less a telephone talker, but it’s just a few minutes, like a check-in. I got my bookkeepin lessons Tuesday an’ Thursday, he’s got band practice Wednesday an’ the poker game on Friday.

Me an’ Tex have been workin our asses off with Stiv gone an’ Stoutamire hardly out here at all. Not like him, so he really must not be feelin well. We’ve got nearly 900 pregnant cows we’re feedin, an’ of course the horses, not to mention fixin things. We’re both goin 12, 14 hours a day, switchin off on the weekend.

Tonight we’re goin a the Buckhorn Bar for supper, but first I stop off at my house to take a shower. I see Francine left a note – call Roberta Twist no matter how late you get in.

So I make the call.

“It’s John,” she says. “He had a stroke and he’s in the hospital in Sheridan.”

“I’m real sorry,” I say.

“It doesn’t look good,” she says. “I was up there with him for three days and two nights, but the doctor told me I had to go home this morning.”

“Who’s mindin the ranch?” I ask, ‘cause the stock gotta be fed no matter what else is goin on.

“We’ve got a neighbor I asked to help,” she says. “But he’s got his own ranch to run.”

“Well, I’d go up there an’ help, but we’re short here an’ I cain’t get away.”

“How about that boy you brought with you? Regent?”

“No ma’am, he’s away at college. I can ask my boss, see if we cain’t find someone we can send your way.”

“I’d sure appreciate it. And how are you Ennis?”

“I’m doin good. You know, I think about Jack all the time.” Some a those thoughts are X-rated, but she don’t have to know that.

“Me too,” she says. “And now if John’s not going to be able to run this place …” Now I’m thinkin about what Jack wanted, the two of us up there runnin things. Shit.
“Don’t you worry,” I say. “I’ll help you find someone to look after things, an’ you can spend your time helpin Mr. Twist get better.”

After that, I call Stoutamire, an’ he mentions a few guys who worked here in the summer an’ how they worked an’ if you cold trust ‘em. I call ‘em. Mikey the stable boy who worked with Tex, but he’s takin classes at Central Wy an’ we need him here Saturdays an’ Sundays.

So I call James, an’ his daddy says he’s just doin odd jobs an’ he’d probly be glad for real work. The boy’s quiet an’ pretty rough around the edges, but I get the impression he’s solid. I seen him cry real tears last year when his mama died a cancer.

But the boy’s out an’ not expected home tonight, so I ask his dad to leave James a message to call me, give him this number. I take a deep breath an’ give him Chuck’s number ‘cause that’s where I’ll be tomorrow. I gotta tell myself, nothin weird about two guys hangin out on a Saturday.

*****

Lucky I never get sick a the Buckhorn Bar’s cheeseburgers, ‘cause here I am, havin a beer with Tex. Bernadette gets a short break an’ sits down with us. She says they’ll be gettin married in May or June, an’ Tex asks me if I’ll be best man.

I guess I’m honored, my second time bein best man, though I sure didn’t bring K.E. good luck on his first marriage, nor him to me. The next two times he must a got someone else.

“I’d be happy to do it,” I say. “Gotta be after the last calves’ve dropped though. You ever pulled calves?”

“Just foals,” Tex says. “I’m sure I can learn.”

Bernadette clears her throat. “Back to our wedding plans?”

“I’ll let you know when we set a date,” Tex says. “We’ll be gettin married in Cody so Bernadette’s family can be there.”

That’s more’n two hours from here for sure, an’ I’m about to say something, but I hold it in ‘cause I already said yes.

“You can bring a date,” Tex goes on. “Assumin you got someone special to bring.”

I see Bernadette shoot him a look an’ he flinches like he got kicked under the table. She says, “I’ll be invitin Junior an’ Curt, so you could go along with them.”

I say sure, sounds good. Like hell am I goin a bring anyone special, an’ I’m left wonderin what she knows an’ what Tex knows. The circle keeps gettin bigger, whether I want it to or not.

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Saturday, Feb. 23

I’m supposed a be spendin the day an’ night with Chuck ‘cause he’s got his birthday next week an’ he’ll be goin to Washington, DC for some Land Management thing.

I didn’t know what to get him for his birthday, so I got him nothin, an’ I’m feelin bad about it. Francine’s gettin ready for work, so I ask her.

“Pretty last minute,” she says. “At least get him a cake. You could call Monroe’s store right now
and order one. They’ll have it ready by suppertime."

That don’t sit right, me goin in there an’ pickin up a cake for “Chuck.”

“What, Daddy?” she asks when I don’t say nothin.

“Your mama still workin at the store?”

“She hasn’t worked there for years. Tell you what; I can order the cake and drop it off at Chuck’s when I get off work at 5.”

Seems like a lot to ask, but she says it’s no bother at all.

“How about you have ‘em put ‘Happy Birthday Charlie’ on the cake, huh?”

“Sure,” she says. It’ll be a chocolate cake with white icing.

Still no idea what to get him. More videos? Somethin to wear? Then I get a crazy idea. I’ll stop at the drugstore to get a card to put it in.

*****

I get to Chuck’s at 10 with a case a 24 Buds, an’ we spend the early part a the day watchin videos an’ havin sex, good as always, what I been thinkin about all week.

Then we take his horses out for a ride around the trails an’ into the hills behind. The sun’s out an’ most a the snow on the ground is melted, a perfect day. When we get back, the phone’s ringin an’ it’s James sayin he’d be happy to go up to Lightnin Flat, an’ how much does it pay?

I tell him I’ll have to check with Mrs. Twist, an’ would he be ready to go tomorrow at first light? He says sure thing. Jack’s ma’s not home when I call, probly back up to the hospital in Sheridan. Chuck talks me into callin there to track her down, an’ sure enough, the nurses find her for me an’ put her on.

We agree she should pay him a little more’n what Stoutamire paid last summer, an’ he’ll be sleepin an’ eatin at the house. I’m rememberin that he’s kind a short, good thing for sleepin in Jack’s old bed. I ask how the old man is doin an’ she says not much better.

I call James back, an’ he’s all in, but then I realize I need to sit down with him to go over what I know about old man Twist’s operation an’ how to get there. I put my hand over the phone an’ ask Chuck if he’s OK with the boy comin over here, an’ he says no problem.

When James gets here, Chuck takes off sayin he’s goin into town to get new guitar strings. I tell the boy about the Twist ranch, old equipment, broken-down horses an’ all. He asks about the old man’s health an’ I have to say I don’t know what kind a condition he’ll be in if he comes home from the hospital at all. Could be a long-term job. He says that’s OK, he needs some kind a steady work.

“What’s the old lady like?” he asks.

“Well, first off, you don’t talk about her like that,” I say. “She’s Mrs. Twist to you, an’ she’s a fine woman. She’ll feed you real good an’ take care a you an’ leave you alone if you want that.”

I tell him to get ahold a the neighbor who’s been helpin out, an’ call me if anything comes up he needs help with. I give him $20 for a tank a gas, an’ tell him Mrs. Twist’ll be waitin for him
tomorrow. Then I call the hospital to let her know he’s comin.

Francine drops off the cake. Chuck’s not back yet, so I check his fridge to see what I can make for supper, an’ there’s nothin there.

So when Chuck gets back, I tell him I’ll take him to the Knife’n’Fork for supper, an’ you should see the surprise on his face. Easy to please.

But as soon as I park at the restaurant, I’m changin my mind. I got a bad feelin about this.

“We could just go pick up a pizza,” I say, but he won’t have it, not when he’s got me here already.

We walk in, an’ right away I see Junior. She comes over to help us find a seat. “Mama’s here with Monroe,” she says, barely movin her mouth, cockin her head in their direction an’ smilin the whole time. Well, shit.

“C’mon over here.” She takes us to a table about as far as you can get from Alma.

Chuck sits, but I say, “Just a minute,” an’ I head over there. No use avoidin her or lettin her be the one come over to see me.

“Alma, Bill,” I say when I get to their table, givin each a them a nod. Looks like they just got here too, nothin but water in front a them.

“Ennis!” Alma says, not surprised, not mad. “What are you doin over here?”

“Havin supper, just like you, I guess.” I see her lookin around.

“By yourself?”

“No, I, uh, I’m with Chuck Ausman.”

I know I’m turnin all shades a red, an’ I try to think up some legitimate reason I’d be havin supper with him, but nothin comes up an’ time is passin.

Before I can think up anything to say Alma says, “That’s nice.” Monroe must be memorizin the salt’n’pepper shaker an’ the little packets a sugar.

“You an’ the boys doin OK?” I ask, not knowin what else to say, an’ not wantin to walk away like I’m embarrassed or something, even if I am.

“We’re doin good,” Alma says. “That was a pretty shirt you got for Francie.” So she’s tryin a make it normal too, that’s good.

“Well, nice to see both a you,” I say, givin another nod an’ headin back over to Chuck.

“Why don’t you two come over here an’ eat with us?” Alma calls. “Plenty a room at this table.” So, she knows about Chuck an’ me, Christ.

“No, that’s OK,” I say. “See you.” An’ I’m back to Chuck.

“You ever talk to your ex-wife about this?” I ask him.

“What?”

“This.” I point my finger back an’ forth between the two of us, after makin sure other tables ain’t
lookin.

“No, why?”

“I’m pretty sure Alma knows, an’ they talk to each other.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking I should anyway,” he says.

*****

After supper, we go back to Chuck’s an’ I go in the kitchen an’ take the cake outta the box. First, there’s a cowboy hat an’ boots on the cake an’ second, Francine’s put candles in the box too. I leave the cowboy stuff, but I ain’t goin a put 44 fuckin candles on the cake, so I put just one an’ I find matches to light it.

I turn off the lights an’ carry the cake into the family room singin’ “Happy Birthday.” He’s nice an’ surprised. I take out the card I got him – not flowers, but kind a formal without too many words on it. An’ out a the card drops a map a Arizona I cut out from an old gas station map a the Western U.S.

“Ennis?” he says. “What does it mean?” Well shit, it hadn’t occurred to me he wouldn’t get it.

“Means I’ll drive to Arizona with you.”

He opens his mouth to say something, then closes it, then says, “You know what I thought? I thought you were saying let’s move to Arizona.”

“Huh!” I say. Like that would ever happen.

“And what’s with the ‘Charlie’?”

I’m embarrassed to tell him I didn’t want no one at Monroe’s store to put two an’ two together, so I say, “How about I start callin you Charlie, like back in the day?”

He smiles like he’s pleased. “Really? Do you have a nickname?”

“No.” Not goin a mention kids callin me “Ennis the Menace” after the kid in the Sunday funnies.

“Yeah, you can call me Charlie,” he says. “I’ll think up one for you.”

“Naw, forget it,” I say. How do I get myself into these things anyways?

An’ now I feel like a total fuck-up. “Sorry, I didn’t get you nothin else, an’ I ruined your day too. I couldn’t think a what to get.”

“You didn’t’ ruin my day. You agreeing to drive to Kerby’s ranch with me is a huge relief. But now I’m going to tell you want I really want, all right?”

“I guess …”

“OK. First, I want us to talk about a few things, and you don’t get to tell me to shut up. And then I want to sing you a song, and then for us to sing together. And after that, I wanna have my way with you.”

Aw, shit. If he’s sayin what I think he is … “All right,” I say, after a space.
“So I want to say, Ennis, that I’ve been happier in these months we’ve been together than I’ve ever been in my life.”

“Mmm.”

“And I love you. And I get that you might never say that to me, and it’s OK. But please let me say it to you.”

“I might say it someday, you never know.” Most I’ve ever given him. I can see it in his smile.

“And I’m not going to tell you how much I want to wake up every day with you next to me in our own big bed, in our own place.”

“Good, don’t.” I can’t resist.

He hits me. “Shut up. I’m going to get my guitar.”

He sings me an Ian Tyson song about corrals an’ sagebrush, real nice, an’ then we sing a few songs from Hank Williams an’ Willie Nelson.

Then he puts away the guitar, kneels down in front a me, takes my face in his hands an’ says, “The one more thing I want, Ennis. I want to fuck you.”

Damn, I knew it was comin. I’m wonderin if I should just tell him no, that was only for Jack an’ only a few times? Or just plain no, or OK, just this once? He’s lookin real fuckable himself, with them steel blue eyes an’ messed-up hair.

“Come here, you,” I say, lyin back an’ pullin him up onto the couch. He starts mashin his pelvis into me, shoves his tongue into my mouth.

He says real gruff into my ear, “C’mon, you know you want this.”

He’s right, in a way I do want it, at least I wanna get it over with so I don’t have to keep dreadin when it’ll come up. A couple a queers ain’t nothin like a man an’ a woman where it’s always clear who’s doin what.

“You goin a go easy on me?” I ask, ‘cause I know it can hurt like a motherfucker at the start, even if it gets better.

“If that’s what you want.” He’s kissin my neck an’ startin to unbutton my shirt. I’m breathin hard already.

“Try to relax, Ennis. Come on, let’s go upstairs.” That seems like a better idea, go up while our clothes is still on.

“Let’s take a shower,” he says. Now, if it was me, I’d wanna stay like we are, smellin like men an’ horses, but he’s the one in charge this time.

We take each other’s clothes off real slow, revealin that both of us are havin the same reaction to bein undressed an’ looked at. We get in the shower in his room, a nice big shower with a floor an’ not over a bathtub.

It’s nice, nothin I ever done before, takin a shower with a man, or anyone else. We soap each other up, kind a kinky but seems natural at the same time.

Then we get up, dry off an’ open up the covers to get into bed. I lie down on my back an’ he kneels
over an’ starts lickin my nipples, as much a turn-on as it is ticklish. Then down my tummy to my cock, which is good an’ hard, an’ he puts his mouth over just the head an’ licks around there, playin’ with the foreskin with his tongue. Then he makes a quick move to roll me over an’ starts kissin the back a my neck.

“I should be doin this for you,” I say.

He just goes on with what he’s doin, lickin down my back an’ into the butt crack.

“Hitch up,” he says, an’ pulls on my hips so I’m on all fours, an’ he’s down there lickin the hole, around an’ around an’ then shoving his tongue in. My cock is poundin, so I go to my elbows an’ reach one hand down to rub it.

“Oh no, you don’t,” he says. He gets up to grab the K-Y, an’ I take the opportunity to turn over. He pulls up my legs an grabs onto my dick with one hand while he’s spreadin the jelly around an’ into the hole, an’ then onto his own dick. I get an eyeful, an’ that pushes me just about to the edge.

“Hey, watch what you’re doin there,” I say, “or I’ll be done before you are.” I didn’t think I wanted this, but now I want it bad.

He puts the tip of his dick right onto the hole, then says, “You ready Ennis?”

I grunt out a yes, an’ try pushin out while he pushes in, like Jack told me to do.

“Yow!” I yell. He stops, so I say, “No, don’t stop.”

I kinda like seein him over me like this, never minded seein’ Jack there the few times we done this.

“I’m not going to last long,” Chuck says, in between pantin’ an’ moanin’.

I touch my hand to my dick an’ start rubbin in the same rhythm. When I’m just about there, I say, “Let it go, Charlie,” an’ I feel him explode inside me. Another pull on my dick an’ I’m havin my own explosion. He drops down on me an’ we roll over.

“Thank you, Ennis,” he says. “It was the best birthday ever.” An’ that’s the last thing I remember before fallin asleep.
Monday, March 4

How did my life get so complicated, huh? Now I’m managin the Twist ranch up in Sheridan County along with Stoutamire’s operation, short on help here. Turns out Stoutamire’s heart trouble is worse than he’d ever made out, Jannelle tells me, an’ she’s limitin him to office work, which must be killin him.

At the Monday meetin, I say we need to hire someone ‘cause the cows’ll be droppin their calves soon. Rocky, old ranch hand who usually comes around this time a year hasn’t showed up yet, an’ anyways he’s one a those that goes AWOL for a few days each time he gets paid.

The old man makes it clear that hirin is my job, but he says he’ll help me out, an’ I’m grateful. He says we’ll phone in ads to the Farm an’ Ranch Report an’ the Fence Post this mornin, use his office number for people to call back, an’ the both of us’ll do the interviewin. He says we’ll aim to hire two hands with calvin experience, ‘cause Tex don’t have any an’ he’s busy enough with the horses anyways.

Good thing, James is workin out fine for Jack’s ma. I spoke to her an’ him both yesterday. They’ve only got 10 pregnant cows, an’ they’re on a later schedule. Jack’s old man is doin no better, an’ his ma is frettin about arrangements for carin for him once he gets outta the hospital. So far, he cain’t move or talk, an’ I gotta feel bad for both a them, ‘cause no one deserves that.

Chuck was gone most a last week to Washington D.C. for some government junket – actually he’s sayin it was work. We got together Saturday night as usual, an’ then I spent Sunday helpin him fix things at Kerby’s house ‘cause that’ll be goin on the market soon.

When I get home from work, Junior calls to invite herself over here Friday night, or me to go there ‘cause Curt’s gone. Did I ever say I was lucky to have these two girls, best girls in the world far as I can tell.

Thursday, March 7

Tex an’ me are replacin’ rotten wood in the calving barn, just about to break for lunch, when Jannelle drives up in Stoutamire’s Ford truck, a rare sight. I walk up to greet her.

“Jannelle?” I took to callin her by her first name, well she made me do it, after she started showin me the ways a ranch bookkeepin a few weeks ago. That’s comin OK. I did good in arithmetic an’ math, the little schoolin I got. I like it when the answer is either right or wrong, not some big mystery.

“Ennis,” she says, not gettin out a the truck. “Riverton Hospital just called. Something about Alma? You’re supposed to call back. C’mon an’ I’ll take you up to the house.”

I got a phone in my office out here, but I’m not thinkin straight, so I get in an’ ride with Jannelle to the house. Why would the hospital be callin me about Alma?

I dial the number from the phone in Stoutamire’s office off the kitchen.

“Nursing supervisor,” a woman answers.

“This is Ennis Del Mar. I’m supposed to call this number about Alma Monroe?”

Helpin Out
“Just a moment … I’m not finding that name. Are you sure?”

I cup the phone an’ call to Jannelle in the kitchen. “You sure it was Riverton Hospital?”

“Yes.”

Then it hits me … oh my god … “Try Alma Stroebler?” I say. Now my heart is poundin.

“Just a minute,” the woman says, an’ then I’m waitin on hold.

“Mr. Del Mar?” Another woman’s voice.

“Ma’am?”

“Your daughter had a miscarriage and a D&C, and she asked us to call you. We’re ready to release her, but she’s very emotional, so it’s best if you come to take her home.”

“She OK?” She’d never told me she was expectin, nor anyone else as far as I know.

“Yes, she’s being released.”

“Did you call her mama?”

“No, she asked us to call you.”

“You called Curt right? Her husband?”

“She asked us to call you.”

This is crazy-makin. Why’d she ask ‘em to call me?

“I’ll be right there,” I say. “Where do I go once I get there?”

“Outpatient recovery.”

I hang up an’ my mind goes blank. For a second, I cain’t even remember where the damn hospital is, even though I took Francine there enough times when she had the asthma bad.

I step into the kitchen. “Uh, Jannelle? My older girl had an emergency and wants me to go pick her up at the hospital.”

“I’m sorry to hear it,” she says. “You get going. I’ll tell Karl. Take the rest of the day off if you need to.”

But I cain’t move. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Uh, she had a … miscarriage. What am I supposed to do?”

“Oh, Ennis, come here,” and she hugs me, even though that’s not what I asked for. “The baby would have been your first grandchild, right?”

Christ, I hadn’t even thought about that, just about what Junior must be goin through. I say, “I reckon.”

“I’m so, so sorry,” she says. “You just be there for her. You don’t have to say a thing. Just listen.
Come on, I’ll drive you down to get your truck.”

*****

It’s 15 minutes to the hospital, an’ I’m tryin not to speed, ‘cause a ticket now would only make things worse. I’m thinkin that surely Alma’ll be there, an’ what would Junior want with her old daddy anyhow in such a delicate situation?

But they send me to room 202, an’ when I get there, Junior is alone, sittin on the edge of a bed, face puffed out an’ eyes red. It’s just me an’ her, an’ I’m exactly where I should be.

“Daddy!” she says as soon as she sees me, an’ she bursts into tears. I walk over an’ kiss her hair an’ sit on the bed next to her, put my arm around her shoulders. She cries into my shoulder for a long time.

Then she pulls away an’ looks at me.

“I …” she starts, then bursts back into tears. I hold her an’ pat her hair.

A nurse comes in an’ makes up the other bed in the room an’ then leaves.

Junior pulls out a the hug.

“Daddy, I … never … told him,” she says.

“You never told Curt you was expectin?” I ask. I’m makin my voice as calm an’ quiet as I can.

“No, I thought he would get mad.”

I hug her again. More tears. Another nurse comes in.

“Darlin, let’s get outta here,” I say. “I’ll take you home. She’s free to go, right?” I ask the nurse.

“Yes. The doctor gave her a sedative, so she shouldn’t be driving. And she’s got a prescription she should have filled, just in case she needs more.”

“That’s OK, I’ll drive,” I say.

The nurse takes a bag from the chair an’ hands it to Junior. “Here are your clothes, Dearie.”

“I’ll step out so you can get dressed,” I say.

The nurse says, “You can wait by the nurse’s station. I’ll come and get you.”

I lean on the counter wonderin what good I can do. I gotta find out if she tried a call Alma or Curt. Junior’s on her feet when I get back to the room face washed, an’ she’s tryin a smile.

“C’mon you,” I say. I put my arm around her shoulders an’ we walk out, down the hall an’ out the door.

“Can we take my car?” she asks. “It’s got heat.”


“Not since breakfast.”
“I’ll make ya something.”

“Daddy, we gotta stop at the drug store,” she says, so I turn toward town.

When I stop in front a the Rexall an’ she don’t make a move to get out, I say, “What can I get for you?”

She says she’ll go in an’ I say no to that, so she takes her prescription outta her purse an’ says so quiet I can barely hear, “I need Kotex, Daddy. Lots of ‘em.”

“No problem,” I say. “An’ don’t go thinkin it’s the first time I ever went into a store to buy such things.”

At Junior an’ Curt’s house, I help her out her side a the car, an’ open the side door to let us in.

“I’m gonna lie down,” she says.

“You need more a those pills?” I ask.

“I’m going to try to sleep without it.”

“OK. You need help up the stairs?”

“No, Daddy.” She starts up the stairs slow, then stops halfway up. I head up two stairs at a time, grab ahold of her around the waist an’ walk her the rest a the way an’ into her an’ Curt’s room. She lies down on the bed, sobbin quiet, an’ I take her shoes off an’ then cover her.

“You take it easy,” I say, an’ kiss her forehead. “Get some sleep.”

I go back down an’ think about callin Jannelle or Alma or even Chuck for some advice, but I still don’t know if Junior told her own ma, an’ besides, Jannelle already told me to just be here for her, an’ I ain’t goin a bother Chuck at work.

I make coffee an’ look through the fridge an’ cupboards to see what I’ll make us to eat once she gets up. She’s got fixins for grilled cheese an’ tomato soup, so I settle on that.

At 2, I haven’t heard from her, so I head up the stairs. The door to her room is still open, an’ she’s sittin up in bed cryin.

“Oh, Honey,” I sit down next to her. “C’mon, have something to eat.”

“I’m just gonna wash my face,” she says, tryin a hold back more sobs.

We stand an’ I take her arm an’ take her over to the bathroom.

“You come down when you’re ready,” I say.

While I’m cookin lunch, Junior pours herself a mug a coffee an’ sits down, starin into space.

I set down our food and sit myself.

“It’s funny, you making me lunch,” she says. “Thanks.”

“Least I could do.”

She’s quiet through lunch an’ when we’re finished, I fill up both our coffee mugs, clear the plates,
an’ run water into the sink.

“Daddy, those go in the dishwasher,” Junior says, but she’s not gettin up.

“I don’t mind a do it,” I say. I wash up the dishes, soup pot an’ fryin pan an’ then dry them. I sit back down.

“I wouldn’t have bothered you,” she says, “But I couldn’t stop crying and they wanted someone to take me home.”

“Your mama wasn’t around?” I ask.

“I don’t know if she was,” Junior says. “I asked them to call you. No use calling Curt ‘cause he’ll be driving home tomorrow night anyways, and he drives fast enough already.”

“Don’t you worry about nothin,” I say.

“There’s a lot to worry about.”

“You wanna talk about it?”

“No, but I need to, I guess. I need your advice.” I cain’t remember the last time, if it ever happened, one a my girls asked for my advice about anything.

“OK,” I say.

“It’s really personal.”

“Go ahead, Darlin.”

“Well, I didn’t tell Curt, like I told you. I stopped taking the pill ‘cause I wanted to get pregnant, and I figured I’d just pretend I’d made a mistake. I was about to tell him. I’ve known since January.” She’s sniffin an’ tryin not to start up cryin again.

“I didn’t want to tell him ‘cause he’s got this plan – buy a house, then have kids. And we almost have enough saved for the downpayment …”

I nod, wait for her to go on.

“But I don’t want to move to Gillette,” she says, and the tears come back. “That’s why I signed up for more classes at the college.”

I stand up an’ walk over to her an’ stroke her hair an’ she leans her head on me. A million questions are rushin into my head, but it’s her story to tell.

“I guess I need to talk this out with Curt, huh?”

“I reckon.”

After a moment, she says, “You and mama just went ahead and had babies and didn’t worry about things like buying a house.”

I give a little cough. “Naw, it wasn’t like that. We didn’t do no plannin at all, an’ you know we never could buy no house, not on the kinda money I was makin.”

“I know. Mama went on and on about that,” she says, rollin her eyes. “What I mean is, you didn’t
plan every little step.”

“True enough. I don’t think most folks did back then. But our marriage weren’t no kind a role
model.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to …”

“Nothin to be sorry for.”

“What should I do, Daddy?”

An’ there it is. I don’t have to think this one through too much. “You already know what you
should do – you need a talk things out with Curt. Ever’thing. Babies, where you’re goin a live. You
told me Curt loves you. That still the case?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Then I cain’t see no reason on earth why you wantin a have his baby would piss him off. An’ he’d
wanna know about the pain you’re feelin right now ’cause a this … miscarriage. To help you get
through it.” Said more’n I meant to.

“He’ll be home tomorrow night,” she says. “And you know? You’re right. He’s really reasonable.
Did I ever tell you …?” But she cuts herself off.

“Tell me what?”

“Oh, never mind.”

“All right then.” I go over an’ pick up the coffee pot to pour another, but it’s empty.

“Here, I’ll make some more,” Junior says.

“No, you sit right there.” I get another pot goin in the contraption.

Then I sit back down. She looks at me real determined.

“I do want to tell you what I was going to say before,” she says. “You know I told Curt about you.”


“I told him two nights before our wedding. I laid it out, and I said if he had a problem, tell me right
then. And he said what about our kids? And I said you’ll be their grandfather, just like his daddy.”

I gotta stop her. “Jesus, Junior, you don’t need to tell me all a this.”

“No, I want to,” she says. “I want you to know where we stand. Curt said he’d be OK, as long as he
never had to see you an’ Jack Twist prancin around, like that would ever happen. So we went ahead
an’ got married.”

“OK,” I say.

“Well it turned out Jack had died, and then you took up with Chuck, and Curt became aware of that
the time we went out at Thanksgiving.” That fuckin night, it’ll never go away, will it?

“Mmm,” I say.
“We talked about it, the whole thing, and Julie came over too. And that’s when Curt started to understand better … what you’re like, how tough things are for … anyway. Up to that time, I was scared, not knowing if he really got what I’d told him before we got married.”

“All right.”

“So then I knew, him and me, we’d be OK. And that’s when I went off the pill, but I didn’t tell him.”

I don’t know how to take all this, that my queer disposition was messing with my 20-year-old daughter an’ her life.

“Oh honey,” I say. “I’m real sorry for causin you all this trouble.”

“No trouble,” she says. “Daddy! What I’m trying to tell you is, he really, really loves me and I love him, more than ever.”

“So you’ll talk to him,” I say.

“Yeah,” she says. “You know, when the doctor first told me I was losing this baby, I thought about not telling him about it at all.”

“Secrets’ll kill ya,” I say. That much, I do know.

“I’m seeing the wisdom of that,” she says. “Thank you, Daddy. Thanks for getting me at the hospital. You need to get back to the ranch, don’t you?”

“Nah.”

“Then can you stay here with me? I’d like to lie down for a while, and then can we go for a drive?”

“Sure. Where to?”

“Where’s the best sunset?” Nice. Just like we used to do.

“I know jus’ where to go,” I say. “How about I wake you at 5.”

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I make ham sandwiches an’ pack ‘em along with apples an’ a few beers and Pepsis. I find some foldin chairs in the basement an’ put ‘em in the trunk a Junior’s car.

She’s quiet on the ride. She turns on the radio an’ switches it to my usual country music station.

We drive to the Boysen Reservoir an’ I park at a scenic lookout with a nice view.

The day’s been clear, an’ the sun is still up over the mountains. No one else here.

Junior switches off the radio an’ says, “You taught me how to park just like that, one turn, even in a truck. I always have to laugh when I see people rocking in an out of a space. And you’re right between the lines, even though we’re the only car here.”

I remember teachin her.

I take out the chairs an’ we sit quiet, watchin the sun goin down and the sky darkenin. After a while, I take out the sandwiches an’ we eat an’ drink without sayin a word.
At the very last a the light, Junior says, “How are you doing anyways, Daddy?”

“Good enough,” I say. “Why?”

“You and Chuck are happy together?”

That’s no kind a question, but I say, “I guess.”

“You guess. Dad-dy!” She gives me a little punch. “I know you are! I see you! And I talk to Julie!”

“All right then.” I clear my throat. She knows enough to stop.

“We should get together more often, just you and me,” she says.

“Sounds good,” I say. “You wanna head home now?”

“Sure. Daddy? Can you stay the night?”

“If that’s what you want.” I’ll have to call Francine an’ let her know I won’t be home, an’ I’ll call Chuck too.

“Good,” she says. “I’ll wake up early and make you breakfast and take you to get your truck.”

Saturday, March 9

I wake up to the phone ringin – it’s 5:30, high time to get up anyways. I pull on a pair a jeans an’ go out to the kitchen to answer it.

“Daddy, are you up?” It’s Junior, of course I’m up.

“Yes.”

“Daddy, I have so much to tell you, but first, thank you for being there Thursday and again last night. And Curt thanks you too.”

“Hush, now,” I say, ’cause where else would I have been? I left Friday mornin to work, an’ I went back after an’ brought over a chicken casserole an’ oatmeal cookies that Jannelle had made, an’ we sat an’ talked an’ watched “Dallas” ‘til Curt got home at 10. Junior never did call her ma to tell her what happened, an’ she told me not to tell Francine neither.

“What do you have to tell me, anyways?”

“Well, first, I told Curt about losing the baby, and you were right. He wasn’t mad at me at all, and he was as sad about it as I was. But he had his own bad news … he got laid off.” She don’t sound like it’s bad news at all.

“Sorry to hear that,” I say.

“Well, we’re gonna go through the Riverton Ranger, and then go to the library and go through newspapers from Laramie and Cheyenne and Denver, and find out who’s hiring. You don’t have any jobs, do you Daddy?”

“Not unless he’s got experience pullin calves,” I say. “He ever worked on a ranch?”
“He was at his grandpa’s ranch every summer until he sold it a few years ago,” she says.

“You have him call me,” I say. “So everything went OK?”

“We were up all night talking,” she says, even though she don’t sound like it. “Good thing I slept all day. Curt’s sleeping now.”

“Darlin, it’s good to hear you soundin’ so much better,” I say. Chuck told me on the phone last night she should see a counselor about the grievin, but she sounds OK to me.

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Friday, March 15

So now I got Curt workin’ for me at the ranch, James still up in Lightnin Flat while Old Man Twist ain’t showin no signs of improvin. The nice thing is, switchin with Tex for some days next weekend, I get to take this trip to Arizona with Chuck.

But Jesus, 15 hours is a hell of a long drive, an’ we cain’t even pick up speed ‘cause we’re pullin a quad trailer behind Chuck’s F-150.

We get to Kerby’s new ranch near Prescott at 9:30, real good time since it was nearly 7 by the time we left Riverton this mornin. I’d come over to help Chuck load up the horses, last to go since the Ferrises shipped off a 12-horse rig pulled by a professional a few days ago. Stoutamire didn’t like me takin the time off, but Jannelle seems to be runnin the show now an’ she said it would be fine if I got the time covered, ‘cause the calves won’t be droppin for a few more weeks anyways.

Kerby’s already got the Flyin W entrance gate up with the big W brand an’ wings on the crossbar. First thing we see drivin in is a ranch-style house, big enough with a few pickup trucks parked in the driveway. Chuck says that’s where the Ferrises live – the couple an’ two grown boys who ran the Wyoming operation after Kerby left. They’ll be here now.

Further up the drive, there’s the big house, an’ I mean big – nearly a whole two-story wall a windows on the front. Chuck told me Kerby inherited money an’ then married money. He met the gal, a few years younger, at a Quarter Horse show in Fort Worth five years ago, an’ when he finally got married for the first time, he was nearly 40.

There’s a half-circle driveway in front, but we drive around to the back an’ stop, an’ already Kerby an’ his wife – Lara, not Laura – are out greetin us. Kerby tells me an’ Chuck to go on in the house an’ Lara’ll fix us somethin to eat an drink, an’ he’ll get the Ferris boys to take care a the unloadin.

Lara’s a nice lookin blonde maybe 10 years younger’n Kerby, lots a energy. She gets me’n Chuck beers from the fridge, an’ heats up some chili an’ garlic bread. After askin us about the drive, she gets all shy an’ says, “We’ve got lots of room here … you guys each want your own room, or do you want to share?”

Chuck an’ me both speak at once, me sayin two rooms, him sayin one. I feel like crawlin under the table, but she laughs an’ says no use messin up two rooms if we’d end up together anyways, an’ Chuck says it’s settled then.

I’m sputterin to say somethin, but Lara catches that an’ says, “I’ll make up the other room for you, Ennis. It’s no trouble at all.”

An’ now I feel like a total fool. After we’re done eatin, Kerby comes in an’ says the horses are doin’ fine after their ordeal. He sits down with us an’ offers us whiskey, an’ we both say OK.
Lara’s cleanin off the table, an’ I start helpin her but she says no, sit down, you’re our guest.

“I’ve got a big surprise for you two,” Kerby says. “You don’t have any plans for tomorrow, do you?”

“Just to rest up,” Chuck says.

“Well, how’d you like to go to a Cubs spring training game in Phoenix? They’re playing the Dodgers.”

Holy shit! I never been to a major league game, an’ I doubt Chuck has either. Chuck says, “We’d love it. You’re driving?” an’ Kerby says of course, both ways, so it’s set.

Kerby says that before leavin’ for Phoenix, we’ll have time to ride around the ranch on three of his best horses, an’ I say the ones we hauled looked like real fine creatures.

“Ever worked with a pure Quarter Horse?” he asks. I can see he’s doin a little sales job on me. I tell him I have, an’ it’s a good breed. But for cow horses, more’n half the work is the trainin, so why pay the money for a purebred when you can train a half-Quarter to do the work?

“You do the training yourself?” he asks, an’ I realize he must be thinkin I was braggin, so I say no, I got a boy doin that. But Chuck says, “Ennis is a hell of a good horse trainer,” an’ I have to kick him under the table, damn fool.

Kerby asks if Chuck brought his guitar, an’ Chuck says yeah, he’ll get it. Turns out Kerby plays too an’ Lara’s got a strong singin voice like Linda Ronstadt, so they put on a real nice concert.

Chuck looks at me with a question in his eyes, but he don’t bother to ask me if I’ll sing, thank god, ‘cause he knows I wouldn’t an’ I’d have to kill him.

I pour myself another glass a whiskey. They’re singin “Desperado,” an’ I’m thinkin, hell, that was me, even when Jack was still alive. It wasn’t just the bein alone an’ lonely most a the time, it was this idea they talk about in the song about losin all your highs an’ lows. Me an’ Jack, the way we was livin, the highs was only but a couple a times a year, an’ the rest a the time it was the lows, months an’ months at a time. By the end I could tell Jack wasn’t as happy in our times together. I knew it a long time before that last meetin, an’ that goddamn postcard, an’ it made me sad too. I hate knowin that I could a done something about it, for him an’ for me, if only I’d a had the guts.

Then there’s that other thing, I didn’t have one fuckin person I could talk to about it. This thing with Chuck is so different, probly a dozen or more folks know about us by now, even if I don’t share my business with hardly anyone.

I know I flinched when Lara asked about our sleepin arrangements, an’ I felt that again when Kerby said “you two” an’ when Chuck said “we.” Me an’ Jack, we never had that. No one knew us as “you two,” an’ I never let Jack nor me think of us as “we.”

An’ now I’m wonderin if Jack talked to anyone about me besides his folks. Did he mention me when he was gettin blown by some Mexican, or gettin fucked by that son-of-a-bitch ranch foreman? Or any a the other guys he might a met?

Shit, I gotta bring my attention back to bein here listenin to music. It’s the whiskey that put them dark thoughts in my head, I know it. I do a lot better when I can look at my time with Jack like it was a movie – perfect the way it was, with no endin, an’ not thinkin much deeper’n that. Like an older guy I worked with a few years back said, “Don’t live in your head; it’s a dangerous place.”

I clap at the end of the song, an’ then Lara sings “Crazy Arms” an’ I gotta say she’s really good,
Chuck an’ Kerby too. Better to think on that than old memories I cain’t do a goddamn thing about anyhow.

It’s nearly midnight when Lara yawns an’ says she’ll go make up the room for me, an’ Kerby shoots his eyes over to Chuck, an’ I clear my throat an’ say, “Uh, no need for that.”

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Sunday, March 17

We’re up an’ out before sunup, pullin the empty horse trailer, so we can drive a little faster an’ hope to be home at a reasonable hour ‘cause we both gotta work tomorrow. Lara packed us enough food for an army so we won’t have to stop an’ eat.

“Well, what did you think?” Chuck asks once we’re on the road.

“Think a what?”

“The weekend.”

“Real good,” I say.

“Can you be specific Ennis?”

“I’ll try, if we can have some quiet after that. I been talkin a people all weekend.”

“You’ve been with people, but you didn’t say that much.”

“I said everything I needed to say.”

“It wasn’t a criticism,” Chuck says. “They liked you. Kerby said he wished you could come down here and work for him.”

“No way,” I say. “I don’t know nothin about breedin horses, an’ it looks like he’s set up already with them Ferrises. An’ 900 miles from my girls? No fuckin way.”

“Go ahead and tell me what you liked about the weekend.”

“OK … So your friend Kerby, he’s alright. Lara, she’s real nice. I didn’t know how it would go, two queers goin a visit a nice married couple, but they made it so it didn’t matter at all. Goin to the ballgame, that was the highlight for sure. We wasn’t 10 yards from the dugout! An’ you caught that foul ball off a Davey Lopes. That was real nice a Kerby.”

“Whew!” Chuck says, an’ he looks over at me. “You know how good it makes me feel to hear you say that? Not just because Kerby’s been my best friend since college, but because this is it, Ennis. Don’t you see? We do things like this on the weekend. We go to Denver. We hang around Riverton and go for a drink or ride our horses or fix the leak under your sink. We’re a couple, me and my boyfriend – Hey! Don’t hit me when I’m driving! – Me and my partner in gayness.”

“For Christsake, shut the fuck up,” I say. “Time for quiet now.” But I cain’t help smilin when I turn on the radio. We both sing along to the songs we know.
Three Weddings an' a Funeral

Monday May 27

Well, the snow finally melted, the grass greened up, the calves dropped, quite a few all-nighters an’ even more paperwork. I hired more new hands an’ a new lead hand, a wiry little guy no taller’n Francine who everyone calls “Little Joe” an’ he don’t seem to mind.

Holiday or no holiday, I meet with the Stoutamires every Monday mornin at 6:30 a.m. after havin breakfast with the ranch hands who stay in the bunkhouse. So here we are meetin on Memorial Day.

The old man says he’s feelin a lot better, an’ I’m glad a that. I don’t think I ever heard of a rancher not puttin the brand on his own calves, but that’s what happened last week. On the first day, after the first dozen or so calves came through, he said he wasn’t feelin so good an’ could I take over. A big honor, for sure, but still I asked if maybe Jannelle wanted a do it an’ she said hell no, so it was me, an’ we got ‘em all done over four days.

Bernadette helped Jannelle cook for everyone, an’ she fried up some a the castrated balls an’ took the rest to the Buckhorn Bar for a special treat a Rocky Mountain oysters.

Up at the Twist ranch, James had a ranch neighbor over to put on the brand, a twisted T, on their 10 or so calves. I’ll be headin up there in a week to talk to Jack’s ma about the future a the ranch, now that it’s clear Jack’s old man won’t be doin ranch work for a long time, maybe never again.

Chuck’s been out to the ranch a couple a times to meet with me an’ Stoutamire about the land leases. The one time, he just drove his truck from my house over to Stoutamire’s after stayin the night with me. I gotta believe it’s OK. I got enough worries on my job without takin that one on.

Jannelle is tellin me I get a $100 bonus for how good the brandin went – brands an’ vaccines for 900 calves an’ castrations for about half of ‘em. Seems every time I turn around there’s a bonus, so I say what if I split it between the six hired hands we got, includin Curt an’ Regent. He come back to work for us last week when his school ended an’ he was too busted up after bein bucked off a bronc to go back to rodeoin. She says she’ll give me $25 for each a them, let me give it out, an’ still keep my $100.

******

Chuck an’ me didn’t know what to give Flo an’ Lisa for this so-called wedding a theirs, so he went ahead an’ offered to play guitar an’ sing at the ceremony an’ afterwards. I volunteered to do the grillin, which I guess Flo usually does at their regular Memorial Day parties.

Francine is goin a this thing too, told me she’d run into Regent at the ranch an’ he invited her – just friends now, nothin more, she says. Sad to say, she’s goin ahead with the move to New York. She found a job bein a nanny (well, she says o-pair) an’ teachin some rich kids how to ride, someplace called Upstate New York. She’ll be leavin next Sunday, flyin to Denver an’ then all the way across the country. She says after the summer she’ll be movin into the city an’ tryin out for parts in Broadway musicals. So different from Junior, this brave little one.

How did I get talked into this wedding damn thing anyways? Chuck an’ me went out with Flo an’ Lisa again about a month ago, this time to Kelley’s Bar. He was up dancing with Lisa most a the night. She dances real good for a gal so big, an’ that put him in a good mood ‘cause he just loves to
dance.

Meanwhile, Flo got me up for a couple a songs, but mostly she took the opportunity to work me over, an’ by the time we was all sittin back down at the table, I could see there was no hope a declinin the invitation.

We was seen, part a the point a goin out with ‘em. Seen by two a the ranch hands, who gave me a hard time on the Monday, an’ by Hank, a friend a Chuck’s out with his wife. He come over to our table an’ talked it up a while, makin eyes at Chuck like you sly dog. Even so, I cain’t help gettin the feelin this play actin ain’t the way to go, an’ sure enough goddamn Chuck accused me again later that night a favorin Flo in some inappropriate way. That’s just not true, even though I don’t mind talkin to her ‘cause she seems to get me a lot better’n most folks do.

Anyways, lots a people are goin to this wedding – most a the so-called gay community I met on New Years Eve, along with Flo’s ex-husband an’ Lisa’s kin from New Hampshire. At least I’ll be busy with the grillin.

They got the best possible weather, I gotta say. Rained all weekend after some cold days last week, but today it’s almost hot, an’ I can actually smell the roses as I walk from the Stoutamire’s house. Reminds me to call Jack’s ma later.

*****

Francine an’ me drive over together in her car, windows open an’ feelin the warm May air. Neither one of us is dressed wedding-like ‘cause Flo told us to dress for a picnic.

“Daddy, you’re coming to Junior’s going-away party for me and Julie on Friday, right?” Francine asks.

“Sure enough,” I say, only Junior hadn’t called it no party. I know Julie’s goin a be sayin goodbye too, goin a work at the fanciest restaurant in Yellowstone for the summer. Chuck wants him an’ me to pay her a visit an’ camp there for a few days, but that’s another story.

“Did Mama invite you to the going-away she’s having on Saturday?”

“Well, she invited me,“ I say, “not that I’m goin.” Alma wanted me to help her convince Francine not a go, but I wouldn’t sign up for that. The girl’s gotta go after her dreams, I figure, even if she’ll be leavin a few of us back here worryin about her.

“Anyways,” I say, “you still want me to take you to the airport Sunday mornin’?”

“Yeah, but I want you to talk to Ma about keepin up the boys’ ridin lessons.”

This has been a sore spot between me an’ Francine ever since she made up her mind she was goin a pull up stakes an’ move. She’s been teachin her stepbrothers to ride, havin ‘em over every Sunday for lessons, an’ I been makin myself scarce, mostly helpin Chuck fix up Kerby’s house to sell. We both been so busy seems we’ve barely seen each other since calvin started back in April.

“What are their names again?” I ask. Of course I know; this is somethin else that riles her.

“The older is Michael and the younger is Jason. Daddy! You know that! Junior and me have been telling you about them for years.” Mostly been tellin me that they’re spoiled brats, but I don’t say that. I ran into the boys an’ her at the ranch a few weeks ago, an’ they seemed OK, polite enough. Tex told me the older one is quiet an’ seems kind a scared a the horses, but the younger one is full-speed-ahead.
“Well, your ma can call me if she wants, but I’m more’n likely to tell her there’s lots a other places givin ridin lessons,” I say.

“Not like you do,” she says.

I gotta change the subject, so I say, “You got someone a buy this car?” She’d been told no one in New York owns a car, an’ anyways, doubtful if hers would make it across the country.

“No Daddy, I told you I’m giving it to you. Just in case you want some heat when you’re going somewhere in the winter. Or you wanna listen to the radio.”

It’s true that old radio finally gave on my truck, an’ a course the heat’s been gone for years, but I surely cain’t be takin my daughter’s charity.

“I’ll find out if one a the ranch hands don’t want a buy it,” I say. “I bet you could use the extra money, could fetch two or three hundred dollars. I’d mail you a check.”

“Daddy, please? Just keep the car,” she says. An’ I gotta wonder if the move ain’t really as permanent as she’s insistin it is. Hopin that’s so.

*****

Flo an’ Lisa are standin under a canopy, both wearin fluttery, flowery dresses that make ‘em look kinda like little girls, an’ talkin with the minister guy from Boston. Regent an’ Argent are up there with them, an’ Chuck an’ Francine are in the house tunin up.

There’s probly 25 or 30 people sittin on foldin chairs waitin for things to start. I’m standin here feelin like a fool, when Dr. Timonen comes along with his buddy Alfred the gourmet cook, introduces the guy to me again, an’ asks about a bay mare he’d come out to see last week.

I say she’s fine, thanks. Dr. Timonen goes off to talk to some other folks, but Alfred stays next to me an’ says, “Ennis, you look uncomfortable. Are you here with anyone today?”

“Well, my daughter,” I say, “but she’s goin a be singin.” Don’t know why, I don’t mention Chuck.

“Why don’t you sit with us?” he asks. So we sit down, an’ pretty soon things get underway. Chuck an’ Francine start singin a duet about endless love, an’ Flo an’ Lisa come outta the house, each on one a the boy’s arm. Then the minister greets ‘em an’ starts the ceremony. I cain’t help it, I see the two of ‘em up there starin in each other’s eyes an’ I get some kind a feelin. I gotta swallow a couple a times, hope Dr. Timonen an’ Alfred don’t notice.

When the ceremony’s over, Chuck an’ Francine start up singin again, an’ I’m gettin up outta my seat when I get a bouquet a flowers in my face – all different color roses – didn’t see that comin. I look around an’ see a younger girl, probly a relative a Lisa’s, an’ hand it to her, “Here take this.” But everyone’s laughin. I look over at Chuck an’ he gives me a nod, the fool. Like hell I’ll ever get married again, much less goin through some kind a bogus ceremony like this.

Though I gotta say, it’s nice enough, if you like that kind a thing. Flo an’ Lisa serve up champagne, while Todd an’ Brian, Junior’s friends, start rearrangin the chairs around tables. Regent comes over an’ asks if I want a beer, which I do. We go in the house together an’ bring out the meat for barbecuin. I get the fire started an’ the boys put out salads an’ other stuff that Alfred made.

When Chuck gets a break, he comes over an’ says hi.
“You an’ Francine played good,” I tell him.

“Thanks. You need any help here?”

“Nah, you go on,” I say, but I look over an’ catch Dr. Timonen’s eye. I can do this, I can.

“Hey!” I yell over. “Someone I’d like you to meet.” He comes over with Alfred.

“This here is Chuck,” I say. “This is Dr. Timonen an’ Alfred.”

“Call me Derek, please!” Dr. Timonen says, an’ he shakes Chuck’s hand.

“I think we’ve met,” Chuck says. “Remember that standoff a few years ago up north of Shoshoni?”

“Of course I do,” Dr. Timonen says. “You’re a federal marshal, right?”

“No, just a paper pusher,” Chuck says.

“Well, that was the sickest stock I’ve ever seen,” the vet says.

“That’s what you get when you don’t bother to vaccinate,” Chuck says. “Ennis, you remember that case? They broke through fences and grazed their stock on BLM land, but the calves got so sick they were dropping dead?”

“Sure enough,” I say, but I don’t remember much about it. They keep talkin about the case, an’ Flo comes by an’ gives me the go-ahead to start cookin.

Alfred says, “I wouldn’t mind doing that,” an’ what am I supposed a do, say no to the chef? I step back an’ look around – everyone busy talkin to each other, smilin, laughin, an’ I want a cigarette, first time in months, an’ I wanna leave.

I’m thinkin about if I can just take off, or do I need to say somethin to Flo or Chuck, when I hear Alfred say, “Ennis? I could use a helper.”

*****

Me an’ Chuck end up stayin right to the end, startin up the grill again to reheat stuff for supper, an’ helpin the boys clean up.

Flo’s ex never showed up, but her an’ Lisa are havin a great time with Lisa’s family an’ the preacher.

Francine stays too. She pulls me aside an’ tells me she won’t be home tonight an’ I can go ahead an’ take her car. Well, you just never know, like my mama used a say.

When it’s just about dusk, Todd an’ Brian set up a campfire, an’ Chuck gets his guitar back out. I tell him I’m goin a take off ‘cause I’m plum exhausted. He says he’ll call me tomorrow.

*****

An’ hour later, I’m lyin in bed starin at the ceilin ‘cause I cain’t sleep I’m so wound up from a whole day talkin to people. I know I didn’t do so good ‘cause I never know what to say, but I was there, right?
An’ this thought is always with me: What would Jack’ve thought? What if it was Jack an’ me at
some lesbian couple’s wedding or whatever it was, here in Wyoming? He’d of gotten a hoot out of
it, is what. An’ he’d probly of asked what if maybe we’d do something like it someday, an’ I’d a
told him to fuck off.

I’m startin to rub myself through my briefs, thinkin about Jack an’ Chuck, both of em’. But my
thoughts are interrupted by a knock on the door. Maybe Francine changed her mind an’ didn’t have
her key? I pull on my jeans an’ go open up.

“Chuck? What are you doin here?”

“Being with you,” he says. Well, I cain’t sleep anyways, an’ I really don’t mind seein him here
after thinkin about him like I was, so I let him in.

I get us each a beer, an’ we sit down an’ talk about every person at Flo an’ Lisa’s, all the
conversations we had.

I’d asked Alfred about cookin, an’ he’d told me a little about his job as a criminal lawyer an’ asked
me some polite questions about ranch work. I told him about Junior an’ Bernadette’s cooking
class, an’ the fancy meal they’re planning. He said me an’ Chuck should come to Cheyenne with
Dr. Timonen one weekend, he’s got lots a room at his house an’ he’d cook us up some fine
suppers.

Chuck had talked to Tommy from the Black’n’Blue Eagle, said he seems lonely an’ ‘parently he
mostly goes with married guys. Chuck also met the lesbian school teacher couple, the professor an’
the insurance guy, who might just be the most boring guy alive. Some a their straight friends were
there too – Flo’s boss an’ his wife, an older couple from the next ranch over, a guy Chuck knew
from the 4-H an’ some others.

I tell Chuck how everything was Lisa’s idea, an’ Flo mostly went along, but she had to put her foot
down on dancin, an’ on anything more’n the real short kiss those two had ‘cause it might make
some people too uncomfortable. She told me Lisa’s family is Unitarian an’ they’re great to a point;
she just don’t know where that point is.

Chuck tells me about some a Lisa’s family he talked to, orchard people who keep a few dairy
cows. Lisa’s ma was there along with two sisters – one with a husband an’ a boy an’ a girl, the one
I gave the bouquet to. He says in the Unitarian religion, the preacher don’t tell you what to believe,
you just believe whatever you want. Huh. Don’t sound to me like any religion at all.

An’ then he says it: “Do you see us ever doing something like this? Making a commitment in front
of our girls and some friends maybe?” I cain’t tell by his face if he’s serious.

“An’ dress up in our flowery dresses an’ bawl our eyes out? Throw out some bouquet a flowers?” I
say. “Christ, Chuck.”

“Just wondered,” he says. He don’t seem to be takin offense. I let out a yawn, an’ I say it’s time to
hit the sack.

“Come here,” he says. “I didn’t come here just to talk.” Next thing you know we’re goin at it, hot
an’ heavy. Turns out I’m not so tired.

Later on, lyin here butted up against Chuck, I get a weird feelin I cain’t explain, like everything’s
goin a be OK. I need a grab onto it, ‘cause I don’t hardly ever feel that way.

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Friday, May 31

I got so much goin on, my head’s spinnin.

First, I get a call from James up at the Twist ranch with the news that the old man died last night an’ Jack’s ma is sleepin, but I should call her later. I was plannin to go up there Monday anyways, so I guess I’ll be goin to a funeral.

Long day at work, an’ then I call Jack’s ma. She sounds good, considerin. She says the old man never got much better at all, probably felt no pain, an’ the funeral’s goin a be Tuesday. I tell her I’ll be there Monday afternoon, an’ plan to stay ‘til Thursday if that’s OK with her, help around the ranch an’ help her decide what to do next. She says she’d be delighted. I got some ideas for her, an’ for the first time, I can see how the stuff Jannelle’s been teachin me about keepin the books is goin a come in handy.

I’m gettin ready to go over to Junior’s for this goin-away thing, when Chuck calls with three pieces a news. One: Queenie an’ the lawyer’ll be gettin married June 22 – same day as Tex an’ Bernadette’s wedding up in Cody – an’ his band is goin a play at the reception. Two: Chuck told Queenie about him an’ me. An’ three: He’ll be movin into the house in town at the end a June. I tell him I got news too, an’ I’ll see him at Junior’s.

*****

It’s not so much a party thank god – just me, the girls, Curt, Chuck an’ Julie. An’ Regent’s there too, him an’ Francine acting like they never split up at all. We sit in the backyard eatin hamburgers an’ blueberry pie with ice cream for dessert.

Junior seems a lot better from last time I seen her a few weeks ago, more energy an’ more smiles, until Curt tells us he’s goin a be applyin for jobs in law enforcement – city police, Fremont County Sheriff’s Department an’ the State Patrols in Wyoming an’ Colorado, news to me. He’s big enough an’ serious enough, I’m thinkin. He says a buddy a his from the roughneckin job already got hired on in Colorado. I can see Junior is kind a uncomfortable, but she just keeps smilin an’ don’t say nothin.

Then Francine clears her throat real loud.

“I just want to say how much I’m going to miss all of you,” she says. At first I don’t know if it’s the actress or the real girl speakin. But then she starts soundin pretty genuine, thankin Junior for all kinds a stuff, bein a great sister an’ best friend – “no offense to Julie.”

“And you, Daddy. I’m so glad I got to spend this year with you.” Shit, I should a seen this comin. “It seems like I never really knew you before. And now I do, and I love you so much.”

The tears are flowin, an’ she’s comin over here to hug me.

“You know you’re welcome back any time,” I tell her, not aimin it at no one else. “No need a go on an’ on, now.”

“I’m going to miss you,” she says, more sniffs, an’ I say, “Me too.”

*****

Francine’s stayin over at Regent’s again, so I ask Chuck for a ride home, tell him he can stay over if he wants, an’ sure enough, he does.
When we get settled in on the couch with our beers, I ask him how it went with Queenie. Turns out he went over to the house Thursday after supper an’ had a beer with her, an’ basically just spilled his guts. Her reaction was first, she slapped him across the face, then she started cryin, then she said she probly knew it all along.

Then she asked him, “It’s you and Ennis Del Mar, isn’t it?” I cain’t help it, I feel like pukin when I hear that.

But he went ahead an’ said yeah, that’s right, an’ she said she’d tried to get it outta Alma, but Alma wouldn’t say a thing. That makes me feel a little better.

An’ Queenie told him she’d never heard a word about from anyone else, except one a their friends told her he never sees Chuck anymore that he’s not with me. Not true; he does lots a things on his own.

“What if you come to her wedding with me?” Chuck asks me.

“Not my thing,” I say. “An’ besides, you just told me one a your friends got suspicions. An’ anyways, I’m goin a be Tex’s best man that day.” There’s a million more reasons why not to go that I don’t even need a mention.

“I know,” he says. “Thing is, I’d be so much happier if you could be there with me.” I look at him, an’ he’s got this sad look.

“Not that I wouldn’t wanna hear your band,” I say. I pull him down so I can kiss him, start undoing buttons.

“I never told you much about my marriage,” he says.

“Well, you said she fucked around on you.”

“Before that,” he says. “I wasn’t performing like a husband.”

Huh. Wasn’t or couldn’t? I sure ain’t goin a ask.

“What about you and Alma?” he asks. “How was your sex life?”

“Mmm, not so good,” I say. “Cain’t really talk about it.”

“I don’t need details. Just tell me, Ennis, did you ever have, uh, performance anxiety?”

“Nah, wasn’t that,” I say. I don’t want a say no more ‘cause I feel ashamed a what I done to Alma, an’ I never told Jack about it neither.

“Anyways,” I say. “That part a your life is behind you, right? You didn’t have no performance problem when you done me the once.”

“Ennis!” he says, eyes wide, an’ I can feel my own face burnin up.

“Not that I’d want a put you through that kind a anxiety again,” I say, but I’m laughin an’ grabbin’ at him, an’ he’s finally laughin too.

“We’ll see about that,” he says, then he’s on to somethin else. “You know Sunday is Junior’s one-year anniversary? It’s ours too. One year ago we got reacquainted.”

“No need a celebrate a thing like that,” I say, unzippin his fly now.
“No big deal,” he says. “I just want to take a day off from the house, go up to high land with our horses, take a picnic.” Not a bad idea, I gotta agree.

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Sunday, June 2

After I get back from takin Francine to the airport, I get a call from Jack’s ma. Turns out Bobby an’ Lureen Twist’ll be goin up to Lightin Flat for the funeral too, first time she’ll be meetin either a them. Same for me, an’ damn if it won’t be the most awkward thing I ever done, meetin Jack’s wife an’ boy after all these years.

“I just wanted to warn you,” she says, “in case you don’t want to meet them.”

Well, she’s givin me an out, an’ I’m about to say maybe I could wait an’ go up after the funeral, but that’d be kind a yellow of me, an’ I really would like to meet Bobby anyways. I got nothin against Lureen; she never did nothin to me.

“They stayin there at the house with you?” I ask, thinkin I should stay someplace else.

But she says no, they’ll be at a motel in Gillette. James is stayin in Jack’s room, an’ she’d be glad a sleep on the couch an’ let me have her bed ‘cause there’ll be company comin an’ goin. I say no to that, I’ll just pitch a tent in the yard, an’ stay there. She agrees to it after puttin up a little fuss.

*****

Chuck an’ me go ridin on the trail he likes near Lander, an’ we stop for a picnic, just like we did last summer, back when we was just buddies. We’re lyin down starin up at the sky.

“Penny for your thoughts,” he says. I must’ve been dozin off. What I’d been thinkin was, I can hardly believe the life I got now. Not just this here, but my job, my girls. Bein able to help Jack’s ma, just like he would a done. Bein here for other people after so, so many years alone, clammed up an’ scared.

“I was thinkin, this is pretty damn good,” I say. He don’t need to ask what. I think he knows.
A Cute Little Ole Texas Girl

Bobby’s been exchanging letters and cards with Roberta Twist since he was a little boy. She sends him birthday cards with a few dollars, and he sends back polite thank-you notes. I’ve never met her, but judging from the cards and her voice on the phone, she reminds me of my grandma Hattie Gatling on my mama’s side, a sweet, old-fashioned lady who says “Oh, dear” and “My, my” and “Thank you kindly.”

I know Jack adored her and wanted me to like her too, but we never had much in common. We’d talk about the weather and Bobby in the short conversations we had over the years.

Jack’s parents had been invited to our wedding, but they sent a gift of beautiful hand-embroidered linens, along with the excuse that they couldn’t get away from the ranch. I called to thank her, and I called again after Bobby was born, to invite her down here. She said she’d love to come, but she couldn’t leave the old man on his own. I understood; Grandma Hattie would never have gone anywhere without my grandpa.

Anyway, Jack went up there to Lightning Flat a few times a year, usually tacked on to a fishing trip, but he wouldn’t take me and Bobby. He told me his daddy was no good with kids, so bad in fact that he’d have to drop dead before Jack would ever take Bobby up to visit. No one could have imagined Jack would go first, and of course his parents didn’t come down here for his funeral either.

I might have just forgotten about the Twists, but Bobby’s interest in his mysterious grandparents perked up after Jack died – he was hit hard with losing his own daddy just a few years after L.D. passed. I’d agreed Bobby could drive up to Wyoming once he was 18, giving him Jack’s warning and figuring he’d be old enough to fend for himself. Bobby was planning to do just that this summer. Anyway, he wants to visit Bozeman and Laramie too, not top colleges by any means, but two of the best college rodeo teams, according to him. He’ll be starting college in the fall.

Roberta called to let us know about the stroke, and just a few weeks later, the old man was dead. I said a little prayer for him, and another one for Jack. I told Roberta that Bobby and me would fly up there for the funeral and she seemed surprised and pleased.

“I’d put you up here, but I’ve got a full house,” she said. “My brother Harold lives in Gillette, and I’m sure his wife would be happy to have you.”

I told her no, thank you, we’ll stay at a motel. Then she said, “I should tell you, Jack’s old friend Ennis will be here.”

Oh.

“Ennis Del Mar?” I asked, as if Jack had dozens of friends named Ennis. Of course I knew who he was. It crossed my mind to wonder if he’d ever got a new truck to replace the one that wouldn’t make it to Texas.

“Yes,” she said. “He’s been very helpful. He sent a boy up here to help with the ranch after John had the stroke.”

“Sent a boy?” I repeated, trying to make sense of that. “You mean one of his sons?” Somehow I’d pictured Ennis as one of those itinerant ranch hands who goes from job to job, never settles down.

“No, dear, one of his ranch hands. He’s got daughters.”
So, a ranch boss, not the pauper Jack made him seem. And daughters? I had pictured him as a lone cowboy, not a family man.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not bitter about Jack. I miss him every day, even though I’ve been seeing a man – about as different from Jack as you can be – for almost a year. We’ll probably be getting married soon. I’ll propose to him if he doesn’t pop the question soon.

*****

1966

I hadn’t had a period in nearly two months. I was supposed to drive to a rodeo in Oklahoma City the next day, and I was hoping to see Jack Twist there. The worry of no period was getting to me, so I told Mama about it and she said we’d go to Dallas instead, get me in for a pregnancy test, wait 24 hours for the results, and then go to another doctor if the test was positive.

I decided right then and there that I wouldn’t be seeing a second doctor. I was 25 years old, infatuated with the blue-eyed bullrider who would be the baby’s daddy, and with both of my older sisters married off to oil money years before, it was high time for me to find a husband and move out from under my daddy. Jack was good-looking, fun and fearless.

So after the test came out positive, we went straight from Dallas to Oklahoma City, where I tracked down Jack Twist and told him the news. And bless him, he said of course he’d marry me, that I was about the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen, and we would make a go of it. He even got down on one knee and tied a piece of twine around my finger.

My cousin the bronc rider told me there was a rumor going around about Jack making eyes at a rodeo clown, and maybe more than eyes at some other guys on the circuit. I told him there are bound to be rumors about someone as good-looking as Jack. I thought to myself, if that’s what he’s into, I can handle it.

Daddy kicked up a fuss saying Jack was beneath our class and after his money. We had a big old country wedding in September, my daddy paying. My dress didn’t quite hide the facts, but we held our heads up high. Mama made sure the guests spread over both sides of the aisle so it wouldn’t be so obvious Jack’s folks hadn’t come.

As it was, we had to dress Jack up and teach him some passable slow-dance moves and the Texas two-step. He went along with everything, laughed off my daddy’s not-so-subtle insults, flirted with my friends, charmed my sisters and my mama. We went to Las Vegas for our honeymoon, and our first night on an actual bed, I taught him how to please a woman using his tongue. He was a fast learner.

Daddy hired him on as a salesman, and Jack was so good he surprised everyone – except me, I must say. The man could sell sand to an Egyptian.

The day Bobby was born, Jack and I spent a few hours at the hospital, just the two of us and the baby, before my parents came by. Thinking back, those were probably the best moments of our married life. I’d never seen Jack’s smile so big or his eyes sparkle that bright, and I never saw it again.

I named the baby Robert John, after Jack and his mama. That ticked L.D. right off, but I’d be god damned if my son was going to be another Lyle Dewey.

Life with baby was tough on me because I had no idea what I was getting into. Here I was off work
indefinitely, up for midnight feedings, changing diapers, listening to baby advice from my sisters. When I’d take Bobby for a stroller ride around the city park, I’d stop to chat with other mothers – young ones with no hopes or dreams beyond being someone’s wife and someone’s mother. I figured I’d already accomplished both of those and I had bigger fish to fry.

Come spring, Jack took time off work to go back to rodeoing, and he’d be gone weeks at a time.

Around that time, Jack told me Daddy had offered him a fair bit of money to just get lost, let me find another husband more suited to the job. Jack asked me very sincerely if that’s what I wanted, and I said no, I wanted him to stay but I wanted to make a few changes.

So we hired a nanny and a housekeeper, and I went back to work. I asked Jack to dress up a few times a month and take me out to country club dances and charity events, and to fit his rodeoing into my schedule, not the other way around. We agreed we didn’t want any more children, at least not right away, so I went on the new birth-control pill.

In September, he went to visit his folks for a week and came back all happy and whistling, saying he’d gone fishing with an old buddy, and he’d forgotten how much prettier Wyoming was than Texas, and how much better the fishing was. He started going up there a few times a year, always careful to check his schedule with me. He was still charming and fun to be around, and even though the sex didn’t happen often enough for me, he still brought a little spark to it.

A few years later, one Friday night when we were getting ready to go to the county fair dance, he got a call from the fishing buddy, who’d never called before. Jack stuffed a few things into a duffel bag, told me there was an emergency, and took off in his truck. I was hopping mad because we were supposed to be master and mistress of ceremonies, one of the biggest honors in Childress County and a great marketing opportunity.

Early Monday morning, he was back, in the darkest mood I’d ever seen, and he wouldn’t tell me what had gone wrong. Then I found matches from Juarez in his pants pocket and thought it strange that he would go in the opposite direction from what he’d told me. After that, he took to drinking more heavily and started talking back sharp to L.D.’s shit, not taking it so jovially, which I was secretly kind of glad about.

Jack had to stand up to L.D. or be bulldozed out of Bobby’s life. L.D. only had us girls, so he had definite ideas about how a boy should be raised. Jack was from the lax parenting school, mostly letting the boy develop his own interests. I could tell who was winning when Bobby chose rodeo and baseball over football, and art classes over shop. Jack pushed hard to find Bobby help with his reading, which we finally got just in time for him to bring his grades up high enough that he’d be able to graduate high school on time.

After my daddy died, Jack moved into the guest bedroom, no longer having anything to prove to the old man, and he’d visit my bedroom once or twice a month. He brought up the idea of a divorce, although he denied there was someone else. I said it wouldn’t be any good for Bobby or for the business, and anyway, didn’t he have more freedom than any married man he knew?

The weekend after L.D.’s funeral, Jack and I sat down and put together a plan to buy out the dealership. I fired the head mechanic and two older, low-producing salesmen, cronies of L.D. who I’d heard badmouthing Jack over the years. Then I called a meeting and I announced I was appointing Jack – our top salesman – as vice president of sales, and we’d be increasing commissions. Our new plan was to focus on building our financing side, widening our sales territory, using loss leaders to increase totals and getting better deals from manufacturers. I gave Jack L.D.’s place in the Rotary Club because I couldn’t sit through those luncheons and he was so good at schmoozing with the ranchers and bankers.
Jack also started going to conventions and trade shows. One day, I got a call from the general manager of Amarillo Farm Equipment and Supply telling me he heard something suspicious at a stock show in Kansas City. I wouldn’t let the man finish the story, told him to mind his own goddamn business, that I didn’t own Jack and he didn’t own me. When Jack got home, I laid into him, told him that if I ever caught wind of him and some woman, I’d happily murder the both of them, and I had the marksmanship trophies to prove I could do it. He swore there was no one, and I believed him – no woman anyway.

Our sales doubled in the first year-and-a-half, and we built ourselves a bigger house on the outskirts of town. Meanwhile, Jack started up with a new fishing buddy right here in Childress, the husband of the insufferable Lashawn Malone. I wouldn’t have cared, except that whenever they were gone, she’d call me wanting to go shopping or get our nails done, as if we were best buddies. My best friends are businesswomen like me – Darla, owner of the biggest show stables in West Texas, and Mary Kay who owns 2/3 share of the Ford-Lincoln-Mercury dealership.

In the months before he died, Jack’s drinking got a lot worse. He still functioned at work, but not as a husband, either in bed or as my escort and dance partner. After he got back from a trip to Wyoming in May, he told me to take his August trip off the calendar, and he went on a weeklong bender that I thought might kill him. He got so drunk he had to miss one of Bobby’s rodeo competitions, a first.

The day of the accident, Jack was on his way home from one of his fishing trips with Randall Malone. He was supposed to pick up Bobby from his friend’s house at 5, and then we were going over to my mother’s house for supper. I could tell something was wrong even before anything happened. Tornado warnings started around 4:30, and my Mama called to cancel. Then Bobby called home at 5:30 to say Jack wasn’t there yet. Not to say that Jack was always on time, but I could feel something eerie in the air.

I waited until 6, then left Jack a note and drove through the thunderstorm to pick up Bobby. When we got back, Jack still wasn’t home and the power was out, so I made us sandwiches that we ate by candlelight. The lights came back on in time to watch “Knight Rider,” Bobby’s favorite. The sky cleared up and I poured myself a glass of wine, figuring maybe Jack had the sense to wait out the storm and he’d be home any minute.

When the doorbell rang, I dropped my wineglass and it shattered. Somehow, I knew. And sure enough, there was the sheriff, who came in and told us Jack was dead. I stood there and listened to details of the accident, how he’d been driving alone, got out to fix a flat and had the tire blow up, and the rim hit him in his face. He was knocked over and drowned in his own blood. The sheriff said that usually he’d need next-of-kin to identify the body, but he knew Jack from the Rotary, and he’d be happy to save me the trouble.

Then there was the wake and the funeral, and Randy Malone didn’t show up for either one, even though he was the last to see Jack alive, and supposedly a good friend. Lashawn told me he was beside himself, never handled death well. A few weeks later, Randall left her and their two kids and moved to Dallas.

I’m not stupid. I had pieced together the clues about who the real Jack Twist was. What could I say, but that we worked and had fun together, and we raised a fine boy. Like any other couple, we had an arrangement that mostly worked out for both of us.

But then a couple of months after the funeral, I got the call from Ennis Del Mar. Maybe it was something in his voice, or his explanation of Brokeback Mountain, or him mentioning the year 1963. I realized that the story I had told myself about my life with my handsome, happy-go-lucky,
hard-drinking husband was just a fairy tale. For the first time since Jack died, I broke down in tears, for him and for me.

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Monday, June 3

We land in Gillette at 1 p.m. We’d eaten an early lunch during a layover in Denver, and Bobby wants to drive straight to Lighting Flat, not rest up at the hotel. I say it’s way too early to show up for a 5 o’clock dinner invitation.

“Relax, I’ll drive,” he says. “You can rest in the car.”

*****

Jack never said much about his parents’ place, probably because he never had to prepare me to come up here. It’s one of those iffy houses you see sometimes and it’s not clear if someone lives there or not. Paint peeling, nothing updated in decades, no lawn, parked trucks so old they might run or not.

Roberta Twist comes out and hugs us both while we say, “I’m so sorry.” She usher us into the kitchen, where an older couple is already seated at an old farm table. They’re her brother and sister-in-law, and she introduces Bobby and me around and offers us lunch and coffee or lemonade.

After a bit of small talk, the hired hand James, who looks to be 25 or so, pops in to ask for her grocery list, and says OK when Bobby asks if he can go along. Roberta says there’ll be about 10 of us for supper tonight, and after that we’ll be going to the viewing. I ask if I can help, and she says no, “thank you kindly.”

Jack’s uncle and aunt ask about Bobby and talk about their own three children and seven grandchildren. Then they get to talking about Jack growing up, trouble he got into with his cousins, how good he always was to his mama. Roberta, up at the counter cutting fruit, turns when she hears that, revealing a little smile.

“Would you like to see pictures of him when he was a boy?” she asks. When I say “sure,” she says to her sister-in-law, “Mavis, show her the albums, will you?” And I’m ushered into the living room.

I’m sitting between Harold and Mavis as they walk me through the albums, highlighting their own kids. The photos, the house and the ranch, miles from anywhere, paint a bleaker picture of Jack’s childhood than I’d imagined.

As Mavis goes on, I hear a conversation starting up in the kitchen – not words I can make out, just Roberta’s soft voice and a deep, rumbling hum. It’s got to be him. This goes on for five minutes, 10 minutes, and then I can’t stand it anymore.

“Excuse me,” I say, handing the album to Mavis and standing up. “I’m just going to fill up my lemonade.” I can hear Mavis saying “I can do that dearie” as I make my way to the kitchen.

He’s leaning back against the counter next to where Roberta is washing vegetables in a colander. When I walk into the kitchen, he looks up, but immediately averts his eyes and clears his throat. He’s tall, V-shaped with nice shoulders and upper arms and thin hips and legs. His face looks weathered; his hair is blond-turning-gray, still some curl to it.

Roberta turns and says, “Lureen, come and meet Ennis. Ennis, this is my daughter-in-law Lureen.”
I walk over and hold my hand out. He hesitates, then lifts himself off the counter, steps forward awkwardly and shakes with a better grip than most men offer a woman. I see he’s got brown eyes, a lighter shade than mine.

“Pleased to meet you, Ma’am.”

“Well now, no need for that,” I say. “I’m not your grandma.”

He jerks back just a little and looks over at Roberta.

“You two have a seat,” she says. “I’ll get you another lemonade,” she tells me, taking my glass. “Ennis, have you eaten? I’ve got leftover macaroni and cheese I can heat up.”

“Just the coffee’s good, thanks,” he says, not making a move to sit down. So I sit, and say, “Are you going to join me, Ennis?”

He limps over to the table, sits with some difficulty on a chair at the other end lengthwise and looks everywhere but at me. Roberta refills my lemonade and his coffee from the counter, and brings them to us, then goes back to her cutting board.

“You live around here, Ennis?” I ask.

He glances over at Roberta, whose back is to us again, and says, “No, ma’am, I’m livin in Signal, near Riverton, about four hours from here.”

“It’s Lureen,” I say. “Not ma’am. I’m afraid Jack didn’t tell me very much about you.”

He glances over at Roberta again. “Huh.”

“So you’re a ranch foreman,” I say. “And you’ve got daughters? How many?”

“Two of ‘em,” he says with a shy smile he’s trying to suppress.

“And how old are they?”

“Well, now. Junior, she’s 20, an’ Francine’s 19.”

“Still at home?”

“No, ma’ – I mean Lureen. Junior’s married an’ Francine just moved to New York. Just yesterday.”

“So you and your wife have an empty nest?” I say. “That’ll be me after the summer, when Bobby goes to college.”

“Uh,” he says, sneaking another look over to Roberta. “No, it ain’t like that. Alma an’ me, we been split for 10 years an’ more.”

I’m still taking that in, when I see him glance at my hands. He says, “You never got married again?” First question he’s asked me.

“I’ll probably be getting married in a few months,” I say.

Roberta turns around. “Well good for you, dear.”

There’s a whole other conversation going on between Roberta’s and Ennis’s eyes, and I’m getting tired of it.

“Are you sure I can’t help you with that?” I ask Roberta.

“Oh no, dear,” she says.

“I’m uh,” Ennis says, holding the table to stand himself up, looking at Roberta. “You mind if I take a look around the ranch?”

“Why don’t you take Lureen along?” Roberta says, then to me, “Ennis is going to help me decide what to do next.”

“I’d like that,” I say, before he has a chance to answer. We walk out, Ennis heavily favoring his left leg. I look for his truck, but the only new addition to the dusty parking lot is an ancient Chevy Nova. I stop to light a cigarette, and he leans on the house. I’m thinking it’s a recent injury. He shakes his head when I hold the cigarette pack out for him.

He stands straight, but doesn’t make a move to start walking. “You need a hand?” I say, offering my arm.

“No ma’am, uh, Lureen,” he says. “Uh, I got bucked by a horse this morning. Didn’t think it was too bad, but it just keeps gettin worse.”

“Come here,” I say. “Go ahead, I can hold you up.”

I walk over and put his arm around my shoulders, holding onto his hand, and we take a step, and then another. He’s leaning pretty heavily.

“First let’s go around the side of the house,” he says, leading me around.

I have to catch my breath. There in front of us is a stand of a dozen rose bushes, perfectly trimmed, every hue of the rainbow.

“She takes ‘em to Jack’s grave,” Ennis says. “Blue an’ purple ones.”

I have to catch my breath.

“She told me the old man wouldn’t give you the ashes,” I say.

“No …” He opens his mouth to say something else, but nothing comes.

We walk around to the barn. Everything is dusty and decayed – an old metal shop, ragged tack, broken-down stalls. Out in the paddock, Ennis leans on the fence, which looks like it’s about to collapse, and a couple of old nags meander over. He knows them by name – Apple and Dumpling, surely Roberta’s contribution. He strokes each horse’s nose and scratches behind their ears, murmuring things I can’t hear. I can see the corral’s old, but it’s been repaired recently. In the distance, I see a few cow-and-calf pairs.

“Shit, I don’t think I can get on a horse to ride out there,” Ennis says.

“Do you think you should see a doctor?” I ask. “I could take you into town.”

He looks straight ahead, biting his lip. “You wouldn’t mind?” Knowing men’s aversion to seeing doctors, I’m sure this must be killing him.
“I’ll ask Roberta where to go,” I say. “Let’s put you into the car.” I hobble him over to my rental car and help him in. He leaves the door open while I go in to talk to Roberta.

When I get back outside, the hired boy and Bobby are back, out of the truck and talking to Ennis.

“You want me to take him, ma’am?” the boy asks, and I say no, you two need to unload and help Roberta.

When the car is moving, Ennis says, “ Seems like a fine boy. You an’ Jack done good.”

“Bobby?” I say, as if he could be talking about anyone else.

“Huh. Looks a lot like Jack.”

“Ennis,” I say once we get moving. “ I know about you and Jack. I know all about Jack.”

He freezes, I see a fist ball up and he says, “He told you?”

“No,” I say. “I figured things out. After you called.”

“Unh,” he says, as if he just felt a stab of pain. “I guess I should be apologizin, huh.”

“For what?” I say.

“You know …”

“Well, never mind. We’re onto a new chapter now,” I say. “Bobby doesn’t know anything about you and his daddy, but Roberta does, am I right?”

“I reckon.”

“You loved him, Ennis?”

He hesitates a while, then says, barely audible, “Guess I still do.”

This sweet, gentle man in a rough exterior isn’t what I’d ever imagined for Jack, the whole idea that the fishing trips were any more than a romp. I want to stop the car and punch him until he’s begging for mercy, then pull him out and leave him by the side of the road.

I could say “What?” and insist he repeat it, but what’s the point?

Instead I say, “Well, that’s more than I can say for myself.”

He looks over at me as if surprised.

I say, “So I guess I can say I’m glad he had you. You and his mama.”

We drive on a while, him not saying anything.

“I’m not bitter,” I say. “I made my bed and I slept in it.”

He says, “Well, I’m sorry just the same.”

*****

We have supper with the uncle and aunt, two women neighbors, Ennis and the ranch hand. Bobby sits outside with Ennis and James, a beer in front of each of them, talking and laughing. It could be
Bobby’s first beer. I don’t say anything.

The ladies stay behind to clean up, and the rest of us go to the viewing, which lasts about an hour. Roberta must be a good church woman; she seems to have lots of friends. The old man, not so many.

Afterwards, I drive Ennis and Roberta back to the ranch so they won’t have to climb into James’s truck. The doctor had wrapped Ennis’s ankle and loaned him a cane to walk with.

“Are you staying here?” I ask Ennis.

He clears his throat. “I’m just goin a pitch a tent an’ sleep out back,” he says. Like hell, he can barely walk.

“I don’t mind if you stay on the couch,” Roberta says. But it’s not long enough for him to stretch out on, not by a long shot.

“How about if I drive you back to Gillette with me and Bobby, and you get a room at the motel where we’re staying?” I say.

“Huh,” he says.

“You need to take care of that ankle if it’s going to heal,” I say. “Come on. I’ll get you a good rate.”

“You go ahead Ennis,” Roberta says. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Bobby and James get Ennis’s stuff from his car – a suit bag and a duffel bag, no need for the tent and sleeping bag. Bobby asks if he can stay over “to help Grandma out,” so I give him his luggage from the rental car.

I have Ennis sit in the back seat where he can put his leg up, and I turn on the radio to relieve him of the need to talk. As we’re approaching Gillette, he asks if I would mind stopping for a bottle of whiskey because he “don’t like to take no pills.” I can just hear Jack saying the same thing.

I say fine, if I can join him for a drink. He says, “All right, but I ain’t no kind a company right now.”

At the motel, I check in and get Ennis a room next to ours on the ground floor. I help him bring in his stuff and tell him I’ll be right back with the whiskey.

“Uh, can you give me a few minutes a make a phone call?” he says. So I put my stuff in our room, wait 10 minutes, and then go back to see Ennis’s door is propped open. He’s sitting up in bed, leaning on the pillows. His toes are big and knobby like his fingers, the one foot wrapped in a bandage and the toes swollen.

I pour us each a double, move the armchair up so we’re in conversation distance from each other, and sit down.

“So what happened to your foot?” I ask.

“Uh, got bucked off a horse this mornin like I told you, with my foot stuck in the stirrup. Turns out there was a bee stuck under the mare’s saddle, an’ she’s a skittish one to start.”

“Bobby broke his leg last year getting bucked off a bronc,” I say. “Of course, he was asking for it.”
Ennis gives a one-sided smile, but then it’s quiet.

“You mind if I smoke?” I say. “I can open the door.”

He says OK, and I ask him if he quit, or if he never smoked. He says he smoked for 25 years, but he quit after his boss got sick, some kind of heart problem.

I ask Ennis about his plans for the Twist ranch, and he says he needs to find out a lot more before he can even think about it – how much debt, how much useable acreage, how big the operation was at its peak, what kind of labor is available, what kind of financing.

Finally, I’ve got him talking. I’m watching his lips and eyes as he gets into the topic, one he has confidence discussing. Cleaned up a little, standing up straight, he could be an oil baron or the prince of England with a tan. But he’s got something else besides looks, something deep and brooding and vulnerable, and that’s what makes me so sad, because all those years I thought Jack and I were doing fine with our little arrangement, he had this heartbreaker hiding away in Wyoming.

“If everything works out, would you come up here and run the place?” I ask.

His breath hitches, and then he closes his mouth and clenches his jaw so tightly that I can see his pulse in his temple. He takes a long time to answer. “Nah, I, I got a good job down there in Signal. Best I ever had. An’ my girl’s nearby. I could probly find someone good to come up here though.”

I tell him if he can work out a plan, I might be able to help with financing. I know the old man would never take financial help when Jack was alive, but Jack had left him a chunk of insurance money.

I ask Ennis if he wants another hit of whiskey, and he says no thanks, he’s near asleep. I fill his glass anyway and say goodnight.

Back in my room, I think about all the questions I didn’t ask, and probably never will. Why did either of them ever get married and have children? When Ennis got divorced, had he been expecting Jack to leave me? Did Ennis play around like Jack did? And what happened during that last fishing trip?

I wonder if Ennis ever found himself someone new, and I thank god once again that Dr. Larry Somersby waltzed into my life, and that I let him.
Monday, June 3

My foot hurts like hell. The doc had said I should put ice on the ankle, but then we were eatin supper an’ goin to the viewin, an’ I wasn’t goin a do it in front a Lureen Twist.

So I get up, grab the fuckin cane, take a piss an’ make my way over to get the ice bucket. Lucky, the ice machine’s not too far, right next to the manager’s office.

I tie the ice up in a towel an’ get back into bed. I pour a little more whiskey an’ drink it nice an’ slow, lettin myself feel each whoosh to my brain. Between that an’ the pain in my foot, I’m hopin I can fall asleep without thinkin too much about what I said to Lureen.

I’d called Junior before Lureen came back here with the whiskey, found out that Francine landed safe an’ met up with the family she’ll be stayin with. I’d called Chuck too, got no answer. Now it’s nearly 11. I know if I call him he won’t complain, but I don’t know what I’d say.

Finally I’m feelin like sleep is comin, so I take off the ice an’ dump it in the bathtub.

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Tuesday, June 4

I slept good. It’s 5:30 now an’ I’m wide awake, listenin to the rain an’ thinkin about all the things I might a wanted a ask Lureen, but I know I won’t. Like does she believe that tire rim story she told me? Did she ever try an’ get a police report or a coroner’s report, like folks do on TV? An’ what were Jack’s last days an’ weeks like, after the last time I seen him? Does she happen a know if he was plannin a come up here in November? An’ who the fuck is the ranch foreman, an’ what was that about, anyways?

She’s tough as nails, probly the toughest woman I ever met. Only two things about her surprised me: her hair an’ her sayin she didn’t love Jack. She didn’t seem mad when she said it, an’ accordin to her, she ain’t bitter. I just don’t get it. Alma was bitter for a long time – she told me as much – an’ I ain’t hardly blame her.

Then there’s Bobby. He’s got his daddy’s eyes an’ his daddy’s jokin-around attitude, but he’s polite an’ respectful too. At the viewin, he stood up there with his grandma an’ her family. Jack’s ma had told me yesterday that Bobby’s the only blood relative of John Twist here, ‘cause his two older brothers had both died in ranch accidents when they was teenagers, an’ a sister eloped with a travelin salesman an’ never looked back. I don’t know if Lureen told Bobby he should stand up there or he done it himself, but it was surely the right thing to do.

Bobby got me an’ James laughin yesterday at supper, tellin us stories about his baseball team gettin caught pourin whiskey into Coke cans at their end-a-season party, an’ him sneakin his girlfriend outta her folks’ house then tryin a sneak her back in. They’re a boy’s tales aimed at impressin James, but he told ‘em with this mixture a braggin an’ makin fun a himself that reminded me so much a Jack, it hurt.

The apple don’t fall far from the tree, like they say.

*****
Finally I get up to take a piss. Still hurts to walk on the foot, but not as much. I shave an’ take a shower holdin onto the soap dish so I don’t fall, hopin I won’t pull it off the wall neither. Then I make coffee an’ get more ice. I’m hopin I can walk without that goddamn cane today.

After a while, I get dressed in the suit I wore to Junior’s wedding an’ my newer boots, glad the swelling’s gone down enough I can still pull the one over the fucked-up ankle.

I call Stoutamire’s house an’ talk to Jannelle. She says everything’s fine at the ranch, not to worry. I tell her I’ll be back Friday late.

Lureen knocks on the door at 6:30 an’ hollers, “I’ll be ready for breakfast in half an hour.” The funeral starts at 10 an’ we need to be at the Twist ranch before that, got plenty a time.

We both check out a the motel, each payin our own bill, $30 instead a the $39 on the sign. I don’t know how Lureen got the price down. Instead a headin up to the Twist ranch, we eat at some greasy spoon in town. She says she wants to give Bobby more time alone with his grandma.

She tells me more about Bobby – that he was on the rodeo an’ baseball teams in high school, an’ he likes to draw horses an’ other animals an’ comic book characters. Lureen says the girlfriend is from a Mexican family, which must a set L.D. spinnin in his grave, but at least they’re not too serious. That reminds me a the movie “Giant,” one a Chuck’s favorites.

She asks about my girls, an’ when I tell her their ages she seems surprised, I don’t know why. I tell her how they’re so different from each other, an’ she says what I told her about Francine reminds her of herself at a younger age. She says she would a traveled more an’ had more adventures, but young ladies back then didn’t have the kinda freedom they do now, an’ as it was she pushed it about has hard as she could with her barrel-racin career.

She’s still talkative when we’re back in her car headin up to Lightnin Flat.

She asks me if I’d ever met Jack’s old man, an’ I tell her I’d come up here about the ashes, an’ then helpin out in November.

“So was he as bad as Jack made him out to be?” she asks.

I know we shouldn’t speak ill a the dead, but the old bastard had spoke ill a Jack, an’ I don’t believe in no curses or superstitions, so I say, “I reckon he was.”

“You know they didn’t come to our wedding, or to Jack’s funeral? I never met Roberta until yesterday.”

“So I heard.”

“I blame him for that,” she says. “The old man, I mean. You know Jack was a real good dad? Bobby misses him a whole lot.”

Why not say it? She already knows. So I put it out there: “Me too.”

“So why’d you come up here to help his folks out anyway?”

“Jack’s ma is awful nice.” Only way I know to explain it.

“That she is,” Lureen says. “I’m hoping you can find a way to save the ranch so she can stay right
where she is, like she wants.”

Then she’s quiet for a while. Just as we turn off the main road, she says, “You weren’t thinking to
tell Bobby about you and Jack, were you?”


“Your hired hand won’t say anything about … you?”

“He don’t know nothin a tell.” I’m hopin like hell that’s true. So many people do know, it scares
the piss outta me, an’ it’s gettin hard a keep track. There’s Curt, Regent, probly Tex, not to mention
I’m pretty sure both Stoutamires by now.

An’ that’s where it gets complicated – some folks know about Chuck, others know about Jack. I
cain’t help but wonder if Lureen might be fishin for information, an’ I sure am not goin a bite.

“I might tell Bobby someday,” she says. “I don’t think an 18-year-old boy can handle hearing
something like that about his daddy, do you?”

“Nope,” I say. I don’t know why she’d ever want him to know.

*****

The rain has stopped by the time we ride over to the funeral in Lureen’s rented Town Car, with me
in the passenger seat an’ James an’ Bobby in back. Jack’s ma is goin with her brother an’ sister-in-
law.

In the car, Bobby says, “Ma? Can I stay here the rest of the summer?”

Lureen says, “What about your job at Darla’s?”

“Maybe I can work for Mr. Del Mar here, along with James,” he says.

“Whoa now,” I say. “First, James works for your grandma, not me. Second, we don’t know what
your grandma wants to do with the ranch. An, third, James? Would you want a stick around?”

James takes a few seconds to answer, then says, “Sure, I like it here. If we could get some better
horses.”

He’s right, them mares are for sure on their last legs. The black gelding we used as a pack horse
back when we fixed the fence in November must already be gone.

*****

The minister is hard-pressed to say anything nice about John Twist, or anything at all. I’m guessin
they never even met. After the service, most a the people drive over to the Twist family plot for the
burial.

We watch the coffin bein lowered into the grave, then the minister says a few more things an’
Jack’s ma throws in a shovelful a dirt. My eyes are over at the stone they put up for Jack, an’ I feel
like pukin. I take a few steps in that direction, thinkin no one will notice.

But there’s Lureen, right by my side.

“That’s Jack’s grave,” I say with a nod. I can hardly get the words out.
She says, “Do you know if they buried the ashes or scattered them?”

“No, ma’am,” I say. “Lureen.” I cain’t look at her, so I just keep lookin at the stone.

“Well,” she says. “Like I told you, we put up a stone down in Childress. But his ashes are in an urn in the columbarium. Ennis?”

“Huh?” I look up, hopin my eyes are dry enough.

“If you’d like, I can get the urn back and send it to you so you can, you know, take it to Brokeback Mountain like Jack wanted.”

I sure wasn’t expectin that. I been tryin hard not to think about Jack’s ashes, tryin not to care where they ended up. But a guy’s last wish has to count for something, don’t it?

“I’d be happy to,” I say, nearly chokin on the words.

The ceremony at the old man’s grave is over, an’ Jack’s ma an’ Bobby are headin over to look at Jack’s grave, so we don’t say nothin more.

*****

Back at the church hall, I fill up my plate with some ham, potato salad, raw carrots an’ baked beans, an’ head over to the table where James is sittin with Bobby. Just as I’m sittin down, Lureen grabs the other chair.

“Hey,” Bobby says. “Say we do get some fresh horses here. James and me were thinking about trying team roping, maybe in the county fairs around here.”

“You can do that back in Texas,” Lureen says.

I say, “I thought you was a bull rider like your daddy. That’s what your grandma told me.”

Lureen gives out a snort, not ladylike.

“I got on a bull just one time,” Bobby says. “Nearly got stomped to death. Then I tried the saddle broncs until last year when I broke my leg. I wanted to impress Grandma Twist, so I guess I exaggerated a bit.”

“I doubt you wouldn’t need a do nothin to impress your grandma,” I say. “She’s proud enough a you.”

“Well, put in a good word for me, if she’s hiring,” Bobby says. “I’m a good worker. I work my butt off at Darla’s stables. Isn’t that right Ma?”

“True enough,” Lureen says. “She’s never complained to me, and believe me, she would. But I still don’t get why you’d want to stay here.”

Bobby says he’d rather muck out stalls here in the middle a nowhere with cool breezes an’ a view a the mountains than roast down there in Texas, an’ anyways he’s got catchin up to do with his grandma.

“Your Daddy liked Wyoming better too,” Lureen says to Bobby, but she’s lookin at me with a little smile. I don’t bother tellin them that the breeze is really wind, an’ it don’t hardly never stop.

*****
After lunch, the Twist’s neighbor comes over an’ draws us a map of all the neighborin ranches, most a them abandoned, to show who owns what, where the water is, an’ where we could lease land if we need it. He says he can help out from time to time, him an’ his two boys.

I decide my ankle’s good enough, so I ride out with James for a couple a hours to see the whole Twist operation. It looks to be about one-quarter the size a Stoutamire’s ranch includin the leases. We check out the fences, the outbuildings, the fields overtaken by spurge, the hayfields an’ the grazin areas. Not a pretty picture, I can tell you that.

When we get back, Bobby an’ James tend to the horses. I sit down at Jack’s ma’s table, an’ my ankle is killin me. Lureen says, “Ennis? You should put that foot up and get some ice on it.”

So she sets up a chair an’ gets me to take my boots off an’ put my leg up, an’ Jack’s ma gets ice in a plastic bag an’ sets it over the ankle. I feel like a damn fool, women waitin on me like I’m an invalid or somethin.

When we all have mugs a coffee in front of us, Jack’s ma gets a couple a boxes a paper, an’ pretty soon the table’s piled high with feed records, contracts, bank statements.

Me an’ Lureen both have scratch pads, an’ we take notes as we go through the paperwork. Jack’s ma starts by sayin she wants to stay right here at the ranch ‘cause she’s lived here 45 years an’ all her friends are nearby, an’ anyways no point tryin a sell when so many ranches are up for sale or just abandoned. That’s what I’d figured.

I find a few surprises. First off, there’s money in the bank. Turns out the old man used the insurance money from Jack to pay off the mortgage an’ the ranch loans, an’ just a few repairs – mostly just the ones I helped him with in November. So there’s still a nice chunk a money just sittin there, an’ Lureen says first thing, we need to move that to another kind a account where it could make some money.

I go through some a my figurin – what it would take to clear the spurge, fix the barn an’ fences an’ the irrigation system an’ buy new horses. I tell ‘em that when everything’s up to snuff, next year at the soonest if things get underway right now, the ranch could support probly 150 cow an’ calf pairs. Jack’s ma says John’s daddy used a run 200 pairs when she first got married an’ came to live here. There’s an old bunkhouse we could fix up for livin quarters for the hands, but meanwhile Jack’s ma might want a get a trailer for James to stay in, an’ Bobby too if he’s goin a be workin here.

Lureen an’ Jack’s ma are both noddin as I’m talkin, probly 10 minutes or more. Finally I say, “So, what do you think?”

“What’s the bottom line, and how soon before it’s making money?” Lureen says. I give her a ballpark number, a bit high just in case, an’ I give it two more years before there’s a year-on-year profit.

She says that sounds reasonable, maybe optimistic. Jack’s ma says, “Surely you’d need more than just James and Bobby to do all the work, wouldn’t you? John always had such a hard time hiring help.”

“And would you be the long-distance foreman?” Lureen asks. “Or do you think James is up to the task?”

I say no, an’ no. An’ then it comes to me. Regent told me he needed a senior project to finish his ag. degree, an’ I’d talked to Jannelle, but we didn’t come up with nothin more than havin him
supervise the hayin operation in August. But this ranch? That’s a project.

So I mention Regent, an’ Jack’s ma says that would be wonderful, an Lureen says her friend Darla has a young whippersnapper runnin the whole operations side a her ridin stables, and he started out as a student intern.

Lureen says, why not call Regent right now if I have his number. I don’t, but I get it from directory assistance an’ make the call.

Flo answers, says Regent’s not home. I run the idea by her, an’ she says she bets he’ll love it. I can hear Lisa listenin in an’ askin questions.

Jack’s ma says, “Well, I feel like we’ve accomplished something here, and I’m going to sleep a lot better tonight. Thank you Ennis. And Lureen.”

I’m about to say let’s don’t get too far ahead of ourselves, but Lureen says, “You’re welcome. The important thing is, we all want what’s best for you. You’ve been through so much.” She says it like she means it.

Sometimes Lureen ain’t as hard as she seems.

By the time we’re done talkin about the ranch, it’s near 5 o’clock, an’ Jack’s ma says surely Lureen an’ Bobby aren’t plannin to drive to Bozeman tonight. Lureen says they’ll stay for supper if that’s OK, an’ then drive up to Billings an’ stay there overnight. They’ll tour around Montana State University on Wednesday an’ come back here Thursday.

*****

I cain’t get to sleep, an’ it’s not just ‘cause I’m not used to a sleepin bag on bare ground. It’s ‘cause I cain’t stop thinkin about them ashes.

Every time I close my eyes I think about that last time I seen Jack, not the argument but the night before, him sayin he missed me. I might a wanted to make some wisecrack, but the look he gave me, ah, well. He was long dead before it came to me that “I miss you” is the same as “I love you.” Wish I could a said, “Me too, bud.”

I never told him, but now I’ve told his ma, his wife an’ people close to me. That counts for something, don’t it? Jack, I ain’t forgettin you.

Most a the time, I try not to think couldas, wouldas an’ shouldas. Tonight, it’s drivin me fuckin crazy.

*****

Saturday, June 8

“What’s that you’re hummin, Ennis?” Tex asks. “Eyes of Texas?”

I wasn’t payin attention. “No, I guess it was ‘I Been Workin on the Railroad.’”

“Same tune,” he says. It’s almost 6 an’ we’re puttin away the tack from the horses we just took out. It’s been a long day, an’ I got home late last night. He sings a bit of his Texas song.

“What are you doin for supper?” he asks. “Wanna head over to the Buckhorn Bar for a burger an’
some air conditionin?"

I tell him no thanks, I’m too tired, an’ anyways I’ll see him tomorrow at the big French feast Junior an’ Bernadette are puttin on.

I don’t have no food at home. I haven’t seen Chuck in near a week, an’ he’s supposed to get here at 7 with supper.

I shower, get dressed, an’ sit down with a beer to watch the TV news. The Cubs won today an’ they’re at the top a the N.L. East.

Then I hear a voice through the screen door. “Hey, handsome.”

I turn, an’ there he is. He’s the good-lookin one, by far. “You want me to kill you now or later?” I ask, then I go over an’ wrap him in my arms an’ kiss him hard on the lips.


“I missed you too,” he says into my ear, an’ drops a bag a food to the floor. “Why are you limping?”

“It’s nothin,” I say. I close the door an’ drag him into my room, not that he’s fightin back. We go at it like starved teenagers, at least that’s how it feels to me.

******

“Don’t you wish we still smoked?” Chuck says. He’s lyin next to me naked. Finally the temperature dropped, an’ the air comin in is nice an’ cool.

“You never did smoke,” I say, runnin my fingers through his hair. “You just bummed my cigarettes.”

He laughs.

“I brought barbecued ribs from Hawg Heaven,” he says. “Do you remember the first time I brought that?”

“First time you come over here,” I say. “You invited yourself. That’s when you started this whole thing.” I’m rememberin him puttin his feet up on the coffee table, an’ how that turned me on, an’ just a few weeks later ...

“No way,” he says. “You started it when you made eyes at me at Junior’s wedding.”

“Me?” I say. I grab a pillow an’ hit him over the head with it. “You was the one … come on, I’m hungry.”

We got lots to talk about while we eat the ribs.

He tells me about Julie gettin settled at the fancy hotel in Yellowstone, an’ how one a his poker buddies asked if he’s seein Lisa La Rocque. “I told him yeah,” he says. “Don’t tell Flo.” We laugh.

I tell him about how me an’ Lureen worked out plans for the Twist ranch, an’ then I called Jannelle an’ went over it all with her. So I hired Bobby an’ Regent, had Regent drive two horses from Stoutamire’s up there, spent a day with him goin over everything that needs to be done, an’ went
with Lureen to buy a two-bedroom trailer for him an’ James to live in.

“So how was it, meeting Jack’s widow?” Chuck asks.

“Well, she knew who I was,” I say. “She asked me point-blank, an’ what was I goin a say?”

I tell him about the ashes, what Jack wanted an’ what actually happened to ‘em. “She’s supposed a be mailin ‘em to me this week.”

“You really think she can just walk in and have them disinter the urn?” Chuck asks.

“Well, Charlie, you obviously don’t know Lureen Newsome Twist,” I say. “You should a seen her with the guy sellin the trailers. She brought him down almost to half price, an’ had him deliver it too. She would a got on the phone to talk down the price Stoutamire gave us on the horses, but I had a put my foot down. Anyway, point is, once I get the urn, I’m goin a take it up on Brokeback Mountain an’ throw the ashes to the winds.”

“That’s where you and Jack herded sheep?” he asks. “You want me to go with you?”

That don’t sound right. “No,” I say. “I’ll be doin this on my own.” I’m thinkin if I get it this week, I’ll drive up there an’ back next Sunday. Two hour drive, two hours on horseback, an’ then back down. I’ll take my 30-aught-6 in case a bears.

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Sunday, June 9

We sleep in ‘till nearly 8 an’ then Chuck says we should go to the diner at the Greyhound station in Riverton for breakfast. I say sure, ‘cause the milk is turned an’ I got no eggs in the house.

“Separate trucks,” I say. “You get in there an’ order an’ I’ll come five minutes later.”

He puts out the loudest sigh I ever heard. “You know I’m moving into town at the end of the month. I’ll be just around the block from Alma and Bill.”

“Well, don’t expect a see me over there,” I say.

“Never?” he asks.

“Hardly ever.”

“Then I’ll be over here a lot more.”

*****

I go back home an’ spend rest a the day workin with the horses, then head over to Junior’s at 5. There’s me an’ Chuck, Tex an’ Bernadette, an’ Junior an’ Curt.

One look at Junior an’ I know it, she’s pregnant again. She keeps givin me little smiles. I bet she’s not even three months, not yet ready to tell everyone.

I cain’t tell you the names a the food they serve, but it all tastes pretty good to me. It’s too damn hot inside, even with fans goin, so Junior had Curt an’ Tex bring the dining room table an’ chairs outside, an’ we’re sittin around it, with a white table cloth an’ the fanciest glasses an’ plates she’s got. There’s a different kind a wine for each dish.
Dessert is real thin pancakes called crepes rolled around strawberries with whipped cream on top. After that, Junior asks Chuck if he remembered to bring his guitar. She must’ve asked him to. Turns out Bernadette sings pretty good, Joni Mitchell an’ Joan Baez type stuff.

Chuck says she should try to get a gig singin at one a the bars around here, an’ she says she ain’t nearly good enough, an’ people don’t want a hear that kind a music anyways. She says her ma was a folk singer, an’ sometimes sang at dude ranches an’ ski lodges.

“I played dude ranches too,” Chuck says. “Well, that was after spending my days taking the dudes around the trails.”

“Wow,” Tex says. “What was that like, teachin big-city faggots to ride?”

I feel my neck an’ face gettin hot, but Chuck don’t miss a beat. “To ride and to herd cattle,” he says. “Dangerous work.”

I cain’t help it, I give a little chuckle at that. No way was the ranch usin city slickers to do any kind a work that counts.

“Tex, can you come inside with me for a minute?” Bernadette says.

Something in her voice tells him she means business, so off they go.

“Daddy,” Junior says, an’ she puts her hand on mine. Curt’s lookin anywhere but at me an’ Chuck.

I let the hand go. “It’s nothin,” I say. “I hear that word an’ worse just about every day at the ranch.”

Then Tex an’ Bernadette are comin back out, him walkin with his head down, her right behind.

“Sorry for the language,” Tex says before sittin down, barely lookin at me.

“It’s all right,” I say.

Curt gets up. “Come on, Tex, we’re supposed to be cleaning up.”

We all help clear the table, then Junior brings out the cards an’ we play Hearts while the boys clean up the kitchen. When they’re done, they come back out an’ open the hood a Tex’s truck in the driveway.

“We should go,” I say to Chuck. We thank Junior an’ Bernadette for supper. Junior packs up some a the beef stew with mushrooms she’d cooked up, an’ gives it to me.

At my truck, Chuck says, “You know, that shit will never stop. We’re gonna hear it for the rest of our lives.”

For once, he don’t look like he’s smirkin.

“I’m the one supposed a be sayin things like that,” I say. “It’s goin a be OK. Look, we’re still here. For sure Bernadette told the boy what’s goin on, an’ he didn’t go runnin for his shotgun.” Or a tire iron, but I don’t say that.

Chuck looks at me, an’ I see his eyes start to dance an’ the little smile come back.

“So, what if I stay over at your place again tonight?”
“That’s what this is all about?” I say. “I bet you got your bag all packed in your truck, don’t you?”

What the hell.
Up On Brokeback

Monday, June 10

“Ennis, can we talk?”

Never thought I’d hear such a thing from Tex ‘cause he’s not much for talkin, but I know he probly wants to tell me he’s got another guy for best man. Fine with me. I always said he should have someone his own age.

“Sure,” I say. “I’m just goin a hang up this tack.”

“It’s lunchtime anyways,” he says. “How about if I bring my lunch over an’ we eat at your place?”

So maybe it’s something else. He’s quiet while we’re walkin. Once we get inside, he takes a sandwich outta his lunchbox an’ I fix myself a ham sandwich an’ get us each a bottle a beer, then sit down at the table with him.

He’s nervous, fidgetin with the plastic on his sandwich.

“Uh, the thing I said over at Junior’s,” he says. “I didn’t mean nothin by it. I didn’t even know …”

“Forget it,” I say. He don’t like this any better than I do, so why drag it out?

“You know I was in prison?” he says. “But Bernadette, she told me what you got ain’t like that, it’s more like her an’ me, just wantin to be together. Told me not to think about … an’ what’s it to me anyways?”

“C’mon, don’t,” I say. “I don’t mind if you want a get someone else for best man.”

He looks right at me. “You’re not gettin what I’m sayin. I’m tryin to tell you it’s none a my business. You’re all right.”

“So you do want me to stand up for you,” I say.

“Yeah, Ennis. You’re about the best friend I every had. An’ you can bring Chuck to the wedding if you want. Bernadette’s people won’t say nothin.”

So, the Texas cowboy still thinks I’m OK after findin out the whole story? I say thanks, but Chuck’s band is playin at his ex-wife’s wedding that same day. Then Tex tells me about my duties as best man, an’ we’re all squared away.

The rest a the lunch is pretty quiet, just a little talk about the colt we bought together, name a Honey, an’ some a the other horses.

Sunday, June 17

Sometimes when I’m at home worryin about somethin on the ranch, I try an’ tell myself that the problem ain’t here in the house with me, it’s in the hay meadow or the feed barn or the bunkhouse or the corrals or wherever. Or rememberin about Old Earl – that was miles from here, an’ my old man is in the ground himself down there in Sage.
Now I’m drivin back from Brokeback in Chuck’s truck, an’ I’m tellin myself that Jack is in four places: up Brokeback, at his mama’s house, at his house in Childress, an’ at my house on Stoutamire’s ranch where the shirts are. It feels right.

I’d driven up to the bridge where the Basque used a bring supplies, took Bluebelle from the trailer, an’ rode up the rest a the way. Where I scattered the ashes was on our first campsite.

I’d been dreadin findin sheepherders up there. It looked like people had been there since our time, 22 years ago now, but probly not this year. So there I was alone, sun shinin, wind blowin cold. I don’t believe in God or no kind a afterlife, but even so, I got strange feelings up there, lookin up to where we first took the sheep, half expectin to see Jack ridin that skittish bay mare.

I’d gathered kindlin an’ lit a fire in our old fire pit with the lighter I took from Jack, then sat against a log for probly an hour, wishin I had a cigarette an’ some whiskey, tryin a remember everything I could about that summer an’ other good times we had. I closed my eyes an’ let the wind blow, breathin in the pine. Jack first gettin me to talk, Jack sayin he couldn’t eat no more beans, Jack talkin about Texans, especially his father-in-law. Jack on a horse. Jack cookin supper while I tended to the horses. Sleepin with my arm around him all them times, me wakin up before him an’ makin coffee. The week at Don Wroe’s cabin. The way Jack smiled ear-to-ear when we’d first meet up after all them months alone, an’ even got me to crack a smile. Every time a bad memory came, I chased it away an’ brought out one a the good ones.

Then I’d stood up, took out the urn Lureen sent in the mail, opened it, held it out so I’d be upwind, an’ let ‘em go, sayin out loud, “Rest in peace, Jack. Rest in peace.” An’ then, “I loved you Bud. Hope you know it.”

Now I’m drivin through Dubois, an’ it’s almost 5 an’ I’m hungry. I know Chuck’s got supper waitin for me at his place, an’ I have to give him back his truck, but I’m feelin like spendin some time alone.

Drivin through Dubois, I got a mind to pull over an’ call him to say I ain’t feelin well, an’ maybe I could take the truck back tomorrow. Wouldn’t be a lie; I’m feelin damn strange. But I keep drivin. I take the Y in the road over to Signal, get Bluebelle settled at the ranch, an’ drive over to Chuck’s.

When I get there, he starts the grill up an’ we sit on the deck drinkin beer while he cooks up steaks an’ corn on the cob.

“How did it go?” he asks.

“OK,” I say. Somethin in my face might be tellin him I don’t want a talk about it, ‘cause he don’t ask nothin more.

He gets to talkin about how his week went, his Friday night poker game, Julie comin next week for the weddin an’ to help move her stuff outta Kerby’s house. He says he took my truck into town to get groceries, an’ he cain’t imagine how I can drive it around with no radio nor air conditionin, engine not wantin to turn over.

I tell him about Alma phonin, askin if I can take over her boys’ ridin lessons. When I’d asked her why, she said they’re used to the ranch an’ the horses. So I said OK, an’ she’s bringin ‘em over next Sunday.

“That so,” he says.

“What?” He cain’t be jealous a Alma, can he?
“The thing is,” he says, “we’ve hardly seen each other in the last few weeks. And we’ve got those weddings next Saturday, and then you’re teaching your ex-wife’s kids to ride on Sunday?”

I got nothin to say at first. I cain’t believe he’s doin this. What does he know about spendin time apart? But I hold my temper.

“Chuck, that ridin lesson’ll go an hour, an hour-an’-a-half,” I say. “I got the rest a the day for you.”

“So you’re going to help me move? I’ve got two of my buddies helping too.”

I say sure, after the lesson, even though I ain’t lookin forward to bein in that neighborhood, around the block from Alma.

Then we talk about him movin his horses over here. Turns out I’ve gotta buy ‘em off him an’ change the registration papers, ’cause Jannelle says the ranch cain’t do business with a bureau employee, bad for both sides a the deal. So I’m gettin two Quarter Horses for $100 an’ they’re worth a hell of a lot more’n that. I guess he trusts me.

*****

We got all the dishes cleaned up when Chuck hooks his finger onto one a my belt loops, pulls to turn me around, an’ puts his face right up into mine.

“So, you want to head upstairs?” he asks.

I step back. I’d been thinkin about this over supper. I’m almost always ready to go, just not now. I want a go home to my empty house an’ sleep.

“OK if we don’t tonight?”

“Well, that’s a first,” he says. “Sure. Anything you want to talk about?”

“Not really,” I say. “I just got a lot on my mind. An’ don’t go thinkin this is the silent treatment.”

He squishes up his face like he’s confused. “Are you having doubts about us?”

“Shit no,” I say. “Of course not. That’s what I’m tryin a tell you. I’m just havin some feelins is all.” Right away, I’m thinkin, what a stupid thing to say.

“You can have feelings around me,” he says, smilin a little. “I don’t mind.”

“I do all the time,” I say. “I just …”

“Of course it’s OK Ennis.”

“How about if you come over maybe Tuesday an’ Thursday after work?” I say. “Stay the night.”

He says that’ll work, an’ he gives me a hug. I’m out the door an’ in my truck when I realize there’s somethin else I should a said. In those first months after I found out Jack had died, there was no one, not a single person I could talk to. An’ now I got this, an’ I gotta say, I am goddamn lucky. Even if I don’t want a talk or stay around just now.

I go back an’ knock on the door.

“You’re back?” he says, face lightin up. “C’mon in.”
“No, I just wanted a say, thanks. For bein there.”

He smiles an’ ruffles my hair. “I’ll see you Tuesday.”

*****

I wake up at 3 in the mornin. Another nightmare, this one about Jack’s old man beatin on him when he was a little boy, spit comin out with his words. I’m there too, but I’m older an’ tryin a pull the old man off a Jack. An’ then the old man is gone, an’ I can see Jack but I cain’t get to him because the stairs I’m on just keep goin an’ goin …

I get up an’ look for some a that awful chamomile tea Francine used a drink. Tomorrow I’ll call Lureen an’ Jack’s ma to tell ‘em I took the ashes up.

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Saturday, June 24

“I likely cain’t keep you on past September,” I tell Curt. “Maybe call you for some odd jobs.”

I’m drivin him to Cody for Tex an’ Bernadette’s wedding. Both of us worked this morning doin’ Tex’s job. Junior’s already up there helpin the bride get ready. The Stoutamires are goin too, but they drove up yesterday.

Curt don’t say nothin right away, probly thinkin the job don’t pay shit anyways.

But then he says, “That’s the thing, Ennis. I got accepted at the Colorado State Patrol’s police academy in Boulder and I’ll be going there in September, then hopefully get a posting somewhere in Colorado. Me and Junior were going to tell you later today.”

“Colorado, huh?” I say. This ain’t good news as far as I’m concerned, first Francine, now this. I mean, I know he’s gotta make a livin, but I’m pretty sure Junior’s expectin, an’ I don’t like the idea of them movin either way.

“What do your parents have to say?” I ask. Ellen an’ Gill, good people I’d met last year at Junior’s wedding, an’ they invited me to a few things since then. Their older kid, a girl, is already married an’ gone.

“I haven’t told them yet,” he says. “Anyway, Colorado’s nice – like Wyoming only with more mountains and more people, and it’s not too far.”

“Too damn many people,” I say, “an’ it depends where you go, whether they’re nice or not.” He gives a little nervous laugh.

*****

It’s a priest an’ a native shaman or something doin the wedding ceremony. My job is to stand at the front with Tex an’ wait for Bernadette an’ Junior to walk up the aisle.

They’re both beautiful girls. Bernadette is wearin a native outfit with lots a colors an’ beads, an’ Junior’s in a red skirt an’ white top with beadin on it too. Bernadette’s grandma is the one givin her away; I don’t think she ever knew her own dad.

At the reception, I sit at the head table, thinkin everyone’s eyes is on me. I know I’m too old to be the best man for a 25-year-old kid, even if he acts older’n he is ‘cause a havin been to prison.
After we eat, an elder gets up and gives advice to the newlyweds, some of it serious, some funny.

I gotta make a toast to the happy couple, so I keep it simple: “To the bride an’ groom.” A cousin a Bernadette’s makes a way longer toast with lots a jokes about the antics Bernadette an’ her brothers got up to growin up, an’ some cowboy-an’-Indian jokes about her an’ Tex gettin together. They could maybe be taken the wrong way, but everyone’s laughin so I guess it’s OK.

After that, there’s dancin, an’ I’m figurin to cut out early. Junior says to me, “Daddy, save one for me,” before she gets up to dance with Curt. So I get another beer an’ have a chat with Bernadette’s grandma who’d brought her up mostly an’ taught her to cook.

When it’s a slow song, Junior comes an’ gets me. I’m rememberin her teachin me to dance for her own wedding, just last year. Chuck gave me some lessons since then, strange as that is. Once we’re in the rhythm, she says, “So Curt told you about the state patrol job in Colorado?”

I say, “Yeah,” tryin a keep my voice strong.

“Well there’s more, Daddy. We’re expectin. Baby’s due in December.”

I cain’t help it, I pull her in an’ kiss her on the cheek. “That’s my girl.” I’m lookin at her an’ her eyes are sparkling.

“If it’s a boy, we’re gonna name him Ennis,” she says.

“No need for that,” I say. “C’mon, there’s lotsa names out there. What about Curt Junior?”

She laughs. “There’s already one Junior in the family, and that’s about enough. You’ll come visit us in Colorado, won’t you?”

“Of course.”

*****

It’s nearly midnight when I get home, an’ Chuck’s truck is parked in the gravel next to my house. Yeah, I’d given him Francine’s old key last week, an’ I kind a thought I might find him here. He’d taken Lisa to Queenie’s wedding today, so I know he’ll have some stories to tell.

I can see him through the screen door watchin TV, so I say, “Hey, you.”

But when I step in an’ take my boots off, I can tell there’s something wrong. He’s sittin on the couch with his arms crossed, an’ he don’t get up.

“What is it?” I say.

“C’mon, sit down,” he says.

I say I gotta change outta these monkey clothes, I’ll be right back.

I get a beer from the fridge an’ sit on my recliner an’ take a swig. Now I can see he’s all in black, got his hair in a higher pompadour than usual, an’ he’s wearin black makeup lines around his eyes. What the hell?

“You wearin makeup?” I ask.

“Queenie wanted an Elvis theme,” he says an’ shrugs his shoulders. “I thought I told you about it. Anyway, that’s not what I want to talk about. That little weasel she married wouldn’t shake my
hand in the receiving line.”

“What’d he do?”

“He wiped his hand on his pant leg and then put it in his pocket. I think Queenie’s mother saw it. Ennis, I was so fucking embarrassed.”

I go over an’ sit down next to him on the couch, take his hand.

“Is that it?” I ask.

“No,” he says. “I was talking to Alma’s sister Jeannie. Your brother was married to Charlene Moore, right? And Jeannie was maid of honor?”

“Yeah, I guess.” That’s how I met Alma. I got no idea where this is goin, but if K.E.’s involved it cain’t be any good.

“Well, Charlene’s dad died, and Jeannie was at the funeral in Lander this morning, and Charlene told her that she’d heard from her daughter that you, Ennis Del Mar, are gay. Obviously, Jeannie already knew about you and me from Alma.”

It takes me a minute to figure who said what to who. Then I say, “No shit. We already knew Bridget’s boy told his cousin, an’ the girl told K.E. Musta told her ma too.”

“Well, Jeannie said Charlene was laughing when she said it, like it was some joke. Jeannie asked her to be quiet about it for Alma’s sake, but she doesn’t know how many people Charlene told.”

“Well that’s just it,” I say. “You never know. You just wish people could keep their goddamn mouths shut.”

He looks at me close, like he cain’t believe what I just said. “You’re not going to ask me to leave?”

I let go of his hand an’ pull back. “What? What good would that do?”

“I thought you’d freak out.”

“Don’t you leave,” I say. “We knew stuff like this was goin a happen. We talked about it. We can deal with it, cain’t we?” That was his idea, an’ now he’s throwin it back on me.

“Yeah, sure,” he says. “But don’t you think we should maybe move away from here?”

“Sooner or later, like I told you. In the meantime, just be careful, like we said.”

“OK. You be careful too.”


He smiles, first time tonight. “So … you’re thinking about Colorado?”

“Don’t jump ahead a yourself,” I say. “We need a see what happens with Junior, an’ I’m goin a stick it out here with Stoutamire as long as I can, but if both my girls are gone, an’ Julie not likely to settle down around here …”

“Ennis,” he says, an’ before I know it he’s kissin me, climbin on top, openin buttons.
I cain’t help it, I’m likin how the black makeup makes his eyes look deep an’ mysterious. Not so much girly. I’m pretty sure those old Western stars wore this same kind a makeup.

“Stop,” I say, pushin him away. “Just let me look at you.”

Pretty soon I’m on top a him, an’ we’re tearin each other’s clothes off.

“I gotta have you,” I say, pullin his black jeans off, grabbin that ass a his.

“Take me,” he says. I say just a second, go an’ get the K-Y jelly from my room. When I get back, the son of a bitch is lyin there holdin his dick, pushin the foreskin up an’ down real slow an’ starin at me with the devil in his eyes. I put my hand on my dick, still with my jeans on.

“I keep lookin at you, I’m goin a spurt in my jeans,” I say. So I take ‘em off, kneel down an’ pull his legs up an’ lick at his hole. I start lickin clockwise around, then the other way, then poke my tongue in a little. I spit to give it more lube, like I’ve seen in his porn movies. He’s moanin, so I go on. I lick his balls, an’ up to his dick, totally hard. I take it into my mouth. He’s likin it, but none a this is any good ‘cause I want a see his face.

So I squirt some K-Y on my hand an’ spread it over his hole an’ on my dick, which is feelin like it’s goin a explode. He’s lyin there with his legs up, an’ I’m half-standin, half-kneelin with one foot on the ground. I’m lookin in his eyes the whole time. I slide my dick back an’ forth along for a while, then put just the tip on his hole an’ push in slowly.

“Yeah, Ennis, that’s it,” he says. We go slow for a time, me in him an’ my hand on his cock, an’ then I speed up an’ were both lettin go. Eyes open the whole time.

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Wednesday, July 17

After work an’ a shower, I’m about to sit down an’ read a letter from Francine – first I got from her – when I get a call from Andrew, “Dave’s Andrew” as he tells me. But it seems like that’s over. He says Dave moved out.

I ask him why, an’ he says, “Well, I asked him to leave.”

“Was it why I think it was?”

“Yeah, and there was some sneaking around too. Anyway, I wanted to let you know, if you’re ever in Denver, you’re welcome to stay here. You and Chuck.”

“That’s good to know, thanks,” I say. “You know I don’t travel much.”

“Just whenever,” he says. “I mean, this is an invitation. You and Chuck doing OK?”

“Sure. How about you? Work goin OK?”

“Thank god for work,” he says. “A guy has to have something to do. I went up to see my parents last weekend -- not a word about Dave, or me being gay, or have I met a girl. It was good to see them, but kind of weird.”

“I bet.”

“So I’m hoping you and I can stay in touch.”
“Sure, call me anytime. An’ good luck with everything.”

We hang up, an’ I get myself a beer. Poor kid. An’ god damn that Dave, too wild for his own good.

Next, I sit down an’ read Francine’s letter.

Dear Daddy,

Sorry it took me so long to write. The Ketterings are keeping me really busy. There are three kids. Jennifer is 9, Matthew is 7 and Jessica is 5. DO NOT call them by any nicknames. Mrs. Armstrong won’t have it! The boy reminds me of Jason (the younger of my stepbrothers in case you forgot. I hope you didn’t because Mama said you took over the riding lessons. How’s that going?).

Daddy, these people are rich! This house is three stories high. There’s a ballroom, a library besides a living room and dining room. I don’t know how many bedrooms. The parents are on the second floor and the kids and me are on the third. Mr. Anderson said the estate is 12 acres. The kids’ horses board at the Hunt Club. The parents spend most of their time there or at the Country Club.

Mrs. Kettering and the kids stay here all summer, and Mr. Kettering comes up every weekend. They have another house in Manhattan where everyone lives during the school year. Jennifer told me that house is three stories high too. I haven’t seen New York City yet. I might go there on a day off. Anyway, we’ll all be moving there with them in September. I can’t wait. I’m already bored out here in the country.

My job is to hang around with the kids all day. You know I used to complain about Mama’s boys being spoiled? Nothing like these three. I make them breakfast, but I don’t have to clean up because there’s a housekeeper for that. We go to the Hunt Club or the Country Club, the kids ride or swim or take lessons, we eat lunch at the club, and a cook (chef!) comes in to make supper. They also have a gardener/chauffeur and a twice-a-week maid.

The housekeeper’s name is Lilac, she’s about 45 and she’s black, divorced with two grown sons, both in the army in Germany. Her and me are the only ones who live in. We eat supper in the kitchen, and we each have our own room with a TV, but we share a bathroom and a phone line. We’re off most nights at 7, Wednesdays after 2 o’clock and all day Sundays. Last Sunday she took me to church and to visit her parents in White Plains. On Wednesday, we went to the cheapie movies to see “Beverly Hills Cop.” It’s really funny. You’d like it.

I miss you and I miss home. The Hunt Club (no hunting involved) is nothing like the open range. The grass is mowed, the trails are cleaned just about every day. There are too many trees around here, not enough sky. I have a lot of extra time on my hands, so I’ve been reading all the books I can find in the house. Mr. Kettering likes Tom Clancy (yuck) and Louis L’Amour novels – they’re about cowboys, so they make me homesick. Mrs. Kettering likes biographies and self-help books, so now I know all about Rosalynn Carter and all about LOVE. Ask me anything about LOVE and I can tell you, at least up to the point I stopped reading. I can’t believe people read this stuff.

By the way, how are you? Ready to be a grandfather? I can’t wait to meet the new baby when I’m home at Christmas. Do you want a grandson or granddaughter? I’m hoping for a niece so I can sew her outfits.

Junior told me you sent Regent to run Jack Twist’s parent’s ranch. How does he like it? Please say hello for me when you see him.

Anyway, I have to go. Take care of yourself (and Chuck).

LOVE, Francine
That gave me a good laugh, her readin a book about love an’ now she’s an expert. I told Chuck about it on the phone an’ he laughed too.

After supper, I sit down at the kitchen table an’ write her a letter back.

Dear Francine,

Thank you for the letter. Good to know your doing okay with the rich family. I hope the kids behave good. Yes I have been teaching Jason and Michael. Honey you had the wrong boy on the wrong horse. Michael was scared of Spark Plug. Hes doing a lot better on Bluebelle. Jason got no fear. He thinks hes ready for the rodeo. Chuck’s been trying to get me to read Louis Lamour stories for a while now, so I’ll try and read one allright? I only want Junior’s baby to be healthy, swear to god. Keep writing if you don’t mind me sending you such a short answer. Sorry to hear your missing the sky. I’ll be going up to Lightning Flat next weekend so I’ll say Hi to Regent for you.

Love, your daddy

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Friday, July 19

The other piece a mail I got this week was a card from Jack’s ma, same as last year, invitin me to help her bring flowers to Jack’s grave. July 28 is a Sunday, so I called her an’ said I’ll go up there after work Saturday an’ stay until Sunday supper if that’s OK. I’ll take my tent an’ sleepin bag. She said the boys’ll be doin ropin events at the rodeo in Sheridan Saturday night, so I might want a go to that too.

She said everything’s goin fine at the ranch. Lureen was up there last week with her doctor boyfriend, now fiancé, to take Bobby’s truck an’ horse to him ‘cause it turns out he’ll be goin a Montana State in the fall.

The thing that’s botherin me is Francine’s Nova ain’t in much better shape than my truck, which is to say bad. I look at the clock an’ it’s only 7, plenty a time to drive over to Lander Ford/Lincoln/Mercury to see what they got on their used lot. I put on my nicest jeans an’ my newer hat an’ boots, an take my checkbook with me.

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Well, I guess I must a learned something from Lureen, ‘cause I’m drivin outta there in a 1984 F-250 for $5,000, only 8,000 miles on it, good trailer pull, radio/cassette player, an’ even air conditionin. Last truck I bought was more like $1,000 with 75,000 miles already on it, an’ I drove it another 100,000.

Only thing about the new truck, it’s red with white side panels, showier than I would a wanted. An’ I hadn’t expected to be drivin it outta the dealership tonight, but I paid everything upfront in a check, so why not?

When I turn off the main ranch road just after 9, I see Chuck’s truck parked. I thought he’d be at poker.

“C’mon, get out here,” I call through the screen door. “You gotta see this.”

“Holy shit, Ennis, is that yours?” he says when he sees the truck. “You just went out and bought it?”
“Yeah,” I say. “How come you’re not at poker, huh? Let’s grab some beers an’ let’s go for a ride.”

Turns out the game was canceled ‘cause most a the guys are on vacation. I drive to a spot on the reservation between Signal and Riverton where K.E. once told me was a good place to take a girl. No one else here, so I park where we can watch the sun set. Not plannin any funny business, not in the truck anyways.

Today was clear with just a few clouds, but now the sky is somethin else. The kind a sunset where you can just count the colors – orange, red, purple, pink an’ even turquoise. There ain’t nothin like the Wyoming sky.

“Beautiful,” I say.

“Thank you,” Chuck says.

I give him a little punch in the arm. “The sky, asshole.”

We sit there a few minutes, an’ then he says, “I’ve got some ideas about that trip to Yellowstone to visit Julie.”

“When’s that?” I ask. He hasn’t said much, an’ I thought maybe he’d forgotten or he’d be goin there by himself. I been real busy, I got Lightnin Flat next week an’ I got the hayin comin up soon after that.

“Can you take off a long weekend in August?”

“Not usually.”

“I was hoping you could, and we’d go visit Julie and stay at this dude ranch that Lisa’s friend Camellia owns.”

“A dude ranch? For Christ sake.” I remember meetin the owner at Lisa an’ Flo’s New Year’s Eve party, an older lady who seemed nice enough.

“I mean just to take a look at the operation. It’s this idea I have for you and me, down the road.”

“An’ we’d stay there? In the same room?”

“Not as dudes though. We’d be special guests of Camellia. I talked to her on the phone, and she said she’ll personally take us on a tour. If she doesn’t have a room for us, we can pitch a tent.”

“An’ you picture you an’ me runnin an operation like that? Where do you get these ideas?”

“I would run the guest operations and you’d be in charge of the horses. You’d never have to see the dudes. Anyway, never mind all that. Just tell me if you can get the time off, because Julie’s only there until the end of August. She’s gotta be back in Laramie by Labor Day.”

“You know I got hay to bale all month?” I say. “I cain’t make no plans.” I don’t mention he could just go by himself.

“I realize that,” he says. “We could just wait to see when it rains, then take off for a few days because the hay has to dry out either way, right?”

Well, he’s persistent anyways. “I’ll ask Stoutamire,” I say. “I’ll try an’ make it happen. I don’t mind goin a see that dude ranch, just don’t you go makin plans for me to be no wrangler at a place like that.”
“Thanks Ennis,” he says.

The last lines a light in the sky are just about gone now.

No one else around, so I say, “You could sit a little closer.”

He scoots over an’ I put my arm around him. He leans into me. It feels like a special night ‘cause a the new truck an’ ‘cause I don’t usually get to see Chuck on Fridays.
A Bit of Heaven

Chuck P.O.V.

Tuesday, Dec. 24, 1985

Heaven is … watching Ennis Del Mar holding a baby. Better still, a pair of twins.

He’s sitting on a comfortable chair at my house, with the two of them in the crooks of his arms – Emily Jean, older by 10 minutes, and Ennis John, who Junior and Curt are calling E.J. and Ennis is calling Buster.

They’re both awake, and he’s talking to them. “You just wait ‘til you’re 2, an’ I’ll have you in the saddle,” he tells the boy. “You too,” he tells the girl. “You’ll be a little cowgirl just like your ma an’ your aunt.”

“Daddy! I’m not a cowgirl,” Junior calls over. She’s setting the table for our Christmas Eve dinner. The house smells of ham and applesauce. Julie and Bernadette are here too, and Francine will be over soon with Regent and pumpkin pies being sent over by Lisa and Flo. Tex will come after work.

“Not anymore, but you did take to ridin pretty good,” Ennis says.

“Who wouldn’t?” Junior asks.

“You’d be surprised,” he says. I think he’s referring to Alma’s older son, who asked Ennis to teach him how to drive the truck instead of riding. Ennis complied, even though the kid is only 10 or 11, claiming he was driving his daddy’s truck into town at that age. I’m pretty sure Alma doesn’t know about the driving.

Meanwhile, Ennis turns back to the babies. “An’ I’m goin a take you to Frontier Days when you’re 5, an’ I’m goin a teach you to shoot a rifle when you’re 8.”

“And to drive a truck when they’re 10,” I say.

“Hey, don’t I get to teach ‘em to shoot?” Curt asks. “Did I tell you I won a marksmanship award at the academy?”

“Well good for you,” Ennis says. “I guess I’d let you give ‘em a few pointers.”

Curt laughs.

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Junior found out in August that she was carrying twins, and then Curt was off to police academy in September. When he graduated, he lucked into a job at the Metro district of the Colorado State Patrol, and the two of them moved into a duplex in Denver.

Ennis and I helped them move, staying at Andrew’s and going to a low-key gay bar one night, not Freddie’s because he didn’t want to run into Dave.

Junior cried when we left, and Ennis didn’t speak until we got to Bridget’s house in Cheyenne. We visited her and Julie on our way back from Denver, but not my sister; I didn’t even tell her we’d be in Laramie.
When the twins were born Nov. 16, Alma went to stay with Junior. Ennis drove down the weekend before Thanksgiving and stayed at Andrew’s house.

That caused a rift between me and Ennis because I went and told him it was like a straight man visiting a much younger single woman. He exploded, asking if I was accusing him of being a pedophile or worse. I said no, but didn’t he think he might come into temptation? He huffed and I kind of goaded him into saying that I’m the only one he’s got his eyes on, although what he actually said was, “You’re enough of a handful,” and then grinned an evil grin. I felt pathetic. Of course he wouldn’t stray.

When he came back from Denver, he said the twins were the most beautiful babies he’d ever seen, even more so than his own daughters.

I first met them on Thanksgiving when Junior brought them over to my house in town. Curt was working the holiday, so Julie had driven down to Denver to help Junior take them to Riverton. Julie loves driving.

Bridget and Peter were over, and we were preparing dinner. I had convinced Ennis to take the day off and have the dinner here because it would be easier for Junior to walk around the block from Alma’s with the babies than to drive out to the ranch. He’d hardly been here since he helped me move in June.

After lunch, Junior brought the babies over in a double stroller. Bridget and Ennis went out to help, and each came back in holding one – Bridget cooing loudly over the pink bundle, Ennis just quietly holding the blue one, murmuring things no one else could hear.

He sat down on my recliner with the baby, and said to Junior, “I cain’t believe how much they’ve grown since last time I seen ’em.”

Junior laughed. “Daddy, that was four days ago.”

“Still.”

Pretty soon, they started fussing, and Junior said she had to nurse them, so Bridget and I got up to go back to the kitchen. I thought Ennis would come too, but he stayed sitting.

“Ennis! Give her some privacy!” Bridget said.

“Huh,” Ennis said, and started to stand with little E.J. in his arms.

“You can stay here,” Junior told him. And to Bridget, with a shy smile, “You know, your brother works with mammals every day. He knows how it works.”

She’s right; it’s just a natural process.

When Junior was finished nursing, she came into the kitchen, and Bridget said, “Oh good, I get to hold little E.J.” But back to the living room, Ennis had each of them up on one shoulder with burp cloths. It was something to see.

“Ennis, you don’t get to hog the babies,” Bridget said.

“You wait your turn,” he said. “This is grandpa time.”

Junior stayed another hour, and Ennis would not relinquish either twin even after they fell asleep. He told Bridget she’d have her chance the next day or later in the weekend.
He told me later that he didn’t get to enjoy his baby girls as much as he should have because his life was so fucked up back then. I hardly saw Julie when she was a baby because I was still in school in Laramie and Queenie was back here with her parents. A weird thought came to me that I would have liked to raise kids with Ennis. I would never tell him that, of course.

Ennis had tried to weasel out of the baptism, saying he couldn’t handle the crowd, but Junior pointed out that little Ennis was being named for him, and he better be there. He went, and he even showed up at Alma’s for the party afterwards. It didn’t kill him. There were a few people for him to talk to – Bridget and Peter, Curt’s parents – and I got to go too because Julie was the stand-in godmother for Francine so I had an excuse to be there, sort of. Ennis and I arrived and left separately, and I stayed longer.

The weekend went a lot better than last Thanksgiving, even though Bridget and Peter were staying at Ennis’s and Julie at my house, so we didn’t get to spend any time alone together.

*****

So now it’s Christmas Eve, and Ennis is hunkered down with the twins again. Bernadette has a ham and sweet potatoes in the oven, and she’s putting on green beans. She comes into the living room and says supper’ll be ready in 15 minutes. I get up and go help.

After everyone else gets here and we’re sitting down to eat, Ennis is still in the living room with the babies.

“Daddy, you can put them on a blanket on the floor,” Junior says.

“Shhh … they’re almost asleep,” he says.

The rest of us dig in. There’s lots of chatter, but I’m not following any conversation, because if I listen hard enough, I can hear Ennis humming, first “Streets of Laredo” and then Patsy Cline’s “Sweet Dreams.” Finally, when they’re asleep, he takes them into the first-floor bedroom where Julie’s staying, and lays them down on the bed.

After supper, we open a bottle of brandy and open gifts.

The girls got Ennis the usual shirts and work gloves, along with an answering machine that he balks at. I tell him I’ll help set it up.

Ennis’s gift to the twins is a pair of stuffed ponies and a promise to Junior and Curt that he’ll buy them real ponies when they’re a little older. He gives Junior a sapphire necklace – her birthstone – and a few jars of honey and beeswax candles from Lisa.

Francine’s gift is two Western shirts from a fancy shop in Lander. She says she loves them and she’ll wear them at her gig singing folk music at a bar in Greenwich Village on Wednesday nights. No one has a chance to react before she says she got papers to change her name to Francie Del Mar. Ennis and Regent look as surprised as anyone.

“I never wanted to be called Monroe anyway,” she says.

Junior says, “Me neither, but I got a new last name the normal way.”

“Well, I need a better name right now for my career.”

“Should we start calling you Francie?” Regent asks.
“Sure,” she says. “Junior already does.”

“I thought you hated it!” Junior says.

“Well, that’s the name I’m going by now.”

I cut in by asking if she’ll accompany herself on piano, and she says no, she’s got an old guy from Oklahoma playing guitar, and he seems to know every folk and cowboy song there is.

I ask, “How did you meet him?”

She says he was playing “O Bury Me Not” in a subway station, and she walked up, gave him a dollar and asked, “Do you make much money doing that?” They struck up a conversation and she ended up staying there for another hour singing duets and a solo. The next day, she walked around Greenwich Village looking for a bar where they could play. When she went back to the subway station to find him, he was there and he showed up to the audition. They premiered at the beginning of December, and plan to return in January.

Ennis is making all kinds of faces, like he doesn’t like any of this one damn bit.

“This old guy, he hasn’t done nothin …” he starts.

“No Daddy!” she says. “He’s like an old grandpa. He’s 62 years old!”

“An’ you, walkin around New York City at night, I’m supposed a think that’s safe?”

“I take a taxi home at the end of the night,” she says. “Don’t worry about me! I’m doing fine!”

At that point, I ask if we want to sing some Christmas songs, and everyone’s OK with it, so I get out my guitar.

*****

All the guests are gone, and Ennis is staying over at this house for the first time ever. Julie’s at her grandmother’s, where she’ll open her gifts tomorrow with Queenie and the lawyer. Francine’s staying either at the ranch or more likely at Lisa and Flo’s, and she’s going up to the Twist ranch with Regent tomorrow so he can get back to work and James can have Christmas dinner with his family.

While we’re finishing up with the dishes, I ask Ennis what’s going on between Francine and Regent. He says damned if he knows.

“You didn’t ask her?”

“Why’d I do that?”

“I’d ask Julie,” I say.

He looks at me as if I’m insane. “She’ll tell me whatever she wants me to know.”

After a few minutes of drying dishes, he says, “I’m a lot more worried about her runnin around New York City by herself. But you know this one, she’s gotta run free.”

I reflect, not for the first time, how different Ennis and I are in so many ways. It’s not a bad thing because they say opposites attract. In the things that really matter, we’re pretty similar. We’ll wake up tomorrow and make ourselves coffee, pancakes and bacon. Later in the day, I’ll go over to his
house and we’ll eat leftovers and exchange gifts. Sounds simple, but it’s beyond what I ever dreamed of.

Later, we’re sitting quietly in front of the fire with our third or fourth brandies. I get to talking about Julie’s new boyfriend, a law student, and Queenie being so excited about it even though neither of us has met him. Ennis isn’t saying much, even for Ennis, so I ask if everything’s OK.

“You know,” he says, his words slurring a bit. “This Junior livin in Denver is a hell of a thing. Curt workin nights, dangerous job. Them babies gettin bigger every day, an’ she won’t be comin up here to visit nearly enough, an’ I cain’t just drive down there any time I want.”

I’m wondering if this is my opening to talk about a move to Colorado again, but I think maybe he just wants to talk about his feelings for once, so I hold my tongue and wait for him to go on.

It takes a few minutes, but then he says, “I’m feelin like my family is breakin apart. Again.”

“Why’s that?” I ask. It seems like a leap, considering the evening we just had.

He narrows his eyes, and I know it was the wrong thing to say.

“Oh, hell no,” he says. “You don’t get to psycho-analyze me, Charlie.”

So I shut my mouth, and he goes on.

“I’m just sayin, I got it where I wanted it with Francine an’ Junior, an’ then both of ‘em upped an’ moved away.”

“To live their own lives,” I say. “It’s not like they moved to get away from you. From where I sit, it looks like they both love you very much.”

“That ain’t what I’m sayin.” He gives me a sad little smile. “Shit, this brandy is doin a number on me. Can we talk about somethin else?”

So I jump in. “Is it time to talk about the two of us moving to Colorado to be closer to Junior?” I ask.

“Not yet,” he says. “I mean it, let’s change the subject.”

“OK,” I say. “So I decided today that I’m going to Lisa and Flo’s party with you, and I’m not gonna play my annual New Year’s Eve gig.”

His eyes light up, then squint. “What’ll your buddies say?”

“I’m going to tell them that Lisa’s having an impromptu little get-together, and that’s where I’m going. They can get Kevin to sing; he’d love that.”

“Clever,” Ennis says. “You get out of it by tellin the truth instead a lyin. That’s a good one.”

I chuckle.

We’ve been out with Lisa and Flo a few times over the fall, all of us empty-nesters now because Argent’s at University of Michigan studying music. I took Lisa out dancing twice, just the two of us, to Kelley’s Bar. Ennis and Flo had three dates, one shooting pool at the Black’n’Blue Eagle, and the other two when they didn’t go out at all, but stayed at his place to watch Dallas, which I thought defeated the purpose. Flo’s been pretty subdued since her daughter in Utah had a stillbirth back in the summertime, but she still likes hanging around with Ennis.
“Maybe you could sing some Elvis at Lisa an’ Flo’s,” he says, and I’m surprised to see he’s blushing a little. I think he’s saying he wouldn’t mind if I’d put on eyeliner again. Wow!

“It’ll just be me and my acoustic guitar,” I say.

“Lisa plays piano, an’ if Argent’s around, well, he can play anything.”

I love it that Ennis enjoys listening to my music. My band had played at the Riverton High Homecoming again this year, no makeup. Ennis came with Lisa and Flo and even danced with each of them once.

“You got drunk at their party last year,” I say.

“Sure did.”

“I think you’re drunk now.”

I walk over to the recliner and put out my hands to help him up. “You remember hauling that king-size bed up the stairs? It’s time for your reward now, Cowboy. C’mon.”

He pulls me closer and starts kissing my neck, and puts his lips on mine and soon we’re shoving our tongues into each other’s mouth and he’s got my shirt out of my jeans, his hands all over my back. He rubs into me and whispers in my ear, “Boy, how do you do it? You make me so crazy.”

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Christmas Day, 1985

Heaven is … going to sleep with Ennis Del Mar and waking up with him. We’ve got almost the whole day together. He’s in the kitchen drinking coffee when I get up, but he comes up for a shower together where we soap each other up and give quick handjobs. Then we make breakfast together, eat and clean up. Merry Christmas!

Ennis is off to the ranch to check on things, and I’ll go over there later with leftovers that we’ll eat for Christmas dinner. The Stoutamires are in New Mexico for a week, their first week away since their honeymoon, Ennis tells me, although Dave is there with them this time. It’s partly a trial run to see how the old man likes it, because that’s where Jannelle wants to move.

Meanwhile, I call Kerby and my sisters to wish them Merry Christmas. They’ve got a few friends over, and Kerby’s in high spirits. Martha doesn’t have much to say, and that’s fine with me. She’d called to invite me to Thanksgiving dinner last month, and when I told her I’d be spending the day with Ennis, that was the end of that.

Barb, my sister in California, is kind enough to ask about Ennis and to invite us for a visit once again. She says she’s going to be working with AIDS patients in a new unit at her hospital, and I say that’s great. Apparently the hospital staff was split over the decision to open the unit, and very nasty things were being said.

“It’s amazing what you hear from so-called Christians, when Christ himself said pretty clearly that you should care for the sick,” she says. “Do you know anyone with AIDS or HIV?”

I say no, we hardly know any gay men at all, but our buddies in Denver do. She says Ennis and I should come to California for her son Devon’s graduation from San Jose State University in May, and take a trip to San Francisco, where we could walk hand-in-hand in certain neighborhoods and no one would say a thing.
I laugh. “Ennis? First, he’s never stepped foot on an airplane and second, hell will freeze over before he’ll ever hold my hand in public.”

“Oh!” she says. “Well, I’d like to meet him anyway.” She’s seeing someone herself, a recent divorced with grown kids, but they’re taking it slow at least until Devon is out of the house, she says. Her ex put her through hell, and I’m really happy for her.

I tell her I’ll go to the graduation myself even if Ennis won’t come. She usually comes to Wyoming for Thanksgiving about every other year because it’s easier for her to travel than for Martha with three kids and my ma when she was still alive. I’ve only visited Barb once, years ago when we were all still married. We’d toured all around San Francisco, wine country and Monterey with her husband and Queenie, Martha, Joe and all our kids in one van. We had a lot of fun – not as much fun as I’d have with Ennis though.

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I pick up a case of Bud on my way to Ennis’s late afternoon.

We saddle up the horses. It’s a cold sunny day with a clear blue sky, not a white Christmas. Ennis usually rides behind me, as if he’s making sure I’m OK, but this time I tell him I’ll be in back.

Heaven is … watching Ennis Del Mar ride. His body moves so clunky at everything else, but on a horse he’s graceful, sitting up straight and controlling Spark Plug with his body and legs rather than the reins. We get the horses up to a gallop and he says, “Last one to the lake is a rotten egg,” so we’re on. I’m on a better, younger horse, and I go all out, but Ennis wins anyway. He’s in his element, just gorgeous to look at.

We ride out pretty far, and the sun is setting on our way back. I get to thinking I’d like to start and end every single day just like this.

Back at his house, he tells me not to shower just yet, and I know what that means. While the food’s heating up, I tell him about my phone calls and he tells me about his.

He’d called his brother, his sister and Mrs. Twist. The conversation with K.E. was short because after Merry Christmas and how are the kids, K.E. started on Ennis with the prayer business and God’s way, so Ennis hung up.

His conversations with Bridget and Mrs. Twist had gone a lot better. Ennis had been trying to get to Lightning Flat all fall, but couldn’t get the time off, between the trips to Denver and Thanksgiving. Everything is going fine at the Twist ranch, Regent and Mrs. Twist say, with 50 pregnant heifers and cows. He’s planning to go up there in a few weeks.

While we’re eating, Andrew calls and all I hear are a few grunts from Ennis, and then, “Well, you got a lot a guts.” When he hangs up, he tells me that Andrew is at his parents’ house and having a tough time. He’d thought it would be easier now that he and Dave were broken up, but then his ma had told him about a girl she wanted him to meet and he said he wasn’t interested in girls, and the shit hit the fan. By this morning, his ma was talking to him again, but not his dad.

“Here I am givin him advice,” Ennis says. “What a joke. Like I ever would a talked to my parents about any a that. Especially my daddy. Christ.”

“Don’t I know it,” I say. “Then we both got stuck getting married and living that life …”

“No goin back,” he says, cutting me off. “So no use talkin about it.”
We sit on the couch to open the gifts after supper. He got me a fine black cowboy hat from the best outfitter in Riverton. I’m touched that he would give me something so personal.

“That black one you wear was gettin old, don’t you think?” he says. “I wanted you to look as good as me.”

“I’ll never be able to do that,” I say.

He punches me. “Quit your lyin.”

My gift for him is a lot more controversial. I hand him a small box. He takes off the wrapping, opens it, and finds inside a leather box for keeping your watch and money and other little things that he usually just strews on top of his dresser.

“Nice,” he says “Thanks.”

“Open it,” I say.

Inside, he finds a much smaller leather box.

His face scrunches up. “What’s this, Chuck?”

“Just open it.”

It’s a ring in white gold, plain with tiny beading on the edges, about a quarter-inch wide. He takes it out and puts it on the ring finger of his left hand. He’s still scowling.

“Not to be ungrateful, but I already got a weddin ring for times I need one,” he says.

“It’s not a wedding ring,” I say. “Look inside.”

He takes it off, gets his reading glasses from the table next to the couch, and reads.

“C.W.A. to E.D.M. 1/27/85. Someday,” he says, and looks at me with a blank expression. “I don’t get it.”

I take an identical ring out of my pocket. “These are promise rings,” I say. “For our promise of being together.” I read off mine, “E.D.M. to C.W.A. 1/27/85. Someday.’ Ennis, that was the day you said we’d move in together, someday.”

He still looks confused. He opens his mouth and closes it.

Then he says in formal tones, “Well, thank you.”

Christ, what was I thinking? Of course he hates sentimental shit like this.

Then he says, “I mean, workin on a ranch, no one wears jewelry for fear it’ll catch on something. Never wore my own wedding ring.”

“It’s not for wearing all the time,” I say. “Only when we’re together, if you feel like it. Otherwise, you can keep it in your new leather box and look at it when you’re putting other stuff in.”

He purses his lips and nods. “How’d you know what size ring to get?”
“You remember you came over to my house the one time with your wedding band on? And then you put it in your pocket and it fell out and went under my bed?”

“Yeah,” he says, drawing it out. “That was the first time we …”

“Yes. And before I gave it back to you I traced it on a piece of paper.”

“Why’d you do that?”

“Because I knew.”

He looks flabbergasted. “You knew. What did you know?”

“That you were the one,” I say. I’m really pushing this way too far.

He nods slowly, his eyes fixed on mine. “Huh. I guess I didn’t pick up on that.”

I feel like shit, like I could crumple up and die right now. But I don’t want to cry, not in front of him. The ring was the wrong thing, at the wrong time, as if there would ever be a right time.

We sit in silence for a while, and then he puts his ring on his right hand, takes my hand and puts my ring on me.

“It’s all right,” he says. “You know I’m goin a keep you, an’ that’s a promise, right?”

“Yeah,” I say. I feel tears coming so I clear my throat. “I’m sorry if the ring is too much.”

“No, don’t be,” he says. He’s still holding my hand. “It’s a real nice gift. Hey, you want another beer?”

While he’s up going to the bathroom and getting the beers, I try to pull myself together.

When he comes back, he sits on his recliner.

“You wanted a talk about Colorado?”

I take a deep breath in and let it out. So now I can relax. I need to stop worrying so much about pissing him off and driving him away.

“Yeah,” I say. “I was thinking, I could put in for a transfer. The bureau doesn’t have an office in Denver, but I might be able to get something not too far, or go over to the Forest Service.”

“You’d do that for me?” he says.

“For both of us,” I say. “So we can be together. My idea is, we buy a house on a piece of land big enough for our horses, somewhere close to Denver, and we live happily after.”

He takes a deep breath. “You know why I gotta wait out the Stoutamires, right?”

“You gave Jannelle your word.”

“True,” he says. “But she says even after they sell, the new owner might want a keep me on. Chuck, this is the best damn job I’ll ever have.”

He holds up his hands. “You know, these are all I got. You think you’re with some hotshot foreman, well, I gotta tell you, I ain’t nothin but a glorified ranch hand. I cain’t just pick up the
Now I get it. Maybe I’m not such an idiot. When I make myself vulnerable, I give him permission to talk about his own insecurities. Of course. That’s how this thing works.

“What makes you think you couldn’t get another foreman job?” I ask.

“Ain’t too many a them jobs out there.”

“More than you might think,” I say. “I see the Livestock News and the Fence Post and the Farm and Ranch Report at work, and I’ve been looking at the ads. I can start photocopying them for you if you want.”

“No need,” he says. “Stoutamire gets ‘em too. I’ll take a look. An’ like I said, I’m goin a wait him out.”

“Sure,” I say. I hope it’s not too long.
Movin Along

Wednesday, Dec. 31, 1985

It’s my second time at Lisa an’ Flo’s New Year’s Eve party, first time with Chuck. Francine’s gone back to New York an’ Regent’s in Lightnin Flat, but all the other usual suspects are here.

Chuck tells Dr. Timonen’s man Alfred that we’ll be movin to Colorado soon – never can keep his mouth shut – and Alfred says we can visit him in Cheyenne anytime, an’ he’ll come down when we move an’ cook us a “Welcome to your new house” dinner.

Camellia the dude ranch lady has her sister an’ brother-in-law here again, an’ she’s got a German lady, someone who came to the ranch as a guest an’ never left. They look happy. Me an’ Chuck had gone to her ranch a few days last summer when we was visitin Julie in Yellowstone Park. We’d spent a day ridin crappy trail horses with Julie, an’ then stayed together in one room at the ranch near Jackson, always bein careful a who was around to see us comin an’ goin.

Chuck went right into Singin’ Cowboy mode for the dudes around the campfire, an’ of course he was a big hit. Next day, he followed Lisa an’ Flo’s friend Camellia around askin questions, an’ I spend my time helpin out with the horses. The wranglers were OK, mostly the same guys you meet anywhere you go. Horses not fit for much more’n trail ridin. Me an’ one a the wranglers took some a their better horses on a phony cattle drive with the dudes an’ I showed off a little, playin up my ropin skills, what a joke.

The rain started that night, so Chuck sang inside the lodge, an’ the next day we packed up to drive home, a day early, but he didn’t complain. I know he’s got in the back of his mind somewhere the idea of him an’ me runnin a dude ranch someday. Neither one of us brought it up again.

Flo’s boss Hi an’ his wife are here too, an’ the schoolteachers an’ the professor an’ his insurance man.

There’s one new guy, Alex, a beer truck driver who’s with Tommy the bartender from the Black’n’Blue. Alex tells a funny story about how they met an’ who made the first move. Apparently Alex had been deliverin beer to the Black’n’Blue Eagle for about a year on Mondays, which was Tommy’s day off. It was his last stop for the night, an’ he’d stay at a motel an’ then drive to Jackson an’ into Yellowstone during the season.

Anyways, Alex said he was suspicious a the way Tommy was lookin at him – that gets everyone laughin – so he left his invoice book there on purpose, went out to eat, came back to get it an’ ended up stayin ‘til closing time. By then, both of ‘em knew what was up, an’ he stayed the night.

When he got on the road the next day, his first stop in Dubois an’ he realized he really had forgotten his invoice book. So of course he stopped again on his way back, overnight again, an’ that’s how the whole thing started. It’s funny to look at these two ‘cause they’re real regular guys, beards on both of ‘em an’ Alex with a beer belly. No one would know.

Junior’s friends the waiter an’ the hairdresser, well, they both dress a lot better’n most guys you see. I bet they act more queer here at Lisa an’ Flo’s than when they’re in town. They’re all right though. As I’m walkin by, they stop me to say how cute the twins are, like I don’t know.

Same as last year, I spend a lot a my time with Flo in the kitchen fixin food an’ gettin drinks for folks. When we have a quiet minute, we sit down an’ I tell her about me an’ Chuck movin to
Colorado, an’ her an’ Lisa should come visit us when we’re all settled.

We talk about our kids an’ our grandbabies. Her daughter’s four months pregnant now, havin a stillborn last year. Flo went to visit her in Utah just before Thanksgiving, first she’d seen her girl in quite a few years, an’ only had to put up with one lecture about her “lifestyle.”

Then Chuck comes into the kitchen an’ asks me to dance. I’m feelin mighty strange about Hi from the hardware store seein this, but when I go in the livin room where the dancin is, I see he’s dancin with Lisa, right next to Dr. Timonen an’ Alfred. Hi’s here for a good time, not to judge.

So I dance a slow one with Chuck. When it’s over I tell him that’s enough, an’ he asks if I mind if he dances with Lisa or any a the other women. I say of course not, just don’t let me catch you dancin with no man.

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Saturday, Jan. 11

I’m sittin down after supper with Jack’s ma, drinkin coffee an’ playin gin rummy. Regent an’ James went into town for a drink. Everything’s fine at the ranch. They shipped 40 calves, an’ they’ve got near 80 pregnant for next spring’s calvin. They had a nice hay harvest, probly won’t have to buy much over the winter. Jack’s ma sure likes havin two young men livin right there in the trailer. Mobile home I guess it is.

But now she’s tellin me how much she liked Francine an’ even got her started on a project a hers, knittin little hats for premie babies. They’ll send ‘em out to hospitals.

Then she clears her throat an’ says, “Francine told me about your friend.” She’s lookin at me real steady. I feel my heart drop to the floor. I’m not sure if I was keepin the information secret, but I woulda wanted to tell her in my own time, an’ didn’t Francine know better?

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Why?”

“I mean …” I don’t know what to say.

“Ennis, please. I’m happy for you. Wouldn’t you be happy for me if I found a new man?”

She’s smilin, so I do too.“I guess.”

She puts her hand on mine. “Do you want to tell me about him?”

I shrug my shoulders, give Chuck’s name an’ say he was married too, got a grown daughter.

“You can bring him up here sometime if you want,” she says. “I’d like to meet him.”

I say thanks, maybe I will. But I cain’t really picture him up there, nothin for him to do ‘cause I work pert near the whole time I’m there. An’ I stay in Jack’s old bed when Bobby’s not here. Chuck takes his own trips sometimes too, nothin wrong with that. We don’t need a be stuck like glue all the time.

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Friday, Jan. 31, 1986
This is a big night, the night I tell Chuck that it looks like Stoutamire found a buyer for the ranch, a lot sooner than we’d thought. The new owner, Ian Quittenton, is supposed to be takin over by March.

My first impression a this Ian was, he’s a spoiled brat who don’t know a thing about ranchin or horses or runnin a cow’n’calf operation, an’ it’s goin a be tough workin for him. Jannelle told me he was a bored trust fund baby who decided to tell his parents to shove it, an’ this is his big adventure.

The Stoutamires’d put the ranch up for sale right after stock shipped in November, an’ they got nibbles right away. Chuck said maybe we should put together some kind a lease-to-buy deal, but I wouldn’t have it, said we’d made our minds up to move to Colorado an’ them twins ain’t gettin any younger.

Thursday a week ago, just as I was leavin to go to the stock show in Denver an’ see Junior, Jannelle told me that the real estate guy would be takin two buyers around on Saturday, includin to my house. She said I didn’t need to do anything special, but I should put any valuables out a sight. So I put my ring an’ its box in my top dresser drawer an’ got all the laundry off the floor before I left. I thought about takin down the picture a Jack on the inside a the closet door, but that’s its place an’ why bother?

Anyways, on the Sunday I got back from Denver, I had a message to call Stoutamire. He said he had a prospective buyer who’d be comin in after our regular meetin Monday. The guy had already toured with him an’ the real estate agent, had met Tex, an’ now the old man wanted him to meet me.

The guy knocked on Stoutamire’s kitchen door dressed like some lawyer or something – business suit an’ long coat with a white scarf. I saw he was about Stoutamire’s height – a few inches shorter’n me, an’ he had blond hair an’ a face women might call handsome, no tan. Of course me an’ Stoutamire were in our usual work clothes, still clean at least.

Jannelle took the coat an’ we all sat down at the kitchen table. She introduced us an’ started explainin the different parts a the business operation. The guy came in with questions, one more stupid than the other. After maybe 20 minutes a this, Stoutamire got up an’ said it’s probly better if we show him around rather than just tellin him a bunch a stuff.

We got in the old man’s truck, an’ I was picturing this Ian on a horse in his fine clothes, tryin not to laugh. But no one said nothin, so I guessed that he couldn’t or wouldn’t get on a horse.

In the truck, he kept up with the stupid questions – why do we keep horses? Why do we need to lease land? Right down to why don’t we keep the steers long enough to sell ‘em as meat? How do we know which a the calves to keep an’ which to sell? Why do we cull the open cows who didn’t get pregnant?

I just rolled my eyes an’ let Stoutamire answer the questions. But when Ian asked why we need a bunkhouse for the hands in the summer, an’ why we need to feed ‘em, Stoutamire turned it over to me.

“Ennis manages the hands. You tell him, Ennis.”

Well, the old man had answered all the other questions with some measure a respect, so I had to try too.

“It’s like this,” I said. “The day starts at daybreak, whether or not any a the hands show up to work.
So we give ‘em a place to stay to make it more likely they’ll show up. An’ the day goes on until sundown, so we feed ‘em ‘cause otherwise they’ll drop dead in the heat.” I didn’t know what else to say.

Ian turned around an’ looked at me like I was a fuckin idiot.

He turned to Stoutamire an’ said, “How many of these ranch workers do you hire?”

“Four, six, eight at the busiest time, dependin what needs doin,” the old man says. “Most a them stay in the bunkhouse.”

“And you keep Ennis here and the horse trainer year-round? Do you really need all of them the whole winter?”

I wanna smack the guy, can feel my fist ready to swing around the seat an’ at his ear. We should have Little Joe with us too, with Stoutamire not workin much at all on the ranch these days, but he took a few months off to go work in Texas. I’m hopin he comes back by calvin time.

“It all depends how much work you wanna do yourself,” Stoutamire says, an’ I can hear in his voice that he’s findin this kind a funny. Me, not so much, ‘cause I’m the one that’s supposed a stay here an’ work for this fool.

We didn’t make it to the furthest fences ‘cause Ian said he guessed he’d seen enough. That’s when I guessed he really wasn’t interested in buyin the ranch after all.

“Beautiful country, isn’t it?” Stoutamire asked on the way back, with the better view of the mountains, maybe tryin a be a salesman.

“It’s …” The guy couldn’t say what he thought it was.

We all went back to Stoutamire’s an’ sat back down with Jannelle.

More stupid questions. I hadn’t said a word since the one question Stoutamire directed at me in the truck. Seemed like Ian wanted a run more of a Texas-style big cattle ranch where they graze ‘em an’ fatten ‘em up, not a cow-calf operation at all. Jannelle tried explainin that the price they put out there is for a goin concern, an’ if he wanted a make a lot a changes right away, maybe they should sell off the stock an’ equipment an’ he could just buy the land an’ buildings.

He got all embarrassed an’ said he didn’t know what he wanted, he was just askin questions to understand the operation. So she kept explainin it, how the ranch was makin money now doin exactly what they was doin.

When lunchtime came, Jannelle invited me to stay, but I excused myself sayin I still had a whole day a work to do. I saw the old man wink at me.

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So I was real surprised this mornin when Jannelle come out to tell me this Ian had made an offer, a good one too, an’ he’d be able to finance it himself. She said she didn’t have a lot a faith in the guy, an’ of course I was free to do whatever I wanted once her an’ Karl was gone. They’d fell in love with a part of New Mexico closer to Colorado than Texas, an’ they wanted a buy a house with some acreage, keep a few horses.

“You’re not worried about this Ian guy ruinin your ranch?” I asked.
“Well, Ian has the money to put up, and I’m going to trust that he’ll listen to you and wait a few years before making any big changes,” she said. “Of course it’s hard on Karl, letting go after all these years, but he can be proud of building up a good thing here. We’re both ready to move on.”

She told me that Ian is 30 years old and he inherited a shitload of money from his grandparents. If he changes his mind about the ranch, he might leave me to run it, absentee.

I said I’d likely stay on for a while, but I’d be movin to Colorado myself sooner or later to be closer to Junior.

“Moving by yourself?” she asked, first time she’d ever got right to the point like that.

“No, it’ll be me an’ Chuck,” I said, real slow ‘cause it was hard to say it out loud like that.

“Ausman? Guy from Land Management?”

She smiled an’ nodded. “Yes Ennis, I know Chuck. I wish Dave would settle down like you two.” I hadn’t seen the boy since he came to visit his folks in July an’ took some a his old friends from around here up to their cabin on Whiskey Mountain. Chuck an’ me had gone to Lonesome Lefty’s with him, pretty awkward ‘cause we’ve seen Andrew quite a few times in Denver, an’ Dave was askin us lots a questions about him.

“I guess that’s what parents want, seein their kids settle down,” I said to Jannelle.

“Like Junior,” she said. “Are you worried about your younger girl?”

“Kinda, yeah, but Francine’s got a head on her shoulders,” I said. It’s a lie. I worry about Francine all the time.

“I’m sure she’ll be fine,” Jannelle said. She’s probly right. I got no indication that Francine’s been seein any boys at all in New York, too busy with everything else. An’ at least I don’t have to worry about her gettin no AIDS, but I didn’t tell Jannelle that.

“We’ll invite you to visit us in New Mexico,” she said. “You won’t believe how beautiful it is.”

“That’s mighty kind a you,” I said, even though it’s doubtful she’ll really invite us or that we’ll go. It’s just one a those things.

“And do me a favor?” she asked. “Don’t tell Karl that you’re planning to move yourself. It’ll drive him crazy worrying about this place.”

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So anyways, Chuck’s comin over in a few minutes. I’m goin a cook pork chops like Junior taught me, an’ we’ll have cooked cabbage an’ potatoes with ‘em. I picked up a nice fresh pumpkin pie from Lisa this afternoon when I was in town.

I don’t usually get excited about much, but tonight’s different. I think it’s ‘cause I know I’ll bring a smile to Chuck’s face. I hadn’t told him much about Ian Quittenton or the other guy Jannelle had me meet, a more serious rancher who wanted more financin than the Stoutamires would give him.

*****

When Chuck gets here, I grab us each a beer an’ sit him down on the couch.

“Is everything all right?” he asks. “You’re a ball of energy.”
That gets a laugh outta me. “I got big news,” I say. “It’s probly time you start lookin for a job near Denver.”

His eyes open wide, an’ there’s that smile. He gets up an’ pulls me up outta the recliner an’ plants a wet kiss on my lips.

“So someone made an offer on the ranch?” he asks. I wipe off my lips on my shirt sleeve.

“Better’n an offer. He basically bought it. The dandy from the East.”

“The one who wanted to be a dairy farmer?” That came out of another thing Ian had said, askin why we didn’t keep milkin the cows after the calves was weaned.

“Yeah, that one.”

“And he’s keeping you on?”

“Damned if I know.”

Now Chuck’s eyes get really big. “You don’t sound too concerned.”

“Well, it could be real amusin workin for a guy like that, or real annoyin. I wanna see it through this year’s calvin, but the thing is, I can run anytime. It’ won’t be like workin for the Stoutamires where I feel like I owe ‘em something for takin a chance on me.”

“Jesus, Ennis,” Chuck says. He sits down an’ puts his head down, face in his hands. He’s like that for a while an’ then I notice he’s shakin a little, like he’s cryin.

I sit down next to him an’ put my arm around his shoulders. “This is a big day, ain’t it? Wasn’t a month ago you put this ring on my finger.” I show him the ring, first I’ve worn it since he gave it to me.

“I didn’t even notice that! Wait, I’ve got mine in my duffel bag.” He gets up to find it.

“So you goin a apply for a transfer?” I ask.

“That, and I’ve got some other ideas too.”

“I’ll see where you land, an’ then get myself outta here. That’s the plan, huh?” What I’ll be doin, where we’ll be livin, all a mystery to me.

He takes my hand an’ rubs his ring on mine, then leans over to kiss me.

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Monday, March 3

Today is Chuck’s birthday, an’ the first Monday since Ian took over. We’re meetin in the kitchen at the big house. I see the Stoutamires had left quite a bit a furniture, an’ that’s about all that’s here.

Ian is wearin a white shirt an’ black dress pants. I bring him up-to-date on what we’re doin on the ranch. Me an’ Tex are handlin the horses an’ the winter feedin, an’ Mikey still comes in on the weekends to muck out the stables an’ help with the horses.

I been noticin that when Ian talks to me, he slows down an’ tries to over-pronounce every word, as if I’m an idiot. He says he hasn’t been on a horse in years, an’ did I know where he could get
“I could teach you if you want,” I say.

“Oh. That reminds me,” he says. “Jannelle told me about you giving your stepsons lessons on Sundays. We’ll have to put a stop to that. Our insurance doesn’t cover it.”

Stepsons, huh. “You mean to tell me I cain’t teach my own stepsons to ride?” I ask.

For Christsake. They both took an interest in ropin an’ pole bendin last summer after they seen the little kids doin it at the Fremont County Fair, so I been teachin ‘em how to rope an’ move around some poles we set up behind the feed barn.

“Not here you can’t,” he says.

“Well I guess you’re not insured to learn to ride here neither,” I say, barely keepin in a laugh. Hell, I don’t wanna teach the asshole to ride anyways. “You could go to the Rafter B in Riverton, they got lessons.”

“All right,” he says, an’ he shuffles through some notes.

“The other thing I wanted to ask you about is the cottage. You don’t pay any rent on it?”

“No. I don’t. Why?”

“It just seems unusual to me,” he says. “I’m going to find out what the market rate is, and I’m afraid I’m going to have to start charging you.”

“You …” I start to say, but now I’m too fuckin mad to even speak.

“You do that,” I say, an’ I stand up to go. “I’ll have the feed records to you by Wednesday.”

******

The day goes by, an’ Ian don’t once set foot on the ranch. I see him take off in his Range Rover some time in the afternoon.

After work, I go home an’ shower. I’m goin a be takin Chuck out to the Grand Hotel for his birthday supper. Junior told me over the phone not to worry, that Monday is the least busiest day at restaurants. I put on my black suit, ‘cause he wants us to dress up, an’ I guess I can give him that. I look in the mirror an’ smile. I’m not a vain man by any stretch, but I’m thinkin if you can look past the wrinkles, I might look OK to someone.

In the truck, I tell him about my conversation with the new owner.

“Ennis, he can’t just start charging you rent,” Chuck says. “The house is part of your compensation package. You tell him if he’s taking that away, he’ll have to cough up the rental value in pay, and he’ll end up breaking even.”

Why cain’t I come up with logic like that? “Thanks,” I say. “I’d been thinkin along the same lines, an’ you gave me the words to say.”

“Just look at all those ads for foremen we see in the ranch papers,” Chuck says. “Every one of them comes with a house or a housing allowance. It’s standard industry practice.”

“I reckon.”
“As for insurance,” he goes on. “You’re not charging Alma for those lessons, are you?”

“Of course not,” I say. “Maybe Francine was, back when she was teachin ‘em, but I told Alma I wouldn’t take her money, so that if the lessons didn’t work out, either one of us could just call it quits. Then I ended up likin the job anyways.”

“Well, you don’t need to argue that case until you’re ready to start up the lessons again in the spring.”

“I doubt I’ll last that long,” I say.

Chuck puts his hand on my thigh an’ says, “M-m-m.”

“Don’t be doin that in the restaurant,” I say.

Of course it’s Junior’s friend Brian waitin on us, still actin all professional like he was the last time. I’ll give him a tip just for that.

After Brian takes our order – sirloin for me, filet mignon for Mr. Fancypants, Chuck tells me he’s got news for me -- he’s got a job interview at Colorado State University.

“Where’s that?” I ask.

“Fort Collins. It’s an hour out of Denver.”

“What would you be doin?”

“Working for Cooperative Extension.”

“How’s the pay?”

“About the same.”

It takes a minute to sink in, but once it’s sunk, I cain’t stop smilin myself.

He picks up his wineglass an’ makes a toast, “To us.” I look around, then clink my beer bottle to his. Jesusfuckinchrist. This is happening, for real.

After we’re done with the steaks, Brian brings us each a piece a birthday cake, on the house.

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Monday March 10

I start talkin as soon as I sit down for our meeting, before Ian has a chance to open his mouth. All week, he barely made an appearance on his own ranch.

“I won’t be payin no rent, unless you want a give me a raise to cover it,” I say. All these years, I’ve hardly ever talked back to a boss, no matter how bad, except to argue for time off or for my job back after I’d taken time off without askin first. Feels good to talk back to this one, an’ not givin a shit what his response’ll be. I imagine Jack maybe watchin this an’ smilin.

Ian’s face screws up, then relaxes, an’ he says, “That sounds reasonable.” Again, the slow drawl.

“So no rent?” I say.
“No.”

“An’ you can talk to me like a normal person,” I say. “I might talk slow myself but I’m not a damn idiot.”

“OK,” he says. But then he lays the whammy on me.

“Tell me about that Tex Westly.”

“What?”

“Well, I talked to our neighbor, Mrs. Thomas, and she says he’s been to prison for attempted murder.”

“We knew all a that when we hired him,” I say. “He’s been no trouble at all.”

“And I also saw on his job application that he never finished high school.”

Is that a joke? “Neither did I, neither did Mr. Stoutamire,” I say. “It don’t take schoolin to know how to break a horse, nor how to run a ranch.”

“Well that’s not all,” Ian says. “I got to talking to the weekend hand, Mikey? I asked him if he’d ever seen anything unusual with Tex. And he told me that you and Tex are homosexuals together.”

I jump to my feet. “What?”

“It’s OK,” he says. “I’m from the East Coast. I’m modern-minded. Sit down.”

I sit an’ say, “What did Mikey tell you?” This so fuckin ridiculous I feel like I’m dreamin it.

“He saw you and Tex leave work in the middle of the morning and walk to your cottage, arm in arm, and he said he didn’t see either of you again until lunch.” Shit, I remember that day, first summer he was here, Tex was havin some kind a panic attack an’ I tried a help him calm down.

Ian’s still not done. “And he’s seen you two leaving work together at the end of the day to go out, without inviting any of the other hands.”

I’m shakin my head. “Tex’d be mighty surprised to hear this,” I say, “considerin that he’s been married for almost a year.”

“Well, it’s none of my business, but I don’t think you should be romantically involved with someone who works under you, male or female. So I’m going to have to ask you to fire him.”

God, I’d like to burst out laughing. Does he know how funny he is?

“Tex ain’t no queer,” I say. “That boy got it all wrong. Tex is one a the best workers I ever seen. Never late, never a day off that I can remember. No bad habits at all. Not to mention, Little Joe’s gone an’ he might not come back, an’ the calves’ll start droppin in a few weeks.”

Ian goes to open his mouth, but I cut him off an’ say, “An’ if Tex goes, I go too.”

He looks surprised. “But Mrs. Stoutamire said you’d stay at least through this year, and you’d line up a replacement when you quit.”

“She didn’t know you was fixin a fire Tex.”
“Well.” I can tell he’s still not convinced we’re not homosexuals together, like he said. “OK, I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt and I’ll let him stay. But consider him on probation.”

“An’ me too?” I ask. “Am I on probation too? Would only make sense, wouldn’t it?”

“No …” He rubs his fingers on his temples. “Listen Ennis, I’m under a lot of stress. This isn’t what I thought, and I’m still trying to adjust. Can you help me?”

“Not if you’re firin my men.”

“OK,” he says. “Let’s just get on the same page.”

“I’d like that,” I say.

We go through the business part a the meetin, an’ as I’m gettin up to go, he says, “Do you know where I could meet a young woman around here?”

“Maybe at a bar, or at church,” I say. “I don’t know much about that.”

“You’re not married,” he says.

“No, an’ I like it that way.”

“I was hoping to meet a local girl.”

“You could try the Wolf Ears or Kelley’s Bar in Riverton,” I say, both places where young people go.

He says thanks, an’ I grab my hat an’ get outta there. He’s an odd duck, like Bridget used a say.

*****

When I see Tex, I tell him about the conversation with the dandy an’ we both get a good laugh.

“I’m gonna kill that Mikey,” he says.

“Don’t do that,” I say. “You don’t want a be goin back to jail, remember?”

*****

After I’m done work, I see Chuck’s truck parked at the cottage. As soon as I open the door, the smell a beef stew comes over me. Just like when I was growin up, comin in when I was done afternoon chores.

“What are you doin here?” I ask Chuck, who’s settin the table. Sure, I’d given him the key some months back, but he’s hardly ever snuck in like this.

He smiles big. “Ennis, I got the job. I start the first week of April.”

I throw down my boot an’ walk over to him, grab him into a hug.

“This is happening fast,” he whispers into my ear.

I pull back. “You know I gotta stay at least ‘til the calves are out an’ we got ‘em branded an’ vaccinated,” I say. “But then I’m goin with you.”

“I know,” he says. “I’m going to get an apartment in Fort Collins on a short lease, and I’ll wait for
you.”

It’ll be nearly two months we’ll barely see each other, an’ then … we’ll see each other all the time. I can hardly believe it.

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Wednesday, March 12

I’m eatin beans, fried eggs an’ toast for supper when I hear a knock at the door. I’m thinkin it could be Tex, maybe wantin to go out for a beer. But no, it’s Ian, wearin brand-new bluejeans an’ a white shirt. He’d taken his Range Rover out to the ranch a couple times since Monday, roamin around lookin for me or Tex. We’d stop our work when we’d seen him, but then he wouldn’ have nothin to say.

“Can I help you?” I ask. I’m holdin onto the door, not invitin him in.

“I was wondering if you’d like to join me for a drink at one of the local watering holes.”

“We ain’t friends,” I say. “You gotta know that. You want a talk to me, you pick up the phone. The Stoutamires never came a-knockin.”

“Sorry,” he says. “Maybe I could just come in and we could have a beer? Or you could come to the house? I’d really like to talk to you.”

“C’mon in,” I say, holdin the door open for him.

I get him a beer an’ he sits at the table across from me while I finish my supper.

He’s not sayin anything, so I say, “So how’s it goin?”

“I don’t feel like I’m really here yet,” he says. “You’re out there running the ranch, and I don’t know what to do with myself.”

“Why don’t you come out an’ help run it?” I say.

“Because I don’t know what I’m doing.”

I take a deep breath, wonderin again why someone would buy a ranch not knowin how to run one. “I could teach you everything you need to know, but you’re goin a get your clothes dirty.”

“Really? You’d teach me?” Just like a little kid, eyes all lit up.

“What was you expectin when you bought this place, anyways?” I ask.

He shakes his head like he’s regrettin he did. “You want to hear how I ended up buying it?”

I say sure, an’ over 15 minutes, he tells me his story. He went to Ivy League schools, got a degree in something or other an’ then a business degree an’ then a law degree, went to work for his dad’s friend’s firm in New York an’ married another lawyer he met there. Somewhere along the line he started spendin more time with his old college buddies snortin cocaine than with his wife.

All I need to do is say “uh” a few times ‘cause he’s on a roll. Long story short, he had an overdose an’ got put into rehab. While he was there, he got to regrettin his whole life an’ thinkin all he ever really wanted was to own a ranch out west, be like the ranchers he read about in cowboy an’ western books when he was a kid.
I’m thinkin it sounds pretty crazy, until I realize that’s all I wanted when I was a kid too – own a ranch, run some cows an’ horses, have a wife an’ kids. Things don’t always work out just like you thought you wanted.

Anyway, after he got outta the rehab, he quit the law firm, divorced his wife an’ told his dad his plans. The dad talked him into buyin a bank out west rather’n a ranch, an’ that’s what he was doin in Wyoming when he saw Stoutamire’s ad.

“I don’t want to be a banker,” he says. “I want to run this ranch.”

“No one’s stoppin you,” I say.

“But can you help me? I promise I’ll stop butting in. I’ll just follow you around and you show me everything I need to know.”

“You’ll need to get on one a your horses,” I say. “I’ll give you a real gentle one.”

“Thank you,” he says, tears in his eyes all of a sudden. “I’m really sorry we got off on such bad footing.”

For the first time, the thought crosses my mind that he might be queer. He’s got this delicate look to him that could mean something, or just that he’s rich an’ well-bred. I’m sure not goin a ask.

“It’s all right,” I say. “I do gotta tell you, though, I’m only here until the calves have dropped an’ we got the brandin done.”

“When?”

“June, probly. I’ll try an’ set you up with a real good foreman to take my place.”

“That’s not good news,” he says. “I mean that you’re leaving. Why are you?”

I tell him about Junior, wantin to be near her an’ the twins.

He says he gets it, “and by the way, I haven’t said it, but thank you for staying on. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

I shrug my shoulders. “Just my job.”

Then the phone rings. I get up to answer it, an’ Ian gets up too, says he’ll be goin.
June 5, 1986

I’m packin up some stuff to take with me to Fort Collins. It’ll be my first time at Chuck’s apartment since I helped him move in. He came up to see me a couple a times over April an’ May, but mostly I worked – gettin the calves out, branded, vaccinated, castrated if needed. All the while, explainin everything to Ian an’ answerin his questions. I was glad enough to be busy an’ not lyin around missin Chuck.

Little Joe did come back from Texas just in time to help out, an’ he’s stayin in the bunkhouse. We had a few all-nighters – one with two sets a twins, a two-bull pair an’ a bull’n’heifer pair. I hired a few hands, an’ Ian finally hired himself a housekeeper to do the cookin an’ cleanin.

I called Don Wroe to ask if he knew anyone Ian could hire to do the foreman’s job, even temporary, an’ he said his youngest son Ron, who I worked with a few years ago. So we interviewed him an’ hired him on as a ranch hand, just waitin for me to get out so he can take over an’ move his wife an’ two kids into the cottage.

So that’s what I’m doin this weekend – job interviews at a horse ranch about an hour east a Denver an’ Fort Collins, an’ a cattle ranch near Longmont. I got the Stoutamires’ address an’ phone number in New Mexico, an’ my two other references are Don Wroe an’ Ian.

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It’s a five-hour drive to Fort Collins, so I make a sandwich an’ pack a thermos a coffee for the ride. I’m goin a play the cassette tape Francine sent, her singin’ with her guitar picker. Chuck says she sounds as sweet as Emmylou Harris an’ the guitar is better’n he could play.

Francine quit her nanny job a few weeks ago ‘cause she’ll be actin in a troupe “upstate” somewhere over the summer, all excited about that. She wants me to go see her. I guess Regent’s goin there next week. I told her that with movin an’ startin a new job, I probly won’t make it, not to mention gettin on an airplane to go clear across the country.

Other thing is, Lureen Twist called last week to tell me she’ll be gettin married in August an’ sellin the house. We’d been talkin on the phone about the Twist ranch every couple a months or so. She says Bobby’ll drive Roberta down for the wedding.

“Anyways, I’d like you to come to the house and go through Jack’s stuff,” she said. “I haven’t touched it since he passed. I thought you might want some of his clothes or other things.”

I didn’t know what to say. Just thinkin about his crazy-color shirts – purple, red, blue – an’ his tight jeans that wouldn’t fit me anyways ’cause they’d be too short an’ too big around, made me feel tight in the throat. I’d never wear any of it, so I figured I should probly just say no.

“Ennis?” she said, ‘cause I wasn’t answerin fast enough.

“You know I’m movin to Colorado in a month or so?” I said. “Lookin for a job down there now, an’ I won’t have no time off.”

“You’re moving? Why?”

“Well, we got a new owner here, an’ like I told you, Junior’s livin in Denver with her twins.”
“Well, I hope you’ll still keep an eye on Roberta,” she said. “Try to get down here some time before August. If you can’t, I’ll just gather up some stuff and send it to you.”

I told her I’d see what I could work out.

*****

It’s midnight by the time I get to Chuck’s. He’s in a duplex with the landlady, an older lady, on the other side. I’m his buddy from Wyoming. I made sure not to wear my best clothes ‘cause I want her to think I’m down’n’out enough that I need to stay with a buddy.

I’d been thinkin me an’ Chuck should just get to bed an’ sleep ‘cause it’s been a long day, a long week for me. But I had a hard-on ever since crossin the state line into Colorado, so by the time he opens the door I’m more’n ready to go. I can see he’s got the same idea. He’s turned off all the lights except one lamp in the livin room. He has me drop my duffle bag at the door, tells me to take off my boots.

He comes up behind me an’ starts kissin the back a my neck, grindin into my ass, movin his hands around my chest an’ then my waist, openin buttons, unzippin my jeans. I’m tryin get my hands to his ass behind me to push him into me harder.

Then he comes around to face me, an’ we’re grindin into each other’s thighs.

“Shit, Ennis, I missed this,” he says. He’s pullin my jeans down, rubbin at me through my briefs, an’ then he goes on his knees an’ starts nuzzling.

“Mmm,” I say.

Then he’s pullin down my briefs an’ lickin the stuff leakin outta my dick. I’m runnin my fingers through his hair. Then he takes his mouth off, starts pumpin slow with his hand, an’ starts lickin at my thumb, then takin it in his mouth an’ suckin. I feel like I’m goin a explode. I want a say “OK, go at it,” but instead I take a deep breath. I gotta step back to lean on something ‘cause my knees are goin a buckle.

Finally, he wraps his mouth around my dick. I’ve got my hands on his head. I close my eyes, start movin like I’m fuckin his mouth. But behind my eyes, I’m picturin Jack, an’ pretty soon I’m comin in Chuck’s mouth, moanin an’ then sayin “Jesus, Jack.”

I open my eyes an’ Chuck is wipin his mouth on his arm. I say, “Chuck, I’m sorry. I’m just so fuckin tired. I must a been dreamin.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he says. “I’m going to interpret it as ‘Chuck, you’re that good.’”

I pull him to standin up. “You are,” I say. “You’re a good man.” I’m openin his fly, reachin into his shorts. “Let’s finish this on the couch.”

It’s the leather couch he got from Kerby’s house, first place we ever fucked. I take off his T-shirt, lie him down an’ start fondlin his balls an’ lickin his nipples. Then I kiss my way down an’ start lickin his balls, an’ finally take him in my mouth.

I hardly ever do this for him, hardly ever did it for Jack. But it feels right. When we’re done, he thanks me, an’ I hit him on the arm. “You don’t thank me for that. I ain’t no woman.”

We gather up our clothes an’ go up to crash on his bed, window open to let in the cool summer air. I’d been havin a hard time sleepin ever since he moved here, but tonight I’m lights out, a good
thing too ‘cause I need to be awake for them interviews.

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Saturday, June 6

Chuck cooks pancakes an’ sausage for breakfast. He’s tellin me about a Wednesday bowlin league he joined after he heard about it from Jocelyn, one a the secretaries in his office, an’ the bluegrass an’ country jam session he’s been goin to some Sundays an’ Tuesdays. That’s Chuck. It’s good to see him gettin out ‘cause I know it’s what he likes.

I tell him about my invitation from Francine to go to her play in New York, an’ from Lureen to go to Texas. He says he’d be happy to go with me on both trips, stay at a motel. We never done that before, an’ the idea makes my skin crawl, especially knowin what I do about Childress, Texas.

I tell him no way. “You got no idea what kind a place it is.”

“But just to spell you on the driving,” he says. “It must be nine, 10 hours from here. And why not go to New York? You’ll never get over your fear of flying unless you just get on an airplane and go.”

I roll my eyes at that. “You got it all figured out,” I say. “An’ I don’t even got a damn job lined up. I gotta go get dressed.”

He smiles, not takin offense at all. “You saw how big the shower is Ennis? I’ll go in with you.”

“No, you won’t,” I say, but I smile too. “We’ll save that for later.”

My first interview is at 9 an’ I’ll be damned if I’ll show up late. We’ll have supper at Junior’s later, an’ my other interview is tomorrow at 8 a.m.

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Friday, July 4

My fifth day at Mark Ferguson’s ranch, the Bar Double F. I guess the week went OK. This outfit is different from Stoutamires in a few ways.

For one, it’s set in rollin hills, almost right up against the front range. It’s smaller, runnin’ 250 cow/calf pairs, but they raise the calves to yearlings an’ then sell ‘em off to feed lots. They got a way bigger hayin operation so they can sell hay along with the calves.

Mark Ferguson lives in the house with his wife Lydia an’ three kids. The two oldest – a girl 14 an’ a boy 13 – help on the ranch. The youngest is 4, another boy.

Ferguson’s uncle Frank, who looks to be about 70, is around to help out too, but he had a bad fall from a horse an’ now he don’t get around so good nor think straight. Ferguson told me he don’t mind muckin out stalls, an’ I should give him any work I can think of that don’t involve gettin on a horse – cleanin saddles, shoerin horses, bottle feedin the one orphan calf.

At the interview, Ferguson had told me he didn’t have no housin for me unless I wanted a fix up one a the old bunk houses on the edge a the property that’s already got plumbin. There is a house for a foreman, but his in-laws are livin there – mother-in-law who watches the kids while Lydia works at a hospital in Fort Collins, an’ father-in-law who’s got his own business in his garage, buildin furniture.
So when he offered me the job – same pay as what I was getting from Stoutamire – I had to think fast whether I should mention a housin allowance or not. I decided I better ask after thinkin about the shit Chuck would give me if I didn’t, an’ sure enough, Ferguson coughed up an extra $40 a week. I didn’t argue. I asked if I could keep my horses here until I could find a place, an’ he said sure. Chuck’s horses are stayin at Stoutamire’s – I should say Longview, ’cause Ian changed the name.

Anyway, this Ferguson, he’s a writer, an’ he makes some money from that. He writes novels, mostly about his growin up on a ranch in Iowa an’ his crazy relatives. He told me Uncle Frank figures into one a the books, “Reaching Ames” an’ he gave me a copy. Chuck read it an’ said it’s pretty funny but he wouldn’t tell me nothin else, so I guess I’ll have to read it myself.

This hirin a foreman thing is new to Ferguson ‘cause he’s been runnin the ranch himself an’ writin in his spare time. I cain’t imagine where he’d find that. Anyway, he told me he wanted a hire someone who could run the whole operation, an’ all my references told him I’m his man. Bein new to the arrangement himself, he don’t know where to hang back an’ where to step in, something we’ll both have to figure out.

The other thing we talked about at the interview was vacation time, an’ I went ahead an’ told him I’d like a three-day weekend before the hayin starts in August – that’ll be for the trip to Childress. Chuck an’ me flew to New York for Francie Del Mar’s play the week before this job started, but that’s another story.

Anyways, Ferguson raised his eyebrows, I thought ‘cause no one walks into a job interview askin for time off, but he said hayin starts before August. I’d forgotten we’re a ways south a Signal an’ the climate’s different here. He said sure I can take the time off. I’ll be gettin a total a three weeks off to start.

The other interview I had, on the Sunday, didn’t go nearly so well. First, I’d already decided I’d take the job at the Bar Double F if it was offered, an’ second, ‘cause within minutes a meetin me, he made a joke about Rock Hudson. I’d heard my own ranch hands makin jokes last summer when the news first came out about him havin AIDS, an’ that was bad enough. Now here was this rancher jokin about a man who died of it. I just stared at him, didn’t even pretend to laugh. I went through the motions a the interview knowin the whole time I wouldn’t be workin for him. Ended up he did make me an offer anyways, an’ I got the pleasure a tellin him no.

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So it’s Friday, nearly 6, an’ I go into the trailer that’s Ferguson’s office with a space cleared away for me to have a desk too. He just put in heat an’ plumbing so he can do his writin here. He’s typin away at his next novel I guess, an’ I’m here to take a piss an’ get my paycheck then go home.

He asks me how I’m settlin in, an’ I say fine. It’s true too. I got no complaints. The kids have been helpin with the irrigation an’ the old uncle does his share, always wantin more to do. Then Ferguson asks if I’d like to come in an’ have supper with his family. It’s probly a good idea, except that Chuck’ll be waitin for me at home with supper ready. He’d be OK with me stayin, but how am I goin a call him to let him know, keep him from worryin?

I guess I must a waited too long to say somethin, cause Ferguson says, “Oh, sorry. You must have someone to go home to. You could invite her too, unless it’s too late.” I’d told him I was stayin in Fort Collins, not who with.

“No, I’m, uh,” I start to say, but I can feel my neck an’ my face startin to burn. “I’ll be goin out drinkin with a buddy a mine from Wyoming.” There, I’ve said it.
“Why don’t you call him and say you’ll be there a bit later?” Ferguson asks. “Lydia and the kids would really like to get to know you.”

So I’m kind a stuck. I pick up the phone on Ferguson’s desk to call Chuck.

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Friday July 18

Well, this is a long fuckin road. I worked a few hours this morning, got into my truck a little after 10, an’ now it’s 6 p.m. an’ I’m headin into Amarillo. I’m goin a stop an’ call Lureen like she asked me to.

I could tell the weather was heatin up as I drove into Texas, but I’m so spoiled by the air conditionin in the truck now, I hadn’t realized how really fuckin hot it was. It feels like a blast furnace when I get outta my truck to use a payphone.

“No problem,” Lureen says. “Violeta’s got a real good meal waiting for you.”

A cook? News to me. I’m by myself, ‘cause I talked Chuck outta comin along. Bobby’s up in Lightnin Flat workin at the ranch again this summer. I’m assumin the fiancé, Larry, will be at Lureen’s house.

But no. It’s just her an’ the girl Violeta, who takes off right after cookin me an’ Lureen the biggest fuckin steaks I ever seen. We stay in the kitchen to eat. There’s rice an’ beans an’ grilled squash, an’ Lureen serves us Mexican beer. I eat the whole steak ‘cause it’s good an’ ‘cause I don’t like to waste food. Lureen eats most a hers, an’ when she clears the table, she chops up the rest a the steak for the dog, a big black Labrador named George Bush.

We move into the family room. I’d seen a big fancy living room an’ dining room on my way in. She asks me if I’d like a shot a Scotch or Tequila. I never had neither, so I say maybe Tequila’d be good after a Mexican meal.

Lureen’s tellin me about her wedding, honeymoon in Australia, an’ the farm machinery business. She says she plans to sell it soon, maybe start up another kind a business. When she asks about me, I tell her the new job’s OK, an’ then we get to talkin about Bobby an’ my girls.

She laughs when I tell her about flyin to New York an’ feelin so outta place on the airplane, in the city an’ even in the summer town where Francine’s play was. For the first time, I laugh about it too. The play didn’t make no sense to me, an’ I was tired from jet lag, so I slept through most of it. Chuck said it was avant garde, whatever. I got to spend some time with Francine, goin to the Brooklyn Zoo an’ takin a ferry around Ellis Island. Things I never done before. The subway, an’ all them tall buildings blockin out the sky? I hope I never have to see any a that again.

Somehow I must a let it slip that I’d been there with someone else too. Of course, Lureen don’t miss a thing.

“Who’s ‘we’?” she asks. “Did someone go with you?”

I got no answer, so she says, “Roberta told me about your new friend. Please don’t think it bothers me. I’m just surprised you would travel with him.”

“Guess I’m full a surprises,” I say. I’d called her an’ Jack’s ma to let them know my new address, never mentionin that I wasn’t livin there alone.
“Well, good for you,” she says. “You deserve your happiness too.”

She asks if I want another shot, an’ I say that’ll be the last one ‘cause I still have to go an’ find me a motel to stay at.

“Nonsense!” she says. “You’re staying right here. You can have Jack’s office down here – it’s got a bed – or the guest room upstairs, or camp in the backyard, whatever suits you. What kinda Texas hostess would I be, invite you here and stick you in some damn motel? You’re hurting my feelings, Ennis.”

“Well, if you put it that way,” I say. So we have another, an’ then another, drinkin the tequila shots with Mexican beer in between.

I’m feelin the effects, an’ she must be too. She’s tall, but she don’t look like she weighs much at all.

She lets the dog back in, an’ he lies down on the floor next to her feet.

I ask, “Did you have a cook when Jack was still alive?”

“Violeta? She’s a housekeeper who cooks, not a cook,” Lureen says. “We’ve had a housekeeper since Bobby was a baby.”

“What about the dog?” She says not the Labrador, but they got a little terrier when Bobby turned two, an’ that dog got hit by a car about a year after Jack passed. Jack had told me about the terrier, but I never knew about no housekeeper. I’d pictured a big fancy house, not quite this big. So much we didn’t know about each other.

“You have dogs?” she asks me.

“Just ranch dogs,” I say. “We weren’t allowed to get friendly with ‘em when I was a kid, but later I did get to like some a the cattle herdin dogs I got to know. Mostly if they did a good job.”

She’s lookin at me like she’s puzzled. “What?” I say.

“Ennis, you’re tenderhearted, aren’t you?”

“My sister used a say that,” I say. Aw hell, now I’m talkin before I think, when I usually do the opposite. I can feel my mouth is getting too loose. It’s gotta be the Tequila.

She tells me Jack was real sweet to her an’ Bobby most a the time. She tells me funny stories about Jack talkin back to L.D., times when Jack snuck around with Bobby just like he was a little kid himself, an’ funny things Jack would say about customers an’ people who worked at the dealership. We get to laughin pretty hard.

“He made me laugh too,” I say.

“Talk to me about Jack,” she says. “What did you like about him?”

I should just say I’m tired an’ need to go to bed, but I say, “Probly the same things you did.”

“But he chose both of us, and we’re so different,” she says.

“I don’t know that he chose me,” I say. “I might a just been the first thing that came along.”

“I don’t think so,” she says. “That wouldn’t have lasted for 20 years, would it? It’s me he maybe
Didn’t choose. Did he tell you I was pregnant when we got married?”

“No ma’am,” I say. “Lureen.”

“He was a real gentleman about it,” she says, an’ then she starts sniffin, grabbin Kleenexes.

There’s no room on the couch unless I move George Bush, or I’d go over an’ sit next to her. Next thing I know, she’s got tears streamin down her face.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

Then she wipes off the makeup that smeared under her eyes, blows her nose again, smiles, an’ the cryin’s all over like it never happened.

“Tomorrow you’ll meet Larry,” she says. “We’ll all go out for supper at the club. I’ll be going to work in the morning, give you some time alone to go through Jack’s things.”

She gets up an’ pours us another shot. I lost count a how many a while ago.

“I didn’t bring no suit,” I say. “Didn’t think we’d be goin out.”

“I’ll get you something of Larry’s,” she says. “He’s about your size.”

“I got something to ask you,” I say. “Feel free to say no.”

“What is it?”

“Can you tell me what Jack’s last weeks an’ months was like?”

“I’ll tell you, but then you’re going to have to answer a question of mine.”

“Sounds fair.”

“Well, he went on a bender when he got back from seeing you and his folks in May,” she says. “I thought it might have been some news about his folks’ health, or something his daddy said, the old son of a bitch. He got himself so drunk that he missed Bobby’s school rodeo.

“Then he sobered up a bit and went back to work, but he wasn’t the same old Jack. He wouldn’t tell me what had happened. He did say he wouldn’t be going to Wyoming in August, that he’d take Bobby camping instead. I knew he was avoiding his friend Randall Malone because he wouldn’t take his calls here or at work. Then he went on that last fishing trip and he never came back.”

I see her jaw clench up, no tears. I guess she might know what Jack an’ this Malone fellow was really doin.

“Did it ever occur to you …” I start. I don’t know if I should be goin there, ‘cause once I say it I cain’t take it back.

“What? Say it, Ennis.”

“Well, maybe it wasn’t no accident, what happened a Jack?”

She tries to stand up, but she’s got no balance, so she ends up back on the couch. The dog jumps up to the couch, but she shoos him away.

“Oh my God,” she says. “It never occurred to me until you said it just now. And I went and had
him cremated.” Now she’s cryin again.

“And that fucking Randall Malone,” she says through the tears. “And then he took off … Did you know about him, Ennis?”

“Not until Jack’s old man told me,” I say. “What do you mean ‘took off’?”

“He left his wife and moved to Dallas,” she says. “Right after Jack died. He didn’t even go to the funeral. I figured he was distraught his loverboy had died.”

I don’t like the sound a that. “Lureen,” I say. “Don’t talk about Jack like that. Are you sayin this Randall fellow might a done it?”

“I have no idea,” she says. “Or maybe someone else knew about him and Jack.”

“That’s what I been wonderin,” I say. I hadn’t known about the fishin trip with Malone, an’ that brings up other possibilies.

“No, it couldn’t be,” she says. “I’m sure it was just like the sheriff told me. He was a good friend of my father’s, and I don’t think he’d lie to me. You should stop worrying about it, Ennis. Jack’s gone either way.”

“Don’t you think someone should be accountable if it weren’t no accident?” I ask. I know I should shut up, but I’ve gone over the fence already.

“I’m sure it was an accident. Don’t let your imagination run away with you.”

So that’s as far as she’s goin with it, an’ there ain’t much more I can say.

“What was your question?” I ask.

She takes a deep breath. “Why didn’t you and Jack stay together after the summer on Brokeback Mountain?”

Is she serious? “I was engaged when we went up, an’ I got married right after,” I say. “Jack went his own way.”

“Don’t you think you would have been happier if you’d stayed together? And never got married? And never brought me and your ex-wife into the picture?”

“No point thinkin about it,” I say. “Anyways, maybe it took gettin married an’ havin kids for me an’ Jack to know what we should a done different.”

She’s quiet, so I say, “An’ anyways, I don’t regret havin my girls. You cain’t go back, you just cain’t. You gotta take what’s in front a you right now. You got your doctor an’ I got …” I stop ‘cause I don’t want a say no more.

“You’re right, of course,” she says. We sit there a while longer, each havin our separate thoughts.

Then she stands up slow, holdin the arm a the couch. “Come on, I’ll show you to your room. You want Jack’s office or the guest room?”

I know I won’t be able to sleep if I stay in Jack’s office, so I say the guest room. We stumble up the stairs an’ she shows me the room an’ the bathroom across the hall. I’m asleep before I know it.

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Sunday, July 20

It ended up none a Jack’s clothes fit, just like I’d thought. But I could a sworn some a them smelled like him, so I took a few undershirts. His boots fit too, an’ Lureen said Bobby was a Size 10, so I took a couple pairs, real nice tooled leather.

I found a shoebox full a my postcards, just like the box I kept with his. A couple a other things in that box: a bandana an’ a copy of my wedding picture, with Alma’s side cut off. Just like I did to the picture a him an’ Lureen on their wedding day. But where did he get it? Only thing I could figure, he must a gone to the newspaper office in Riverton.

That just made me sad, so I took a break, drove around Childress to see Jack’s old stompin’ grounds an’ get some lunch. It’s a nice enough little town, except every man I saw I had to wonder if he had it in him to murder someone over something weren’t none a his damn business. I picked up a burger at a drive-through, maybe the worst food I ever ate.

When I got back, I found Jack’s 1983 calendar book, pages marked off for the stock show in Fort Worth in January, one in Houston in March, the trip we took in May marked “Wyoming,” three days he spent with Randall Malone in July, endin the day he died, marked “Fishing,” an’ the August Wyoming trip crossed off with “Bobby” written over it. My heart was poundin, each page I turned goin through the months. End-of-season clearance sale in September, trip to Oklahoma City in October.

Then, November. At the top a the page, before the 1st, “Wyoming” an’ under that, “10 days,” underlined. Well, that’s what it took to get me cryin, just as bad as the day I went up to Lightnin Flat to see his folks about the ashes. It was 3 in the afternoon by then, an’ I hoped to god Lureen wouldn’t walk in an’ find me like this. Felt like I’d never stop. I guess it was OK ’cause Chuck’s books on grievin would say to cry as much as you need to. When the cryin finally did stop, my throat ached an’ my eyes burned an’ my gut hurt from the burger. I splashed water on my face an’ made a pot a coffee.

So all that stuff is on the seat a my truck next to me, an’ it’s pourin rain. An I’m goin home to a man who says he loves me, even though he knows he’ll never be the love a my life. He’ll have something ready for supper, an’ after we eat we’ll have sex an’ watch TV an’ then go to sleep. We’ll wake up tomorrow an’ each go to our job, then come back home to the place where we’re livin together until we can find ourselves a nice little piece a land.

I know I gotta let go a this, but I cain’t help thinkin, not for the first time, it’s a shame I couldn’t a had all this with Jack. You sure cain’t go back.

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Tuesday, Dec. 23, 1986

We’re celebratin Christmas here at me an’ Chuck’s new place near the little town a Magpie Ridge, not 15 minutes from Ferguson’s ranch an’ 45 minutes to Chuck’s job in Fort Collins.

We bought a broken-down old ranch, just a quarter-section, 160 acres, big enough to let my horses roam once we get the fences fixed. The name on the crossbar says “Singing Magpie” an’ we didn’t change it, not yet anyways. We had thought we’d rent, until we talked about money an’ found out we each had more saved than the other had thought, enough for a downpayment. He’s the one who took out the mortgage, even though he wanted me in on it too.

A sheriff’s deputy came by to say “Hi” the first week we moved in, back in November, an’ Chuck
invited him in for a beer. I was sittin in the kitchen, so the cop asked if we was brothers. Chuck said no, we’re business partners, an’ that was that. The cop asked us about our plans for the ranch, an’ Chuck made something up ‘cause we haven’t made any plans yet.

The place hasn’t been ranched in a long time, but the house is nice, built just 10 years ago, biggest place I ever lived by far. Huge livin room/dinin room, big kitchen, family room on the side. Three bathrooms, but the one downstairs don’t have no shower. Four bedrooms upstairs, an’ the master is huge with its own bathroom. Lucky me an’ Chuck had a lot a furniture put together, his from Kerby’s an’ his own house, mine the newer stuff I’d bought for the foreman’s cottage at Stoutamire’s, so we had enough to fix up every room, never thinkin we’d have people stayin in each one a them like we do tonight.

There’s me an’ Chuck, Julie, Junior an’ Curt, the twins, Francine an’ Regent, Tex an’ Bernadette, an’ Andrew. We can fit everyone around the dining room table from Chuck’s, with a card table sittin next to it.

Regent graduated last May an’ decided to stay at the Twist ranch at least ‘til it’s earnin money again. That might be this comin year, the way things are going. No one can figure out what’s goin on between him an’ Francine. Junior told me he’s a fool to hang on, that Francine always needs an audience an’ that’s all he is. All I know is he insisted on pickin up her from the airport an’ they stayed together in one bedroom last night. Tomorrow, they’ll be drivin to Riverton together.

Tex an’ Bernadette are stayin here too, an’ of course Julie. I’d tried to talk Chuck into puttin a bed in the basement, an’ me stayin there, but he wouldn’t have it, said it’s our goddamn house an’ anyway no one stayin over gives a shit what two old men do when they close the door. I couldn’t argue with that, so I stayed up real late last night talkin to Tex. Chuck was already asleep when I finally came up to bed, no need to worry about makin too much noise with the young folks around.

Tex an’ me had talked on the phone a few times, but last night he gave me a fuller report. Ron Wroe is runnin things pretty much the same way I did an’ continuin Ian’s ranch lessons. Tex got a few laughs outta that. But he said Ron don’t have my patience, an’ there had been some loud shoutin matches with Ian, an’ blowin up at the ranch hands, scarin ‘em half to death. I tried to never lose my temper with the hands ‘cause I remembered how awful it felt gettin yelled at by some asshole foreman. Don Wroe wasn’t like that, so I’m surprised his kid is.

Tex said Ian found himself a girl, a nice lookin 25-year-old high school English teacher who’d grown up on a ranch near Casper, an’ he’d even taken her back East an’ introduced her to his folks at Thanksgiving. Seein as how Ian was married once before, I figure he’s not queer after all, not the first time I’d been mistaken about that.

So now Junior an’ Bernadette are cookin turkey dinner with help from Chuck. I’m watchin the twins – Emily’s walkin an’ tryin a climb the stairs, E.J.’s cruisin around the furniture. They’re wearin fancy green velvet outfits their Aunt Francine sewed for ‘em, a dress for Emily an’ overalls for E.J. Curt says they look like Little Bo Peep an’ Little Lord Fauntleroy. They’re both happy babies, an’ I get to see ‘em often enough that they’re gettin to know me.

Junior found out a few months ago that E.J.’s got cerebral palsy – a mild case, the doctor said. What you can notice is, he’s stiff on his left side. It shows in his crawlin an’ cruisin, an’ the way he holds onto toys. She says it’s all wait an’ see, we don’t know what other effects he might have, an’ it’s not “curable,” but he’ll learn to live with it. I guess we’ll all learn to live with it. I’m sure that for a few more years, he won’t know no different. An’ it don’t make no difference to me, except I’m real glad I moved here, so much closer to Junior.

At supper, there’s some announcements. Francine says she got a part in a off-off-Broadway
production where she’ll be singin an’ dancin. That starts in late March. She’s been workin as a waitress since the summer gig ended, takin dance lessons an’ still singin in Greenwich Village on Wednesday nights, an’ now Friday nights too at a different place.

“You gotta come, Daddy,” she says, likely knowin it won’t happen. Then she says to Junior, “What about you? You think the twins could spare you a couple of days?”

Now Junior’s face turns all red, an’ I already know what she’s goin a say ‘cause she told me a week ago.

“I’d like to, but … we’ll be having another baby in May!”

Everyone says congratulations, an’ when that dies down, Bernadette says, “Ahem. Me and Tex are expecting too. I’m due in April.” The talkin an’ laughin gets so loud, I feel like my ears are goin a pop. It’s a good thing, though, havin your family an’ friends around like this.

I see that Andrew’s talkin to Julie, probly about Laramie an’ college. Chuck had worried he’d be odd man out. I’d invited him ‘cause I knew he’d have a hard time of it on Christmas Day with his family.

Later, Andrew tells me he’s been on two dates with some guy he met through a classified ad, a nice enough guy even though he assumed they’d have sex the second night, which Andrew didn’t go for. He did agree to another date though, a New Year’s Eve party where Andrew thought Dave might be goin as well. When I tell Chuck about it later that night, he says he’s glad we never had to go through any a that kind a nonsense.

“Was that datin, back when you an’ me met to shoot pool?” I ask him.

“That’s what I thought it was,” he says. “What did you think?”

“I dunno. I wanted it to be, an’ I didn’t want it. Seemed like you knew everyone, so maybe I was just someone else you knew. You miss your old buddies?”

“Ennis, they were acquaintances, not buddies. I don’t miss them. I’ve got everything I want right here.”

“Me too.”

We’re lyin in bed, the house all quiet now.

Chuck says, “Were you OK with having so many people over here tonight?”

“Didn’t it seem like I was OK?”

“You seemed fine,” he says. He turns to me, cups my jaw in his hand an’ turns my face to him. “You are fine, Ennis Del Mar.”

“I’d been thinkin that about you, Charles Walker Ausman, when you an’ Francine was singin tonight,” I say.

He leans in an’ kisses me. “C’mon, we’ll be nice and quiet,” he says. I roll over on top of him. It don’t get much better than this.

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In this house, we got two closets in the master bedroom. The big walk-in is Chuck’s, an’ the
smaller one is mine. I got me an’ Jack’s shirts hangin on the inside a my closet door, along with the postcard an’ the rodeo picture a Jack. When I moved outta Stoutamire’s, I’d put it all in a box. The day we moved in here, I put everything back up an’ I showed Chuck, told him about the shirts for the first time. He said it’s good to keep reminders of people we grieve for.

Tomorrow I’ll be havin supper at the Fergusons’ an’ he’ll be eatin at Jocelyn’s from his work with some a the other “singles.” On Christmas, it’ll be just the two of us. We’ll make our phone calls, open each other’s gifts, an’ have leftovers for supper.

On New Year’s Eve, we’ll be in Riverton for Lisa an’ Flo’s party. We’ll stop by at Alma an’ Monroe’s on New Year’s Day so I can say “Hi” to the boys, an’ then on our way home we’ll have supper with Bridget an’ Peter, some a their kids in Cheyenne.

We’d said no to an invitation from the Stoutamires to visit them at their place near Taos over the holidays, ‘cause I’m workin all the other days. Maybe we’ll go in the spring sometime.

I cain’t help thinkin back to Christmas 1983, just three years ago. Me tryin a drink myself to death, no one I could talk to, not knowin if Jack would a showed up in November had he lived long enough, not knowin if my girls would ever speak to me again the way I’d been treatin them, never even dreamin that I’d find another one after Jack, nor havin any hope of ownin my own place someday.
PART I - Nathan Stroebler P.O.V.

August 20, 2004

I respect the hell out of my brother, really I do. He’s accomplished amazing things, and he’s a genuinely nice guy, probably the most fundamentally decent guy I know.

But I gotta worry about him sometimes. Like the other day, when Emily told him I’m gay. She’d came upon some, uh, incriminating evidence, and everyone knows she tells him everything, and vice-versa. Part of being twins, I guess.

He didn’t believe her, so he came to me, and he actually argued the point.

“You’re not gay. How can you be gay?” he demanded. “You play baseball and you do Jiu Jitsu! Girls phone you! You’re more of a guy than I am!”

“I’m too much of a guy to be gay?” I was incredulous. “Have you ever met our grandfather?”

“But it’s not like he’s gay gay. It’s not like they still have sex or anything.”

Hello? Has he seen the way Grandpa and the Professor look at each other? Has he ever snooped in their bedside tables and found the K-Y jelly and the magazines and videos? Has he ever snuck up to their bedroom door and listened?

Well, maybe it’s kind of creepy of me to notice such things, so I didn’t say anything.

E.J. asked, “So have you told Grandpa?”

Duh?

“He knows,” I said. I was only 9 when I first asked my grandpa how I could tell if I was gay or not (like I didn’t already know), and he said, “When you’re lookin at someone or thinkin about ‘em all the time and you get butterflies in your tummy – notice if it’s a girl or a boy. You’ll know.”

When I was 12, I got the serious butterflies for one of E.J.’s friends, and I told my Grandpa, and he said, “So now you know, boy. There ain’t nothin wrong with it, but you gotta be real fuckin careful ‘cause the rest a the world thinks it’s wrong. I ain’t jokin.” I asked him when he found out about himself, and he said, “Almost too late.” Then he clammed up, and you don’t press him when he’s let you know he doesn’t have anything more to say.

That was five years ago, and I wasn’t ready to tell the parents, even though I knew they’d be cool, and then my dad died and I didn’t want to put any extra burdens on my ma. So no one else knew anything until Emily came crashing into my room yesterday, and there I was, underneath Christopher, my Jiu Jitsu buddy who goes to the all-boys’ Catholic school. We’d already peeled off our T-shirts, still had our pants on, but she saw us kissing and probably noticed he was grinding into me pretty bad. By bad I mean good.

E.J. asked me if Ma knew, and I said I’d be telling her as soon as him and Emily were gone. They’ll be movin to college in Colorado Springs in a few weeks.

Then he said something I found incredibly sad.
“I’m glad Dad never knew. Obviously you’re not going to carry on the Stroebler name, and I doubt if I’ll ever find a girl to marry.”

“C’mon, bro,” I said. “You’ll find someone; you just gotta get out and meet some intelligent girls. I’m sure there are tons of them at Colorado College.”

He didn’t seem convinced. “Yeah, hanging off the arms of the jocks.”

“Not the smart girls,” I said. “And besides, who says I won’t have kids? What about Grandpa’s buddies Andrew and Dave?” They adopted two little girls whose ma had died of AIDS.

My brother got teased enough in middle school that he built himself a façade of nice guy/funny guy who nothing would bother, and he kept it up all through high school. He was president of student council, on the honor roll for four years, on the wrestling team and playing trumpet in the school band. He dresses real preppy. And he’s an Eagle Scout.

His disability – yeah, you notice it – but it doesn’t slow him down, and really, the only thing he can’t do is certain sports. He’s a lot better looking than me. Him and Emily both got our daddy’s blond hair an’ Grandpa’s curls (well his hair’s grey an’ not so curly now, what’s left of it, but it was in the wedding picture my ma has, anyways). I got my ma’s straight auburn hair, which I’m letting grow out right now, at least until baseball season starts.

Even though E.J. doesn’t confide in me very often, I know that under everything, he’s really insecure and sensitive.

He took a friend of Emily’s to the prom – a “pity date,” he called it because she barely even kissed him goodnight. But a few weeks later, he actually went all the way with a cute camp counselor at the Cerebral Palsy camp at our grandpa’s ranch. I helped him practice putting a condom on a banana because his fingers can be clumsy, not that I’ve done it in real life myself.

The girl, Martha, must be at least 24. She’s a high school counselor in Golden. She’s cute enough, although she’s dealing with disabilities a bit worse than his. Trouble was, by the end of that week, he had fallen madly in love, and told her so, and she told him she had a boyfriend back home, and wouldn’t give him her phone number or email address. His heart was officially broken and he’s still pining for her now, more than a month later.

If he thought that fucking a girl he hardly knows a couple of times was going to be the beginning of a big romance, and if he thinks that Grandpa and the Professor have settled into some kind of platonic friendship, how clueless is he? Would he even notice if a girl made eyes at him? I worry about things like that. I hope things go a lot better for him at college.

I’m pretty attuned to people’s reactions … I know I’ve turned the heads of a few girls and maybe a few guys at my high school. I think I’ve got the gaydar they talk about on “Queer as Folk,” which I got my grandpa to let me watch a few times as long as I wouldn’t tell Ma.

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PART II - Ennis P.O.V.

Saturday, Oct. 16, 2004

I’m on my way to Pueblo to look at a couple a horses. Junior had called me last night an’ said we needed to talk, so I’m stopping by for a coffee, expectin something kind a serious, maybe her needin money.
Her an’ the kids stayed in the house after Curt was killed by a drunk driver at a speedin stop three years ago. Turns out his insurance left her enough so she could stay in the house an’ go to nursin school too. She’s got two more years to go an’ she’ll be a nurse.

“Daddy, did you know about Nathan’s little boyfriend?” she asks once we’re sittin down.

“He might a mentioned it,” I say. Junior’s known her boy was gay almost since I knew, but he didn’t see fit to tell her until a few weeks ago after his brother an’ sister moved to Colorado Springs for college, both on scholarships.

“Well, they broke up,” she says.

“Bound to happen, I guess.”

“He’s too young to be dating anyway,” she says, an’ it sounds funny because I’d never thought about two guys as datin, even though everyone else seems to.

“Weren’t you an’ Francine out with boys at that age?” I say, “An’ your mama not likin it one bit.”

“Or you either,” she says with a chuckle.

“An’ you know Darlin, Nate ain’t goin a turn up pregnant, nor knock anyone up.”

“That’s true. I still worry though, mostly about him getting his heart broken.”

“That what happened here?” I ask.

“No, I don’t think so,” she says.

She’s quiet a while, bitin her lips.

“Honey?” I say. “Somethin else botherin you?”

A little more quiet an’ then she says, “Daddy, Nathan’s getting teased at school. He told me not to tell you but …”

I cain’t help it, my fist slams down on the table, makin the coffee an’ everything else jump.

“Goddamn it to hell, I told him … how’d anyone at school find out?” Christ, after I tried so hard to show the boy how to act an’ how not to act.

“I guess Christopher’s sister said something to her boyfriend who goes to Nate’s school and he started telling …”

“Where is he?” I say. “I’ll ram his fuckin teeth right down his fuckin throat. Excuse me.”

“No, stop, Daddy. This is exactly why I had second thoughts about telling you.”

“Well what’s Nate doin about it?”

“He got into a fight at school and he was called into the principal’s office, him and the two other guys, and they were all sent home. The principle wouldn’t even talk about what started the fight.”

“That so,” I say. “Anything else?”

She takes a gulp of coffee an’ then looks up at me.
“Well, there’s been more name-calling since then, and shit smeared on his locker. He hasn’t been to school since Tuesday. He’s threatening to quit.”

“An’ you wait ‘til today to tell me?” I say, tryin to keep my voice normal so I don’t scare her. “An’ he didn’t call, didn’t tell me this morning when he come to work?” He’d acted totally normal as far as I could see.

“He’s scared of what you’re going to say.”

“Well, for Christsake, what am I goin a say? I ain’t goin a let him quit school, that’s for fuckin sure, excuse me. He oughta get a fresh start, come live with me an’ Chuck an’ go to school in Longmont.” The kids stay with us most a the summer, between workin our ranch an’ Tex’s an’ Regent’s. It’s been a joke for years now, them sayin they wanted a stay year-round, an’ me sayin they’d be fools to put up with Chuck’s cookin when their ma cooks so good.

“You’d have to drive him to school until he can buy himself a car,” she says, an’ I realize she must a thought this thing out before she even brought it up with me.

“Sure, I can do that.” I’m my own boss on our ranch, best boss I ever had.

“Don’t you need to check with Chuck?”

“Gimme your phone. I’ll do that right now.”

Of course Chuck says yes, just like I knew he would. I tell him to give Nate the good news when he comes in for lunch.

“You won’t be too lonely here by yourself?” I ask Junior.

“I’ll be fine, I’m so busy with my classes,” she says, an’ she’s blushin because she’s seein a guy Nate told me about, but I ain’t supposed to know about him yet.

“Daddy, can I drive down to Pueblo with you, an’ we can talk?”

I say sure, I’d love the company. I got a feelin she’s goin a tell me all about the new guy an’ ask me if I think it’s too soon. An’ I’m goin a tell her to listen to her heart an’ know that Curt would a wanted her to be happy more’n anything else.

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The house in Magpie Ridge is half mine now, both our names right there on the mortgage. How that came to be is a long story, but I’ll go ahead an’ tell it.

I was workin at Mark Ferguson’s ranch an’ I likin it well enough, but I’d come home every day an’ look out over our 160 acres with the tumble-down corrals an’ outbuildings, which I never had time to do anything about.

After two years, I’d done nothin more’n fixed the perimeter fences an’ fenced off a big pasture so the horses had room to breathe, that was about it. Chuck an’ me had a runnin’ discussion about how much work he should be doin on the ranch – he pretty much said none, he’d take care a the house, an’ I said why’d we buy so many fuckin acres anyway if we weren’t goin a do nothin with ’em.

I pretended like I was mad about all the time he spent in Fort Collins, playin with his band, bowlin, takin classes for a master’s degree, but I wasn’t really. I’d go see his band play every few months,
an’ on all the other nights, I didn’t mind him bein out ‘cause I need my quiet too. I always waited up for him, an’ that didn’t bother me neither. The only thing I really wanted was help on the ranch on the weekends, but he thought weekends were for relaxin an’ travellin or studyin. We had the same fight over an’ over.

Finally, after two years a this, an’ nearly comin to blows more’n a few times, he said, “Ennis, why don’t you quit your job and just stay home and fix this place up?”

I said that was the dumbest thing I’d ever heard. It took him another few months to talk me into it, sayin we could afford it, and he’d help me draw up a plan so the ranch would be makin money before you know it. I said I’d earn my keep in any case, work odd jobs to bring in some cash. By then I knew a few ranchers around the area an’ I knew Ferguson would give me a good word.

Meanwhile, when Bobby Twist graduated in 1989 with his degree in ag business, he moved to his grandma’s ranch, an’ with Lureen’s help, bought the ranch next to theirs an’ started runnin sheep. Regent called me just a few weeks later to tell me there wasn’t room for two top dogs an’ he was goin a start lookin for another job. I set him up for my job, an’ sure enough, Ferguson hired him an’ I helped him fix up an old bunkhouse to stay in.

I built up me an’ Chuck’s ranch gradually to what it is now – 100 acres for 50 cow/calf pairs an’ a little horse operation. Junior’s kids started workin here when they was 8 or 9 years old. I got ‘em each their own horse an’ their own animals to raise for the 4H – chickens, sheep an’ a pig, the worst. They was doin real ranch work by the time they was 12, an’ we started payin ‘em for it.

We still keep a few chickens for the eggs an’ a herd a 10 goats for the milk. One a the reasons for that is, we started runnin a Cerebral Palsy camp when E.J. was 6 or so. We just had our 12th annual in July. That boy sure has grown up. Nate, who tells me more’n he should, told me E.J. bedded down one a the camp counselors, makin sure to use a rubber. Junior has pounded that message into their heads since before puberty, an’ I’m glad for it. I never used one to this day myself, but I know kids today need to.

Anyway, just after I quit my job an’ started fixin up this ranch, the quarter-section next to us went up for sale, an’ Tex bought it on a lease-to-own deal, an’ moved down here with Bernadette an’ their two kids, girl an’ boy. He breaks horses for ranch work an’ for stupid things like trick ridin an’ show jumpin, whatever the client wants.

I got friendly with Jacob Deauville, the old rancher across the road from us, an’ when Tex moved here, we started goin for a coffee Wednesday mornings at Judy’s Diner (an’ gas station) in Magpie Ridge. Rev. Purdy, the minister with a wicked sense a humor from the Methodist Church catty-corner from the diner would usually join us, an’ sometimes Ralph Winkleman from the feed store. No one said a thing about my livin arrangements – as far as everyone but Tex was concerned, I was rentin a room from some guy who works at Colorado State an’ workin his ranch. His name never came up. I did my errands in Magpie Ridge, Longmont or Denver when I was goin a see Junior. Chuck did his errands in Fort Collins an’ had his own social life there like I said.

We lived like this year on year, both of us busy livin our own lives but knowin who we’d be comin home to an’ why. Andrew an’ Dave, they’d gotten back together after Dave got pneumonia an’ a pretty bad AIDS scare. They was always tryin a get us into gay political stuff, especially after a gay guy was murdered in Denver an’ had his body thrown onto a freeway, but we just wanted a keep to ourselves. We sure never marched in pride parades nor went to the gay rodeo.

Julie had gotten a job at U-W an’ married a history professor, wedding in Laramie. Chuck sat with his sisters an’ their families, still not very friendly with Martha an’ her husband Joe. I sat with Curt
an’ the kids an’ the hairdresser an’ waiter guys from Riverton, who’d moved to Denver themselves by then.

Francine had her ups an’ downs in New York, but she came home every year for Christmas. She’d hang around with Regent, except the one year when he was seein a lawyer from Longmont, but that lasted just a few months. Regent would go see Francine in New York for a week or so every June.

Chuck an’ me always had a big gatherin at the ranch before or after Christmas, keepin the day itself just for us. We still went to Riverton every year for Lisa an’ Flo’s New Years Eve party.

In 1997, after 11 years in New York, Francine surprised everyone by sayin she was ready to move back home an’ could she stay with us? She’d get a job an’ enroll at U-C in Boulder to study music education. Of course we said yes. By this time, Regent had bought himself a big spread that borders on Tex’s, where he runs 400 cow an’ calf pairs. Lisa an’ Flo helped him out with the financin. Their younger boy Argent had got his music degree, got married an’ was playin French horn for an orchestra in Chicago. Flo’s daughter in Utah had five kids.

Me an’ Francine’s war over the heat started up again when she moved in. For me, 60 degrees is fine. Chuck likes 64-65. Francine cranked it to 70 every chance she could. It felt like a sauna most a the time. I put up with it ‘cause I was happy to have her around, but I’d open the windows any room I was in.

Pretty soon, she was over at Regent’s more’n she was here, an’ by March, she’d moved in with him. By May they was engaged. He told her he’d kept the ring he tried a give her nearly 15 years before, an’ she said that’s the one she wanted, not some newer fancier thing. That’s my girl, I thought. Don’t take things you don’t need.

They got marriedJuly 4 at Regent’s ranch – lit up by little white Christmas lights, an’ fireworks after that. When Francine an’ Regent had gone to ask Rev. Purdy to do the ceremony, they told him about me an’ Chuck an’ Lisa an’ Flo. All he said was we was all blessed to have found each other, nothin about sinners or sins. I couldn’t believe my ears when Francine told me that, but I think she was tellin the truth ‘cause the Rev. never said a thing against it.

Bernadette an’ Flo did all the food for the wedding. Me an’ Chuck sat together, same table with Curt an’ the kids, Alma an’ Monroe an’ their younger boy, near full grown by now. They’d moved to Laramie after Alma’s ma died an’ the boys was goin a college there. Monroe an’ me had learned to look each other in the eye somehow, an’ the boy Jason was friendly, still doin a bit a rodeo an’ lots a stories to tell. The older boy was teachin English in Japan.

I gotta say, I felt almost comfortable, nothin like at Junior’s wedding when part a me didn’t even want a be there. Both my girls an’ Bernadette got me up dancin ‘cause I didn’t figure I could say no.

A few months later, in October 1998, a boy named Matthew Shepard got killed up in Laramie, an’ me an’ Chuck’s lives changed forever.

First came the news that a gay student at U-W had been beat up, tortured an’ left for dead. Me an’ Chuck seen it on CNN, an’ we was up half the night after that with me wakin up screamin, an’ Chuck right there, holdin me, no words needed.

I was on the phone most a the next day with my girls, Bridget, Andrew, Flo, Alfred the vet’s man from Cheyenne, just about everyone we knew. Tex rode over here too, just to see how I was doin. A couple a days later, Chuck called me from work to say he’d be late ‘cause he was goin to a vigil at Poudre Valley Hospital where the boy’d been taken in critical condition. I asked him what good
he thought that would do, an’ he said he just felt like he had to be there. When he came home that
night, we didn’t have much to say to each other.

The next day, Sunday, we seen on CNN that the boy had died. Chuck cried an’ I held onto him,
feelin like cryin myself but figurin what’s the use. Earl, Jack, now this. Things don’t never change.

A few days later, Chuck told me he’d be takin time off work an’ goin to Casper for the funeral. He
was teachin at Colorado state, not workin for Cooperative Extension no more, so it was a bigger
deal to take time off durin the semester. He said he’d be takin “personal time” which sounded like
a joke to me.

On the Wednesday, nobody at my table in the diner said a thing, but I heard Max Eimiller remarkin
that if some queer came up on him, he had it comin, whatever he got. Tex looked at me sharp, but
he didn’t need to ‘cause I wasn’t goin a say nothin.

Rev. Purdy, who hardly ever brought religion into the diner, said, “Whatever happened to ‘Thou
shalt not murder?’”

Max said, “Don’t apply here, ‘cause the Bible also says homosexuality is an abomination.” Some a
the guys laughed.

Rev. Purdy said, “You should read that chapter more closely. It would put almost every one of us
to death for one thing or another.”

I noticed that Jacob an’ Ralph was lookin straight at their coffee mugs, an’ I wondered since when
did they know about me, an’ how. Maybe Tex …

Anyway, Chuck drove up to Casper after work on Thursday. I watched the funeral Friday morning
on CNN. It was rainin, so most a the people outside was under umbrellas singin “Amazing Grace”
an’ other songs. There was anti-gay religious folks there with signs like “Fear God Not Fags” an’
“Remember Lot’s Wife.”

Next thing I knew, a reporter was interviewin Chuck, my Chuck, who said, “That isn’t what Jesus
would do. He didn’t condemn people. This whole thing is so upsetting.” An’ there was his name
on the screen with “Magpie Ridge, Colo.” under it. I saw Julie was standin next to him.

I yelled, “Jesus fuckin Christ!” to no one, cause I was alone in the house. My heart started poundin.
I took some deep breaths, turned off the TV an’ went to the bathroom to puke up my breakfast.

Junior called to ask if I’d seen it, an’ I told her how mad I was. She said at least Chuck didn’t say
he was gay himself. Like that would make any fuckin difference.

Soon as I hung up, the phone rang again, just heavy breathin’ on the other end a the line. That
scared the shit outta me ‘cause the phone is in my name, not Chuck’s, so that one was meant for
me.

I knew Chuck’d be headin back to Laramie at some point ‘cause he was stayin with Julie. I loaded
the .38 in my glove compartment an’ headed out to the feed store for my day’s errands.

I stood at the counter for 10 minutes, watchin Ralph Winkleman’s son an’ another guy serve four
other customers, ringin up sales an’ helpin folks find things. When it was just me an’ the son across
the counter from each other, I cleared my throat ‘cause he was tryin a look busy with some papers.
He looked up an’ said in a sissy sing-song voice, “How may I help you?”

I wanted a smack him across the face, but I just said, “You can tell your father that if he don’t want
my business, I’ll take it somewhere else,” an’ walked out.

At my truck, I felt like pukin again, but there was nothin left. I drove to the feed store in Longmont, an’ as I was loadin my pickup, I noticed a party store across the street, so I went in an’ bought a bottle a Canadian Club.

When I got home, I seen there were messages, so I unplugged the answering machine without listenin to them. I took the phone off the hook ‘cause there was no one I wanted a talk to.

I poured myself a glass a whiskey an’ took a long swallow. This was the good stuff. It rolled smooth and smoky over my tongue an’ down my throat, an’ I had a moment’s flash a drinkin with Jack the last night we spent together, him sayin that sometimes he missed me so much he could hardly stand it, an’ me havin no words to tell him it was the same with me.

I don’t know where that came from, except it got me thinkin about Jack, wonderin if he’d be out there rabble-rousin for gay rights after I told him I didn’t want him to. It wasn’t the first time I’d wondered what would a been different with Jack.

I ended up pourin glass after glass a whiskey, buildin up my anger at Chuck for basically ruinin the life we had here together.

Around 6, Tex came knockin on the door sayin he tried a call a few times, got no answer.

I said, “Well I’m here, ain’t I?” I didn’t want a let him in, but he asked so I opened the door.

He said, “You’re drunk.” He saw the bottle on the counter an’ got himself a glass. He took a beer from the fridge, drank down his whiskey an’ then guzzled down the beer sayin he needed a catch up to me. Then repeated the whole thing, not sayin a word.

I laughed ‘til my mouth hurt, ‘cause I’d never before seen the boy still livin inside a Tex, even with the hard life he’d lived an’ now married with two kids an’ his own ranch. He’d been nothin but responsible an’ upstandin since the day I met him. Must a been the first time I’d laughed in a week or more. It must a been contagious ‘cause he started laughin too.

I said I might as well laugh ‘cause I probly wouldn’t be around much longer, an’ he asked why, an’ I told him about Chuck on TV. Tex said Regent had told him.

“Tell me,” I said. “What do the guys at the diner know?”

He said Jacob had asked him a few years ago what the deal was with me an’ Chuck, an’ he’d told him. Tex figured Jacob was all right, considerin things he’d said about religion an’ politics, an’ if he had a problem he’d just stop hangin around with me rather’n makin trouble. Tex didn’t know who else knew or suspected, an’ he said if anyone wanted a come after us, they’d have to deal with him first.

“An’ we all know the damage you can do,” I said, “but I’d rather you stay outta prison.” It was still a sore spot with him, but it set us off laughin anyways.

We ended up havin a lot more laughs an’ gettin totally shitface. Tex had to call Bernadette sayin where he was an’ she made me coffee an’ gave me a piece a apple pie.

Next day, Sunday, I left the answering machine off, packed a lunch an’ took Nate’s gelding Blackhawk out to check our farthest fencelines. Then I rode over to Regent an’ Francine’s, but they weren’t home, so I went to Tex an’ Bernadette’s an’ she made me coffee an’ gave me a piece a apple pie.
When I got back to our ranch, I seen Chuck’s truck was there. I took my time unsaddlin an’ curryin Blackhawk, still not knowin what I was goin a say.

He was sittin at the kitchen table readin the Rocky Mountain News, garbage from McDonald’s strewn around him. He looked up. I stood in the doorway but didn’t walk in. He went to get up, then sat back down. I saw all kinds a things pass across his face at once, an’ then he said, “Ennis, it’s freezing out there. Can you please shut the door?”

I did, but I stayed there leanin on the closed door.

“What did you unplug the phone?” he asked.

“I guess I didn’t want a talk to no one.”

“Where were you all afternoon?”

“Runnin our ranch.”

He stood up an’ walked toward me, held his arms out when he got closer. I didn’t budge.

He said, “Listen, Ennis, I’m sorry. But it’s not like I told CNN I’m gay and live with a guy.”

“You don’t think people put two an’ two together?” I said. “You’re goin a get us run outta town, an’ get yourself fired or killed, an’ for what?”

“No one’s going to run us out of town.”

“Oh no?” I told him about the feed store.

“So you go all the way to Longmont to buy feed, big deal,” he said. “Anyway, I can’t get fired for this. And I’ll tell you what, I’m not done. I’m going to join Andrew and Dave’s AIDS committee, and help start a center for gay youth in Fort Collins, and go to the gay rodeo and march in the pride parade.”

“You fuckin asshole,” I said. “Throw away everything we worked 10 years for so you can be the gay Jesus Christ an’ get yourself crucified. Fuck you.”

I grabbed my keys an’ stomped out, got in my truck an’ drove to Andrew an’ Dave’s house, same one they was in when Chuck an’ me used a stay with ‘em when we came to Denver.

Andrew heated up leftover spaghetti for me, an’ they kept askin me what was goin on, but I said nothin, I just needed a place to stay that night. I was seriously thinkin about never steppin foot back on me an’ Chuck’s ranch.

The boys was on their way out to see “Rush Hour,” so I tagged along. The movie got me laughin, provin I still could laugh even without no whiskey.

When we got back to their house, Andrew gave me a toothbrush an’ I went to bed, but I couldn’t sleep. My thoughts moved away from the ranch an’ our neighbors, to my grandkid Nate, only 10 but already knowin how he was made. I love those three kids so much, sometimes it feels like I love ‘em even more than my own daughters when they was little an’ I was hardly ever around an’ not right in the head anyways.

I got to thinkin I’d be god damned if I’d stand around an’ wait for some motherfucker to come after little Nate. But shit, that’s what I’d be doin if I backed down from this fight Chuck was on, if I let
assholes like Ralph Winkleman’s son grab a hold of my grandkid an’ tie him up to some damn fencepost.

An’ why was it that movin to some big city seemed to be the only way for gay folks to live their lives like in peace? I’d been to San Francisco by then, an’ the best I could say for it was, it wasn’t New York. I thought, fuck this. We gotta be able to live right here where we want a live.

I got outta bed, got back into my boots an’ jeans an’ shirt, went downstairs, left a note on the kitchen table, an’ drove back to the ranch. It was near 3 a.m., so I tried a let myself in real quiet, went up an’ went to bed in the room where Tex had stayed last night.

Next thing I knew, I was hearin Chuck’s footsteps come down the hall an’ into the room. He said, “Come to bed, Ennis.”

I got up an’ walked with him back to our room. I put my hand on his shoulder to turn him around facin me, an’ I said, “Chuck, I was wrong.”

“About what?” he asked.

“About this whole gay rights thing a yours. You go ahead an’ do whatever you need to do. I might not always be out there fightin the fight with you, but I’ll be behind you all the way. I’ll be right here fightin for what we got. This ranch. This house. You an’ me.”

“Ennis …” he said, barely a whisper.

“No, you listen to me. If it ain’t worth fightin for, it ain’t worth havin. We’re goin a stand our ground.”

“What made you change your mind?” he asked.

“Nathan,” I said. “I want that boy growin up in a world a lot better than the one we did.”

He put his arms around me an’ we hugged a long time, an’ I then I felt his body start to shake like he was cryin. I stroked his hair over an’ over, held him up when it seemed like he was goin a lose his balance.

“C’mon over here,” I said. We both sat on the bed. I reached over an’ got him the box of Kleenex.

I walked around the other side an’ got under the covers, pulled him down next to me.

We was both lyin on our sides facin each other, an’ he was lookin at me. I thought about what I had to say, an’ I finally found the words.

“Somethin else I was wrong about,” I said. “I do love you. I don’t know why I never told you before. You could a got yourself killed an’ never known it.” In a way it hurt to say what I’d never been able to tell Jack, but there was no use holdin words back from Chuck when I needed a say them.

“Oh, I knew,” he said. “I’ve known for a long time. But thanks anyway, for saying it.”

We made love that night like we’d hardly ever done, feelin everything so deep it almost hurt, an’ knowin we’d have a lot more nights like this, as many as we could imagine.

On Monday, Chuck had his tires slashed in the parking lot at Colorado State. He got the car towed to a tire shop, an’ I went to pick him up an’ took him out for supper at a steak house in Fort Collins,
somethin we hardly ever did except on some special day like when he got his master’s degree or some promotion at work.

On the Wednesday morning, Tex came an’ picked me up an’ we walked into the diner together. Everyone who’d been talkin shut right up. We went to our usual table, the usual guys already there along with Mark Ferguson an’ Regent, who hardly ever stopped by. Sarah the waitress put a coffee down in front a me.

Some guy sittin at the counter who I’d seen often enough but didn’t know the name of said, “Well, I guess they’ll serve anyone here,” an’ got up. The table next to us, Max Eimiller an’ some other guys I’d seen before, got up too an’ walked out.

One a them knocked my hat off as he was passin’. I just picked it up an’ put it back on, feelin my face burnin. Rev. Purdy said real quiet, “That’s right, turn the other cheek. You’re going to be fine, Ennis.”

Sarah said, “Hah! The assholes didn’t even pay for their coffee,” an’ Ferguson pulled out a $20 bill an’ handed it to her, wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Ralph Winkleman’s son got up from the counter where he was sittin, walked over an’ said in a normal voice, “Mr. Del Mar, we do value your business an’ we hope you’ll be back.” Even though he was lookin at his dad when he said it, I said, “I guess I’ll be back then.”

Later that day, Andrew called an’ said he was doin an investigative piece on unsolved murders a gay men in rural areas, an’ hadn’t I said I knew of some cases? I told him about Earl, gave him Bridget’s number ‘cause Peter knew more about it than I did.

Then Andrew said, “Didn’t you know someone else in the ‘70s or ‘80s?” I told him I’d have to call him back. As far as I knew, Lureen had never considered the idea that Jack might’ve been murdered. The only other person who might know was the ranch neighbor Malone, but Lureen had told me a few years ago that he’d died of AIDS alone in some hospital in Dallas. Not a fate I’d wish on anyone, even him.

Turned out Lureen had changed her tune ‘cause of a few things she’d heard over the years, an’ the thought that she really owed it to Jack to find out more. So I gave Andrew her number too.

More shit happened, some folks in Magpie Ridge crossin the street when they seen me, guys pretend-coughin an’ sayin “faggot,” stupid phone calls. I bought myself a calf holster an’ a little .38, an’ wore it whenever I went to town.

Andrew’s story got published with five different unsolved cases in Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho an’ Nebraska. He hadn’t got enough to go on from Lureen or the Childress County sheriff. But he had talked to Peter an’ somehow found Rich’s niece, got more stories about Rich an’ Earl. I didn’t cry when I read it, but Bridget did, an’ when she called me to talk about it, I shed a few quiet tears myself, to tell the truth.

Me an’ Chuck’s life went on, about as good as it could be, I thought. I let Chuck talk me into comin onto the mortgage with him, takin out insurance policies on each other, even goin to the gay rodeo. I won all the ropin events the first year, saw it was too easy, an’ ended up helpin out in the chutes.

Francine, who’d always said she didn’t want a be no ranch wife, settled in with Regent just fine ‘cause she got to have her own life too. She got a job teachin music in Longmont, had two kids – a boy named Lucas an’ a girl named Lynette – an’ kept on workin. The kids are 5 an’ 4 now, an’ I
could swear they’re even cuter an’ smarter than Junior’s kids at that age, though I’d never say it. Bernadette watches ‘em when Francine’s at work.

I’d go see Jack’s ma every couple a years, her happy with Bobby nearby an’ his wife an’ two boys, older a which he named after Jack. I’d call Jack’s ma an’ Lureen every July 28 an’ exchange a few words about Jack. The missin him changed over the years, but never went away.

Karl Stoutamire lived another 16 years after he retired, a quiet life in New Mexico. After he died, Jannelle moved to Loveland with a friend a hers from school, also a widow, got her real estate license an’ started a whole new career at age 60 or so. Dave made her real happy when him an’ Andrew adopted two little girls left behind by their ma who died of AIDS.

Bridget an’ me had lost touch with K.E. sometime around 1993 when he left his wife Patti for the last time. She called Bridget just last year to let her know he’d died in a car wreck in North Dakota an’ was already buried up there. Me an’ Bridget drove to Fargo, found the grave an’ laid flowers on it, then drove back through Montana an’ met Patti for the first time. She told us she’d only found out about K.E.’s death ‘cause he’d listed their oldest boy as next a kin.

It made me sad, thinkin about my nephew I’d never known who hadn’t seen his own daddy in 10 years an’ then findin out he was dead. I kept thinkin, there but the grace a god, ‘cause there were times in my life I could a died alone an’ no one would a missed me.

Bridget got to tellin me some good memories she had a K.E., an’ even though I didn’t really have any a my own, I didn’t argue. I could see that havin your parents drop dead when you’re 15 wasn’t so much worse than me bein only 12 at the time.

On the way back, we visited Jack’s ma, now in her 80s an’ holdin on pretty good. We drove over to Bobby’s house for supper with his wife an’ kids. Bobby had found out about me an’ Chuck some years before that when James or Regent had let somethin slip, an’ he’d asked his ma, who went ahead an’ told him about Jack an’ me too. Bobby never mentioned a word about it to me, always looked me in the eye an’ shook my hand like a man, though I’m always bracin for it.

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Saturday April 30, 2005

I wake up at 2 a.m. to sounds a someone clumpin around downstairs. I figure it’s Nathan finally comin home from the movie he went to with a guy from school, but then I hear there’s someone else with him.

I go downstairs to find Nate gettin ice from the freezer, the other boy lookin like he’d been beat up, sittin with his leg up on a chair, face like he’s in a lot a pain. Nate turns around an’ I see he’s lookin bad too, not just because he must a taken a few punches, but he’s wearin makeup that’s smearin down his face, even lipstick. He’s dressed in a pink lace T-shirt too short to tuck into his jeans, an’ black leather pants. He sure hadn’t left the house looking like that.

I look back to the other boy, walk over an’ pull up his pantleg to see the damage. The ankle is way swelled up an’ it ain’t sittin right.

“That’s plum broke,” I say. “We need to take him to the hospital.”

By now Chuck is in the kitchen too, an’ he says, “Why don’t I take him, and you help Nate get cleaned up? We’ll meet you there.”

We try to get the boy’s name so we can call his parents, but he won’t give it, so Chuck drives his
truck around to the kitchen door, an’ I help the boy into the truck. When I go back in, Nate’s in the bathroom washin his face.

“Grandpa, I can explain everything,” he says.

“In the truck,” I say. “Meantime, let me help you with that, an’ get you changed outta them clothes.”

So as we’re drivin to Fort Collins, he explains that him an’ the boy, name Anthony, went to Foley’s department store in Denver an’ had a girl in the cosmetics department give Nate a “makeover,” an’ then they bought the pink T-shirt an’ leather pants. They went an’ saw some horror movie, bought a bottle a tequila an’ went walkin in what they thought was the gay neighborhood in Denver. A group a guys came on them an’ started mouthin off an’ then beatin on ‘em. As they was runnin back to the truck, Anthony lost his footin. He walked back to the truck OK, but by the time Nate went to drop him off at his house, he couldn’t put no weight on his foot, so Nate brought him back to our place.

I hadn’t said a word, but now I say, “You know boy, there’s about a dozen different things goin wrong in that story, startin with the drinkin an’ drivin.”

“I know Grandpa. I’m sorry.”

“What about the makeup, was that your idea?”

He hesitats, then says. “Yeah Grandpa. I’ve tried on Emily’s an’ Ma’s makeup a few times.”

“You want a be a woman?” I ask. Chuck knows a few guys who dress an’ act like women, even a few who’d gone as far as surgery. I figure they know what they want for themselves, an’ it ain’t nobody else’s business.

“No, I like being a guy,” he says. “I just wanted to try it out.”

“That’s OK,” I say, “but you gotta be a lot more careful than you was tonight. You coulda gotten yourself killed.”

He says, “I know, I’m sorry.”

Nate’s a smart boy, got a scholarship to go to University of San Francisco an’ study nursing like his ma. Smart to get the fuck away from here if he wants to dress like he did tonight.

We drive the rest a the way quiet. I’m thinkin about how good Chuck looks to this day when he puts on eyeliner, with his dark hair an' grey eyes, an' how I might ask him to do that for me tomorrow night.
You wouldn’t call my Grandpa a sentimental guy, not by a long shot. So whenever I get a hint of that, I listen up.

Like today. He was over at our new house – a split level – helping me put in railings on the half-flights of stairs, because I can’t really do stairs without a railing, nor could I install one by myself. Then we came back here to the condo, and Lina wanted to go shopping and leave me and Grandpa with the baby and our 3-year old.

Jeremy was jumping around saying, “Grandpa! Horsie! Grandpa! Horsie!”

Grandpa squatted down, groaned because of his ankle, mussed up Jeremy’s hair and said, “Not today, Buckaroo.”

“How about we go to the park?” I asked Jeremy, and that got him off the horse thing. “Park! Park!”

“Gemma needs a nap,” Lina said. “And she’s got a cold, so I don’t want her out there napping in the stroller.”

“Give her here,” Grandpa said. Lina handed her over, and he took her to our room where the basinet is squished in with the changing table and rocking chair. Thank God we’ll be moving to the new house next weekend.

After I got Jeremy ready, I headed back to the bedroom to get myself a warmer jacket. Just before barging in, I stopped in my tracks. I could hear Grandpa singing in his low, gruff voice to little Gemma, “Hush little baby, don’t say a word, Grandpa’s goin a buy you a mockin bird.”

And I had to catch my breath because I literally felt like my heart was going to explode. This is my Grandpa, Ennis Del Mar, the tough old cowboy. One of the few people in my life who never asked, “Are you sure you can do it?” or “Do you need a hand?” or the imbecilic follow-up, “Are you sure?” He rode me hard, waited for me to say uncle or ask for help. My ma spoiled me and my dad would try to challenge me, but mostly he’d cave to my ma, who did mean well. Only Grandpa would say, “You think you’ll have someone else muckin out your horse’s stall for the rest a your life? You think you’re goin horse-packin an’ relyin on someone else to shoot the bear?” So he taught me how to shovel shit and shoot a gun, and way more than anyone else thought I could do, along with patience and perseverance.

Grandpa never gave advice unless I asked. When I did ask what he thought about me proposing to Lina, he asked, “Does she love you?” I said, “She says she does. I just don’t think I’m good enough for her.” And he came back with, “If you was that stupid, you’d be right.” Rough and convoluted, but he got his point across. The night I was going to propose, she asked me first, and I pulled the ring out of my pocket and we had a good laugh.

So here I am, a high school physics teacher and Scoutmaster, married to a pediatrician – a beauty – and we’ve got two kids, and we’re about to move into our dream house – not a new build, but perfect for us.
I waited and listened to his singing for a few minutes, until Jeremy yelled, “Daddy! Time to go!”

Then I stepped in gingerly, and of course, the song stopped. But Grandpa kept on rocking the baby, even though she was already asleep.

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The last time I had seen that soft side was a few months earlier, on his 70th birthday, when he was stuck in the hospital with pneumonia.

When I walked into his room that morning, I was surprised to see the side chair empty.

“I sent him home this morning,” Grandpa said. “Had to whoop his ass, but he finally left.” “Him” is Chuck, or the Professor as we call him, Grandpa’s partner in business and in life.

I laughed, from relief more than anything. Grandpa was still hooked up to an IV with breathing tubes up his nose, but he wasn’t looking as gray as he had the day before and he had obviously regained his spirit. The antibiotics must have kicked in.

On New Year’s Eve, Grandpa got bucked from the wild mustang he’s training, and the Professor took him to Emergency with what turned out to be a sprained ankle. They made him stay overnight because of the possibility of concussion, much as he fought against it.

I guess he got bacterial pneumonia from the hospital visit. A few days into the new year, the Professor called my ma and said Grandpa didn’t have enough breath to make it up a flight of stairs. She insisted Grandpa get on the phone, heard how he was gasping for air, and got out of him that he felt like he had a spear running though him. She insisted he get the Professor to take him to Emergency, and she called back 10 minutes later to make sure they’d gone.

I wasn’t allowed to see him until last night when they were sure it wasn’t viral pneumonia, because I have CP and I’m extra susceptible to viruses.

I told him Emily would be here after her morning class, and Nate would come when he finished his shift.

“What the hell, boy,” Grandpa said. “You tell ‘em to stay right where they are. I ain’t ready to ride off into no sunset just yet.”

Yep, I’m 28 and he still calls me boy. Anyone younger than him is a boy – ranch hands, my uncles, Tex, his friends Dave and Andrew.

“Well, they’ll want to see you anyway,” I said. The doctors had said it was pretty serious, and my ma and Lina hadn’t disagreed, although that was before the improvements this morning.

“I ever tell you about the time I was fixin to die?” he asked out of the blue. Must be the codeine or some other drug. Of course he hadn’t told me. He’d never say anything about himself unless you pried it out with a crowbar.

“No …”

“It was the year I was turnin’ 40,” he said. “Back in Wyoming. I was drinkin myself to death. Your mama never told you about that?”

“No,” I said, making the quick calculation that he and my grandma must have been about 10 years split by then, not with Chuck yet. My ma had mentioned she and Aunt Frannie worried about him
a lot after the divorce, but I wasn’t going to let on. As much as he hated talking about himself, he hated being talked about even more. I didn’t want him to stop talking.

“Anyways, I didn’t kill myself, even though I thought my life was over,” he said.

I waited, and he went on. “For me, these last 30 years, they’ve been gravy. Chuck. The ranch. You and your brother and sister and cousins, and now little Jeremy an’ another one on the way. I’m a fuckin great-grandfather. All gravy. No one owed me nothin, an’ I never done nothin to deserve it. I’ve had a pretty damn good life, but I ain’t ready to let go just yet. Christ, who’d take care a the Professor?”

Thank god for the breathing tubes, he had enough breath to finish the thought. I waited for more, but he was done.

I asked, “Why did you want to die?”

“Didn’t think I had no reason to go on livin,” he said, as if it was obvious.

“So, what made you go on?”

“An angel,” he said. “An’ I don’t even believe in that religious shit. An angel walked right into this ratty little trailer where I was livin, told me …”

Then nothing. He was staring out the window at the cloudless blue sky. I really wanted to hear this story, but didn’t know how to proceed without shutting him down, so I tried to wait patiently.

But I shifted in my chair, and that was enough to snap him out of his reverie, and he looked back at me and said, “You go get somethin to eat. I gotta rest up some before your sister gets here.”

I could hardly believe he was admitting he needed rest, even in a hospital bed with tubes sticking out. “You’re not going to tell me about the angel?” I asked.

“Not today.” He shot me a wistful smile, the hint of an upturn on the left side of his mouth.

I was on my third coffee in the cafeteria when Emily texted me that she was here. By the time we got to his room, the breathing tubes were already out and my ma was there. A doctor had come by and told them he would be discharged tomorrow.

“So you come here for nothin,” Grandpa told Emily in his grousing voice, but with a twinkle in his eye as she kissed his cheek.

“I bet you faked the whole thing to get out of the big 70th birthday bash I was planning,” Emily teased. “I’m still going to bake you a cake.”

“You do that,” he said with a little smirk. “So I guess I’m goin a have to go to your goddamn brother’s wedding after all.”

“Grandpa!” Emily shot back. “Of course you’re going!” Nate had announced the happy news over the holidays, and I could tell Grandpa was just as happy about it as the rest of us.

Then a nurse came into the room and shooed us out, and I never heard anything more about the angel.

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When Jeremy and I got back from the park an hour later, I found Grandpa still rocking Gemma in
his arms. He laid her down gently in the basinet and came into the kitchen with me, and I got us two bottles of Bud from the fridge.

I mentioned that he wasn’t limping anymore, and he said only when it’s rainy or damp out. That’s the worst time for me, too.

I took out my laptop and we settled on dates and times for the trip to Des Moines for Nate’s wedding, still two months away. He complained about the price of the flights and hotel rooms and having to close down the ranch for a week, and tried to argue one more time that they could drive – “only 10 hours for Christsake” – and stay somewhere cheaper, not at the Embassy Suites with everyone else.

“Still don’t see the point a getting married somewhere else when it don’t count here,” he grumbled.

The truth is, he always complains about going to weddings, always tries to make excuses, but he always goes anyway. And I knew this was one wedding he would not miss.

Lina came back a while later and invited him to stay for dinner, but he said no, he had to get back to the ranch because he still had a few late heifers that hadn’t dropped their calves, and he had to spell my cousin Lucas who was working that day.

After Grandpa left, I told Lina about hearing him sing the lullaby. She looked at me as if I was a space alien.

“You never heard him sing lullabies to Jeremy?” she asked. “I bet he sang them to you when you were a baby.”

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PART II - Nathan P.O.V.

Sunday, July 8, 2014

“I thought you said you wasn’t goin a cry.” My grandpa is teasing me because that’s what I’d said, but by the time Alex and I were exchanging vows, I was a hot mess of smeared eyeliner.

“You looked like Alice Cooper or somethin,” Grandpa says.

“Who?” I’m teasing him now.

“Way before their time, old man,” Chuck tells him.

“No, I know who Alice Cooper is,” I say.

“You’re old, you old sonofabitch,” Grandpa tells Chuck, who cups his hand around his bad ear and says, “Eh?” Grandpa hits him on the arm.

We’re at breakfast at the Embassy Suites in Des Moines – Grandpa, Chuck, Alex and me. Everyone else is staying here too, but we were the first ones up. Alex and me have a flight to catch, to Vancouver for our honeymoon. Grandpa is always up by dawn.

“Your pardner here told me he’d get you up dancing last night, Dr. Del Mar,” Alex says. That’s their little joke. Alex is a cop like my daddy was. I met him when he came into the emergency room with a mother and new baby he had just delivered. Grandpa had delivered Aunt Frannie on a ranch in Wyoming many years ago.
“Well, Dr. Williams, you ever notice that my pardner is a fool an’ a liar?” Grandpa asks. But when he looks over at the Professor, I can see the twinkle in his eye. “You’ll surely go to hell for that one, Charlie.”

“Well, Dr. Williams, you ever notice that my pardner is a fool an’ a liar?” Grandpa asks. But when he looks over at the Professor, I can see the twinkle in his eye. “You’ll surely go to hell for that one, Charlie.”

“No soon, I hope,” Chuck says with a wink.

They’re jovial together, like Robert Redford and Morgan Freeman in “An Unfinished Life,” only they really are gay. I look over at Alex, point to them. “That’s us someday.”

Alex nods. “I hope so.”

Of course I cried at my wedding. I’m a crier. But the weirdest thing was seeing tears in my Grandpa’s eyes, I swear to God, after we said our vows. He even took off his glasses and put a bandana handkerchief to his eyes.

Everyone in my family came to the wedding – aunts, uncles, cousins, my Grandma Ellen and Grandpa Gill, even Grandma Alma and her husband Monroe, who had to pull along an oxygen tank. Alex wasn’t so lucky. His parents had their own stuff to work out, but they ended up coming and wishing us well. None of his grandparents though, and only one aunt, his mother’s sister.

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PART III – Ennis P.O.V.

Nov. 28, 2014

“Why are you all dressed up?” Chuck asks. “You should have worn that to dinner yesterday.” I’m puttin on my best shirt, a white Western shirt with pearl buttons he got me for Christmas last year.

“What, this?” I say. “I didn’t look so bad at dinner did I?”

“Of course not,” he says. He always dresses nice – black jeans, tailored shirts, leather jacket, new boots. An’ he wears it well, like they say, even at 72. Of course I hardly ever mention that to him, don’t want a give him a swelled head.

We stayed over after Thanksgiving dinner at Julie’s last night. Her husband Gary an’ two kids an’ three grandkids were here with their dates an’ spouses. Now I’m goin into town an’ Chuck’s goin Black Friday shoppin with Julie, buyin stuff for the grandkids.

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“C’mon, slowpoke, pedal to the metal,” I say. It’s almost 2 an’ I told him we gotta be in Longmont by 4 so I can get a replacement driver’s license at the DMV before they close. It’s all a ruse. I made a big fuss a few days ago about losin my drivers license, not a bit true. It never left my wallet.

The weather in Laramie was nice enough, but as soon as we pass the state line into Colorado, it gets colder an’ damp too. By the time we get to the County Clerk’s office in Longmont, there’s freezin rain an’ my ankle is killin me.

I cain’t tell if Chuck knows there’s something up.

“Can you come around here an’ help me out?” I ask as I start to climb out of the truck. “The ground looks real slick an’ the ankle is actin up an’ I didn’t bring the fuckin cane.”

He gets outta the truck an’ walks around to my side an’ offers me his arm, eyes buggin outta his
head. This is the first time since I re-sprained my ankle last summer that I asked for help out in public, not that there’s a lot a people around. Nate an’ Alex musta parked a few blocks away.

We walk into the clerk’s office, an’ there they are waitin for us. When Chuck sees ‘em, he turns to me an’ says, “Ennis, you crazy son of a bitch!” An’ he kisses my cheek, right there, in front a three strangers in the waitin area. Lucky they’re too busy lookin at their phones to notice.

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An’ then we’re married. Married. After steppin away from the clerk’s window, I pull the rings outta my pocket, put Chuck’s on his left hand an’ let him put mine on me. He leans in an’ kisses me again, this time on the lips. There’s only two people left in the waitin area, an’ they cheer. He bows to them. I wish I could disappear.

“I didn’t know you had rings,” Nate says as we’re walkin out.

“Had ‘em for a long time,” I say. First time we ever wore ‘em outside our own house.

Chuck had been proposin to me for years, to the point it was a joke. First time, at the Calgary Stampede in 2006, he actually got on one knee an’ took out the rings. I said thanks but no, one marriage was enough for me. Then it was “Let’s go to Massachusetts,” or New York or California or wherever.

I’d sign any paperwork he’d push at me, so we could visit each other in the hospital an’ have power of attorney an’ all that. We even got a “Civil Union” last year, no fuss, because it didn’t mean a thing to me.

When Nate an’ Alex got married in Iowa a few months ago, Chuck tried a convince me that we should too. I said again, what’s the point, it ain’t even legal.

What got me to change my mind was something Flo said to me just a month ago, right after Lisa dropped dead of a heart attack, about not putting things off, not thinking you have forever. That’s a lesson I’ve learned myself more’n once. So today, this was the real thing.

As we’re leavin the clerk’s office, Chuck says, “What about your drivers license?”

“You didn’t believe that one, did you?”

He says, “I really did. You pulled off quite a surprise here.”

By the time we get back in the truck, he’s sniffin an’ wipin his eyes.

“Bout time I made an honest man a you, ain’t it?” I say. That only gets him goin worse.

We drive over to the Moose’s Hide an’ meet back up with Nate an’ Alex for a drink. Chuck is tellin them again the story a how we met, how we ran into each other at Junior’s wedding, how he woo’ed me (as he claims it, not me), the big fight at Thanksgiving, the rings he’d got the measurement for the first night we fucked (leavin out that detail, thank god), everything he can think of, embarassin the shit outta me.

After a glass a Champagne an’ a double shot a whiskey for my ankle, he says, “So, Ennis, where are we going for our honeymoon?”

“Now you’re just gettin greedy,” I say. “I’m goin out past Greeley tomorrow to look at some horses. Then we got supper at Dr. Timonen’s on Sunday, an’ I told Regent I’d help him out at the
auctions next week.” Dr. Timonen an’ Alfred bought a piece a land near Loveland when they retired, built themselves a real showplace.

“OK,” Chuck says, not hidin his disappointment very well. “Can we at least go out for supper tonight? You boys wanna join us?”

Nate says, “We’ve got Alex’s parents, sorry.”

I say, “An’ we got a cooler full a leftovers in the truck, an’ the weather’s really shitty. I just want a get home.” I’m gettin a kick outta this in a sadistic kind a way.

Back in the truck, Chuck says, “Can we at least consummate our marriage after supper?”

“I guess,” I say, tryin not to sound too enthusiastic. But I reach out an’ rub his arm.

“Good, I’ll take a pill as soon as we get home.” He’s got the little blue pill to help get things goin, an’ I gotta say, it really works. He got to where he could get it up, but it wouldn’t stay up, an’ he’d get all flustered. People can joke all they want, but the pill fixes all that.

“Anyway, thank you for marrying me,” he says. “Even if you don’t want to celebrate.”

“Well you know me, I still ain’t no party animal,” I say. “Husband.” An’ we both burst out laughin.

Then we’re turnin onto Royce Canyon Road, an’ drivin up our long driveway. After the curve, he sees it. The lodge all lit up an’ there must be 25 or 30 cars an’ pickup trucks parked in front an’ along the fence on the other side.

“What the hell? Ennis?”

“Looks like we’re goin a celebrate after all,” I say, “ye of little faith.”

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When we walk in, everything is set up, thanks to our womenfolk who got this thing together while the two of us were in Laramie. They done it up just like I asked ‘em to – nothin white or lacy, no flowers. They wanted a do some kinda cowboy theme, so it’s red, white an’ blue streamers an’ balloons, blue an’ red bandana tablecloths. Well, there are a few flowers in mason jars on the tables.

People are standin around talkin an’ a few are sittin at the tables an’ the couches, but as soon as Chuck an’ me walk in, Francine yells out, “Here they are!” an’ there’s a big cheer. Junior an’ Julie run over an’ pretty soon everybody’s all around us shakin our hands an’ huggin us. I hadn’t pictured all this commotion.

All my grandkids an’ my two great-grandkids are here, Julie an’ her family, Bridget an’ Marty an’ his family, K.E.’s older boy who lives in Cheyenne now, Chuck’s sister Barb an’ her husband, Martha (Joe the cop had died a year after he retired), Tex an’ Bernadette an’ their kids an’ grandkid, of course Flo who’s been stayin with Francine an’ Regent since Lisa died, Andrew an’ Dave an’ Jannelle, Kerby an’ Lara, Dr. Timonen an’ Alfred, Jacob Deauville’s widow from across the road, my old boss Mark Ferguson an’ his wife, Rev. Purdy (who’d volunteered to do the service at his church) an’ his wife, Ralph Winkleman from the feed store an’ his wife, Sarah the waitress from the diner an’ her husband, some a Chuck’s old colleagues from Colorado State, people from the gay youth center where he volunteers, neighbors on the Royce Valley Clean Water Task Force with me an’ Emily.
After a while, Emily whistles an’ says loud enough for everyone to hear, “Time to find a seat, folks.” About time, my ankle is killin me from standin on it so long. I hook my arm around Chuck’s so he can help me to the table. Most a the folks here, that’s the first time they ever seen either of us lay a hand on the other, I’m sure of it.

I’d told Junior I didn’t want no seatin arrangements, just let people sit where they want, but she’s got me an’ Chuck at a kind a head table along with herself, Francine, Julie, Emily, Nathan an’ Alex.

Now Emily’s at a podium with a microphone. “Everyone, pour yourselves a glass of Champagne or sparkling grape juice for the kids.”

Chuck pours Champagne into our glasses.

“Now, please raise a glass and join me in congratulating my Grandpa and Chuck on their wedding today.”

Chuck an’ me clink along with everyone else. Then folks start tappin their spoons on their glasses, which even I know means the wedding couple is supposed a kiss. That just ain’t right. No one wants to see two 70-something men kiss. I turn to Junior an’ say as low as I can, “Honey, cain’t you make this stop?”

She says, “No, but you can.”

Then Chuck’s hand is on the back of my neck, turnin me toward him. He grabs my face in both hands an’ plants a kiss right on the lips. Folks cheer.

Emily says into the microphone, “Now we’ll have toasts to the happy couple. First, my brother E.J.”

The boy lopes over with little Jeremy holdin his hand. He keeps it short an’ sweet, tells the story a when he asked me if he should propose to Lina. Next is Nathan, who – what a surprise – cain’t hold it together. He tells a few jokes about when he lived with us, some a the antics he got up to, an’ then he breaks down in tears, an’ everyone claps for him.

Julie gets up an’ talks about the time her daddy was chasin after me, how her an’ Junior guessed what was goin on an’ how she told Chuck I was at the Buckhorn Bar the one night. I can still remember it, me wonderin what the hell he was doin’ way out there, an’ noticin how good he looked standin by his truck in the moonlight, how much like Jack.

Chuck whispers in my ear, “You could have had me that night right there in your truck, you know that?” I shush him. He’s always sayin things like that at the worst times. One a these days he’s goin a get caught.

Kerby Crick tells about the first time he met me at the Western Stock Show, how nervous Chuck was an’ for no reason ’cause I was just the way Chuck had described me. “The two of them totally changed my image of what a gay couple looks like,” Kerby says. People clap an’ hoot at that.

Francine tells some stories about us visitin her in New York the few times we did, where of course I’m the punchline of all the jokes.

Then Chuck himself goes up there, an’ I don’t know what in the hell he’s goin a say.

He starts out, “Ennis has been making me happy for 30 years. Today, he made me even happier, if that’s possible.” Everyone cheers an’ someone starts tappin their damn spoon on a glass, but Chuck
just goes on, talkin about how surprised he was today, makin a few jokes, thankin everyone for comin an’ supportin us, puttin in a plug for the gay youth center people are supposed a donate to instead a givin us gifts.

He’s a good talker, always has been, an’ he’s a performer too. He talks about how we first met on his uncle’s ranch, how we both got married, says we done our wives wrong but good thing each of ‘em found happiness with someone else, and we ended up with the best daughters in the world. Then he gets to meetin up with me at Junior’s wedding, thinkin I was the cowboy a his dreams. I wonder if he’s tryin a kill me. An’ I’m noticin he’s leavin Jack out, just as well, but it makes me a little sad on this happy day.

Next, he mentions all the folks who were important in our lives who couldn’t be with us today because they’d already died.

“Starting with Ennis’s brother K.E., his sister Bridget’s husband Peter, my sister Martha’s husband Joe, Junior’s first husband Curt, Ennis’s friend Jack Twist and Jack’s ma Roberta, Ennis’s old boss Karl Stoutamire, our friends Lisa La Rocque, Camellia Rose, Jacob Deauville, my old bandmate Lawrence Stattler, all those who got taken down by AIDS …”

 Mentionin K.E. an’ Joe is a joke, just Chuck tryin a be nice. But there he is, mentionin Jack an’ his ma, who he’d never even met, an’ most people here don’t know a thing about. Chuck must a known what I was thinkin, an’ he’s tellin me it’s OK. I can feel it right in my chest.

Then he’s sayin, “Ennis, you want to say a few words?” I ain’t gettin up an’ talkin into no microphone, so I just scramble to my feet an’ say loud enough for folks to hear, “Uh, thanks everyone for comin here tonight. It means a lot.” More cheers an’ spoon tappin as Chuck’s comin back to sit down. He gives me a peck on the cheek, an’ everyone groans. I just shake my head.

Then Emily announces it’s time to eat, an’ a friend a Francine starts playin classical guitar, something Chuck really likes an’ I don’t mind so much neither.

They’ve got a buffet full a Chuck’s favorites – ham, cornbread, baked beans, hot potato salad, green beans an’ quiche for the vegetarians – all home made by Bernadette, who does most a the cookin when the dudes are here too. Chuck an’ me generally watch what we eat, ‘cause what’s the point a quittin cigarettes an’ then killin yourself some other way.

Chuck asks me if he can fix me a plate, an’ I’m about to say I’ll fix my own damn plate, when I look at his face an’ see the smirk he’s always had an’ his kind eyes, more gray now than blue. He’s just tryin a be nice, an’ I really don’t want a stand up on this ankle an’ hobble over there anyways.

“Sure,” I say.

I’m sittin between Chuck an’ Junior. You always gotta be on Chuck’s right side because he’s near deaf in his left ear, too vain to get a goddamn hearin aid.

Junior’s married to Marco Ramirez now, a guy who works in high tech in Denver. He’s 10 years older’n her an’ 10 years younger’n me with two grown kids of his own. He’s sittin with Bridget, Marty, E.J., Lina an’ their kids. Very nice guy. Junior had dated a few frogs before she found this one, includin one homophobic sonofabitch of a doctor who wanted a “fix” Nate, but that’s another story.

“How’s Mama doin?” Junior asks.

“Good as can be expected, I guess.” I’d taken Alma out for lunch today in Laramie, her on a break
from a death watch over Monroe who’s dyin a lung cancer. Only a few days left at most, she said. They’ve got hospice over there helpin out, an’ her sister Jeannie too. It’s a rough go.

“She told me she would have wanted to be here today,” Junior says. “I thought that was nice of her.”

“She’s a nice woman,” I say. “A good woman. Always was.” Forty years ago when she kicked me out, I couldn’t have imagined sittin there with her, talkin about our girls, our grandkids an’ great-grandkids, rememberin an’ laughin, even while she’s goin through so much pain.

While we’re eatin, the band comes in an’ starts to set up. Chuck says to me, “Even the band, Ennis? This is too much.” He’d had a little trouble with the bass player years back when we first stopped hidin who we was to each other, even broke up the band for a few years. Then one day the guy called him an’ they started back up, an’ no trouble since. I still go see ‘em play in Fort Collins once a month or so.

The grandkids get up to serve red velvet cake an’ coffee. Francine had wanted some kind a cuttin the cake nonsense, but I wouldn’t have it.

Then Francine an’ Lynette, who’s 16 now, get up an’ sing a duet a Roy Orbison’s old song “Evergreen” with Lynette on guitar. This is a surprise to me, not something the girls had run by me, an’ embarassin ‘cause it’s so damn sentimental. Chuck grabs onto my hand, whispers in my ear, “This is unbelievable, Ennis.”

I take my hand away. “The girls had a hand in it, you know.”

“Still …” he says.

Now the band’s about to start, an’ Junior whispers in my ear, “Daddy, you sure you won’t dance?”

I say, “I’ll dance with you, Darlin’.”

“With Chuck,” she says. “I mean you’ve come this far.”

“Uh, the ankle is real bad tonight.”

“Come on. Just part of a song. Then Julie and me will cut in.”

I know this would tip Chuck right over the edge, so I say, “OK. Just the first part a the song.”

She kisses my cheek an’ gets up to talk to Emily, an’ then to the band.

Then Emily’s back at the podium, an’ the band starts in with the slide guitar, real soft.

“We’re going to start off the dancing with the wedding couple …” Chuck looks at me, jaw dropped. I just waggle my eyes at him.

“… and then I’ll have other people cut in, and then everyone will be welcome to dance.”

I nod to him, an’ we stand up. I grab his arm. The ankle’s not so bad now, a miracle.

We walk out to the dance floor an’ hold onto each other about a far away as we can. The band starts singin “Look At Us” by Vince Gill, one a Junior’s favorite songs.

Chuck moves in closer; I let him. Before you know it, Emily’s announcing Junior an’ Julie cuttin in. That was quick. I kiss Junior on the head an’ smell her shampoo, just like that day at her
wedding. Then Francine comes an’ cuts in, an’ then Emily announces everyone can come up an’
dance. The band is draggin out the song. As soon as they play something faster I’ll be sittin down.

I look around at the other couples comin to the dance floor – man an’ woman, man an’ man, even a
lesbian couple from the college.

Emily comes over to dance with me, an’ Francine goes off to find Regent.

“You done a fine job, girl,” I tell her. She’s a little pistol like her aunt, not so much like her own
ma. She’s the one who conspired with Chuck to get this whole dude ranch thing goin after she
graduated college an’ went back for a hospitality certificate.

“Thanks Grandpa,” she says. “I’m so glad you did this. Chuck must be in heaven.”

“I imagine so,” I say.

The song ends and Emily’s boyfriend Brandon, who manages a fancy restaurant in Boulder, comes
over. I go sit down with Flo an’ our grandkids Lynette an’ Lucas.

“I never thought I’d see the day,” Flo says. “You remember me and Lisa’s wedding back in ’85?”

“Of course I do. You looked pretty funny in that flowery dress.” I hope I didn’t say the wrong
thing.

But she just laughs. We both know that was Lisa’s idea. I ask, “How you doin anyways?”

She says she’s OK, can’t decide whether or not to sell the farm and move down here permanently.

Lynette says, “We want you to stay here, grandma,” and then to me, “Grandpa! I’m mad at you
because you danced with Emily and not with me.”

“You askin me now?” The song they’re playin is way too fast for me.

“Sure,” she says. I tell her to go dance with her cousins, come back an’ get me when there’s
something slower.

Flo tells me she’s goin a visit her daughter in Utah for Christmas, see her grandkids an’ great-
grandkids. Then we get to talkin about “Hell on Wheels,” TV show about the buildin of the
railroad that we watch every Saturday night.

“Crazy” comes on, an’ Flo says, “This was one of Lisa’s favorites. Let’s dance.” So we do. Later,
I’ll dance with Lynette an’ with Tex an’ Bernadette’s girl Stephanie who’s got an amazing gift with
horses. Good to know I’m so popular, even though I cain’t dance no better than I ever could.

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PART IV - Chuck P.O.V.

It’s nearly 9 p.m. when the band goes on a break and the families with little kids start packing up.
Ennis is holding baby Gemma and saying goodbye to E.J. and Lina. Once he’s handed the baby
back and tousled Jeremy’s hair and they’re out the door, I tell him quietly that I’m going next door
to get a pill, unless he’s too tired. He says, “Wait just a sec,” reaches into his pocket and hands me
a pillbox.

I kiss him on the cheek before he can get away. Right away, his hand is up to his face and he’s
looking around.
“Relax,” I say. “We’re among friends.”

He nods slowly and says, “That’s right. We got a lot a friends, Chuck.”

When Ennis put on a dress shirt this morning, I thought maybe he was dressing up for Alma, who he’d be meeting for lunch, or maybe in case Bill Monroe was well enough to see a visitor.

I had no clue that the driver’s license issue was a hoax, and I was shocked when he asked if I could help him out of the truck at the clerk’s office, first time ever in public.

In Ennis’s mind, we never touch in public, but the truth is that right after we moved in together, he got in the habit of holding doors open for me, then putting his palm on my back to guide me through, as a gentleman would do with a lady. I never minded. The other thing he does is, since my left ear got fucked up, he’ll step behind me and put his hands on me to move me over so he can get on my right side.

But tonight, oh my God, tonight. This was the first time we’d kissed or danced in front of people outside of somewhere gay. He’s definitely mellowing in his old age.

I think part of what makes it work between us is knowing each other’s limits. I’ve learned that his first answer to anything I propose is going to be no, but I know I can talk him into most things if I’m patient enough. I’ve said yes to just about anything he’s ever asked me for.

We’ve travelled coast-to-coast and into Canada, gone on quite a few horse-packing trips and even to a gay resort in California. We’ve had Francine, Nathan, Emily, and Julie’s son Griff live here at various times. I’ve never horned in on Ennis’s relationships with Jack Twist’s mother, widow or son, or his Wednesday coffee buddies. Nor has he ever minded me socializing with people from work, playing in the band one night a week, volunteering at the youth center, or traveling for work. He even OK’d a visit from my teenage boyfriend Johnny King who found me on Facebook, but that’s another story.

Some things I’ll never talk Ennis into, like giving up on the Cubs and adopting the Rockies instead. To this day, he’ll go to Coors Field only when the Cubs are playing. He’ll cheer for them under his breath and then grimace when the Rockies are in the lead, which is most of the time.

Then there was this whole dude ranch thing. A year before I’d be retiring from Colorado State, I asked Ennis what his retirement plans were, said maybe we could start spending our winters somewhere warmer. He said he’d retire when he was six foot under, he didn’t work this ranch for 25 years just to let it go to seed, he wasn’t sellin out to no gentleman rancher who wasn’t goin a get his hands dirty just so he could go burn up in Arizona or New Mexico every winter, etc.

Meanwhile, Emily was graduating from Colorado College with a degree in environmental studies. Emily came to me with her idea of a guest ranch, something that had been at the back of my mind ever since I worked on dude ranches when I was in college. We drew up plans that included building a lodge, leasing pasture land further away for Regent’s herds, Emily getting a certificate in hospitality management – all behind Ennis’s back. We even got a tentative OK for a bank loan.

Of course, Ennis hit the ceiling when we finally dropped it on him. No. Fuckin. Way. Emily’s the one who talked him into it, I’m not even sure how. As Junior says, he’s always had a soft spot for girls.

So we borrowed a large chunk of money, built a lodge with a huge “great room” with fireplace, a commercial kitchen, four bedrooms for guests and a two-bedroom apartment for Emily. She set up a website with an online reservation system and social media.
The way we’ve got it, we’re open for guests almost every week from June to August. We still run the Cerebral Palsy camp in July, and E.J., Nate, Junior, Francine and her kids still volunteer that week.

The first week of June, Ennis and Regent take experienced riders only to trail Regent’s herd 18 miles to leased pasture land, along with two or three hired hands, some of which are Tex’s kids and Ennis’ grandkids, and a truck driven by me. We stay overnight, spend the next day spreading the herd around and checking fences, stay another night, and then ride back. In September, we do the opposite, round the herd up and trail them back here. We have campfires and sing-alongs, and a lot of fun.

Other weeks, we’ll have families with kids. We teach riding, take guests out to the swimming hole on Regent’s property, move Ennis’s herd around our ranch and Regent’s. We’ve got two vans to pick up dudes from the airport and take them around sightseeing, fly fishing, kayaking, shopping and to museums on rainy days, or whatever else they want to do.

They come from as far as Japan, Germany and New York City and they’re willing to pay a lot for the experience – Bernadette’s cooking, Emily’s thoughtful hospitality, Ennis’s horses trained perfectly for any level of rider, and his taciturn cowboy way. We’ve even hosted a couple of gay and lesbian private groups.

The rest of the year, Ennis works the ranch and Emily teaches hospitality management at a nearby college and arranges special events at the lodge. I help out where I can and I still do some land use consulting.

Julie told me it was Flo who talked Ennis into marrying me, and then Emily took over with the party details, and Junior, Francine and Bernadette all came on board. I could tell which details they’d OK’d with Ennis and which ones they’d snuck in.

At the end of the night, Ennis and I move the truck around to the side of our house where we usually park. When I open the kitchen door, Ennis says, “I’d carry you over the threshold, but…”

“I know you would,” I say. I close the door and pin him against it, grab his face and shove my tongue into his mouth. Then I’m tearing open the snaps on his shirt. The pill makes me a crazy man, which he doesn’t mind at all, and soon he’s rubbing up against me too.

He whispers in my good ear, “C’mon. This ankle’s about to give.”

And we go up to our big king bed, same one Ennis balked at 30 years ago on the night of our first consummation, back at Kerby’s ranch when his old wedding band rolled underneath, only with a new mattress and box springs.

We’ve never been religious, either one of us. But after we make love, lying there spooned up in the dark, Ennis says, “God or someone has really blessed us, don’t you think Charlie?”

I rub his arm and say, “Yes. Both of us.”

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