

## Coming to Nothing

The cottontails peeled off the roadside like cards from a deck as he rounded Salmonson Corner, the willows drooping over the fallen log homestead. That hadn't changed. The secondary ditches were gone, plowed flat with the rest of the meadow so that wheel line sprinklers could move the jetted spray efficiently across the fields. That meant there'd be no Charlie Phillips left, or anyone like him, the dribble down his whiskered chin, pipe dangling. No need for canvas dams and shovels, the meandering daylong walk to control the flow. He wondered if there were still horses to buck and rear in the copper light before a storm; perhaps they'd been plowed flat and tame, too, four wheelers lined up in their place. He felt that pain inside, somewhere deep in memory, at the sight of the barn, chinked split log from the early days, the branding record carved into the tack room door: eighteen sixty-five. He remembered the feel of it, quiet and warm, the horses blowing as they shifted their weight, tails flicking, the smell of manure and hide, hay dust floating in the filtered light.

How long had it been since he'd been on a horse? Almost forty years if he didn't count the time he and the kids rode around the ring at the county fair. Forty years since he'd swept these meadows with a buck rake or tightened a cinch in the rain, the hand-rolled smoke sharp in his lungs as the water ran off his felt hat and the horses circled and side-stepped in anticipation. He really had been here, mounting the roan in the yard outside the barn.

He drove by, not so slow that anyone would notice, them looking out the window wondering who it was with the out-of-state plates, just as he would have done all those years ago. Not much had changed; he could see that. There was still hay to stack and cattle in the hills that needed checking when it rained. A ranch had its rhythms, after all. He didn't

want them gawking and guessing, there'd be time enough for that. He drove past politely slow enough to keep the dust from rising. He passed the cemetery on the bench above the road, a backhoe digging, the dark earth piled neatly on canvas next to the hole.

At the highway he hesitated before turning away from the Inn. Sylvia would still be in the spa; he had time. A quarter mile up the road he turned in the lane, just two tracks winding through the willowed dredge ponds. How long had it been? Twenty years, maybe longer. The small meadows opened to a rise where the old log house sat listing on one end, over one hundred years since Old Man Meresworth skidded the first logs down from William's Creek. The truck was in the yard but no dogs came barking; Marla would be in the fields bucking the hay in, only herself to count on now.

The window box was full of red petunias, the door was open. Dishes sat untended in the worn enameled sink, the *Madisonian* spread out on the slab table. A log sofa faced the river rock fireplace, its stained brown plaid cushions dotted with cigarette burns. A green corduroy stuffed chair covered with a crocheted throw sat next to the couch, the table and lamp between them. On the table, face down, *Leaves of Grass*. He picked the book up and read the open page:

*“In paths untrodden,  
In the growth by margins of pond waters,  
Escaped from the life that exhibits itself.....”*

So, after the years of struggle, a gentleness had ensued. He thought of all the conversations he might have had, wondered if there was some wisdom that might have been imparted. Outside he heard the tractor revving, then, through the window, shooting above the willows, a shock of hay. The beaverslide, he realized, built by Marla's father after the baler

accident. She was out there in the meadow, a team hooked to the sweep pushing the piles onto the deck and then the pull of the tractor flinging hay skyward; her one good arm, the firm, tan arm that had held his brother, shifting gears and adjusting the throttle.

He drove back through the town, past The Longhorn Café, still there with the same name after all these years, where on Sunday afternoon, the cook's day off, his father would treat him to steak and eggs and a chocolate shake, in that first summer when the adventure of the ranch was still new and held them there, and past Clint's where his brother once slouched at the bar, the ten gallon pulled down till it turned his ears, speaking with a twang that was almost authentic; past the Ruby Hotel where Bud would traipse when the company grew stale at Clint's, shots lined up like fence posts cold in the wind. It was all still there.

He drove three miles to the Vigilante Inn, a grand lodge with cabins placed along the river, an overdone replica of the old west as it is imagined in urban centers: a vestige of Warner Brothers and Twentieth Century Fox. He felt uncomfortable there, in the three fifty a night room, alongside guests from Los Angeles and Chicago costumed in L.L. Bean and Patagonia. It was the only real change in the valley and Sylvia's idea; a treat for him, this luxury, but foreign to his remembrance of things. It wasn't how he had wanted it to be.

But then what is, he thought as he turned in the gate, down the carefully coiffed lane as pretty as a picture. Perhaps it had all been illusion: the smell of his sweat in the fields, the orchard grass and brome swirling in the breeze, the collar turned up in the wind high on a ridge with the roan neighing. No different than a picture show; he'd just had a good seat.

He found Sylvia in the room, wrapped in a robe.

"How was your massage?" he asked, thinking of her relaxed on the table, foreign hands gliding through lotion on her naked back.

“Just divine. There is something about the mountain air. I can see why you loved it,” she said and just then he remembered forking out ninety years worth of manure, tromped hard as concrete in the loafing shed, the ammonia so sharp it stung his lungs. They pitched it in the wagon, then towed it through the fields spewing shit from longhorns trailed from Texas in the eighteen sixties when the gulch was full of prospectors and claim jumpers and the range was wide and free.

“I think you should go fishing tomorrow. You could do it in the morning, before the funeral.”

“I didn’t bring my gear,” he said, not telling her that he had left it purposefully after reading the website she had forwarded: eight miles of the river tied up, leased from the ranchers; the stretch through the old meadows with the grassy banks, and below the dam, even the dredge ponds behind the house. Somehow he felt a claim to that water: he had rights to it; he’d be damned if he’d pay to fish it.

“Darling, they provide the gear. It’s all included.”

“But five hundred a day,” he complained.

“It would be worth it, wouldn’t it? To fish your river again.”

He lay back on the king-sized bed. A picture of Chief Joseph hung on the wall opposite him; the bitterly twisted mouth, the look of betrayal and permanent loss pulsing from his eyes, once a moment in time as real as any other, now reduced to an expected decoration: the romance of the west.

“I thought we could drive up Williams Creek and over the hill, take in the ‘City’, walk the boardwalk like a couple of dudes.”

“I am a dude, Bryce, and so are you. Your cowboy days are in the distant past.”

“I suppose I always was a dude, even when this was my home. I didn’t know it at the time, but we were pretenders, just passing through.”

“Except your brother. He stayed.”

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He remembered his brother's face, the same weary look of betrayal as hung on the wall, without the fierceness. It was thirty years ago, after five in the city, the ranch gone along with their parents' marriage, not a patch of ground to stand on. He remembered as he hadn't remembered in years the early morning phone call from the tavern down by the river where the railroads used to run. "I can feel myself dying," Bud had sobbed into the phone. "I'm disappearing right before my own eyes. I just wanted to say good-bye."

And then he did disappear. It had been a hard winter, the snow and gloom piled dirty into March. He turned into himself, whiskey his only companion. One day he showed up at the police station confessing to crimes that hadn't been discovered. He was held in a cell for a few days, the detectives questioning, threatening, until they understood that the gory deaths existed only in Bud's imagination. After six weeks in the State Hospital he was released to Bryce's couch where he sat smoking and trembling, intensely studying something no one else could see.

One evening a spring storm blew in, the trees bent over, the pounding of the sky wet and fierce with flashing thunder. He had turned in early, Bud fidgeting on the couch, and snuggled deeply into sleep. In the morning the skies had cleared and robins pulled at worms seduced to the surface by the rain. The only sign of Bud was a saucer on the arm of the couch filled with cigarette butts and ashes. Bryce left it there for days as if it were a talisman that would draw his brother back.

After a week his father reported Bud missing. How could his car disappear, they wondered? He must have driven into the river. But no one was interested. Three years later Bryce got a card: "Working as a line rider in summer, feeding cows in winter. It ain't much, but it's a life." His family was furious.

"Technically, he came back," he said.

“I know. You’ve told me the story,” she said, turning the page of the Vigilante Inn brochure; a thousand times, her inflection said.

“I’m looking forward to dinner,” she said. “You should see the menu; it’s to die for!”

“I know. Only forty dollars to have the trout you caught braised in French wine,” he snorted. “So refined, here in the valley. A genuine postcard experience.”

“I’m spending a small fortune here; I’d like to enjoy it.” She snapped the brochure shut, sitting up on the edge of the bed. “You could work the room. You never know what might turn up.”

It was true; the Vigilante Inn was perfect ground for him: nothing but high rollers. He wouldn’t have to qualify anyone; they were all cherries. He made his living by moving in the right circles and telling people what they wanted to hear. He moved their money and some of it stuck with him. He was good at it: pleasing people. It was a skill he’d learned in his family. Always avoiding conflict, he was quietly everyone’s confidante. He had thought of it as a weakness, not being courageous enough to take a stand. All he did was listen to them as they aired their grievances, each against the other, hidden safely in the shadows.

When they lived on the ranch the land had allowed them all some forgiveness; it absorbed just enough of their pain to give their lives some semblance of order. When it was lost to them the pain became like a centrifuge, casting each of them randomly from the center of things. Bud dropped out of college and soon was drafted. It was the sixties, the time of Vietnam, and marijuana and LSD. Bud was high all the time; it was the beginning of his inward turn, hallucination the landscape for his pain. He was discharged from the army, unfit for service, and returned to the city where the rest of his family struggled to create their own new realities, and a string of odd jobs and occasional “holidays” at the state’s expense.

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Bryce got a job in an electronics store, a vast expanse of neon and steel; the gleaming vinyl-tiled floors polished each night, as cold and deadened as the ranch had been alive and warm. There was no grass weaving in the wind, no straw hat or roll-your-own; no cocksuckers or motherfuckers or sons-a-bitches; no reins held in thick-fingered hands, sparkling eyes betraying the stoic jaw, the hay stacked in the meadow. No, his landscape now was manicured nails and clip-on ties and aisle upon aisle of inventory needing to be moved: refrigerators and dishwashers and color TV's.

And he was good at it, listening to their stories just as he had listened to his family's stories.

"Twenty years married and never once he washed the dishes."

"This ought to quiet her. Get me top of the line; I don't want no complaints."

He was salesman of the month, and then the year. The commissions rolled in. He moved into a bigger apartment and bought a new car. But it was just appliances, after all. He wanted more: a suit, an office, respectability. He got a job selling stocks and bonds, mutual funds and limited partnerships. It wasn't much different than selling appliances, he learned: listen to them and tell them what they want to hear, just as he had always done. Within a year he was again salesman of the month, and then the year, in a three piece suit and a corner office. When he walked down the street in the city women noticed him; he had become a man of substance.

That is how he met Sylvia. Her husband had died, leaving her a thick portfolio. She didn't know anything about investments, she said, she'd always depended on him. She needed help. It was almost too good to be true, a rich widow walking through his door. And a looker. It was just business at first. He'd take care of her, he'd said. And her portfolio grew

beyond her hopes; it was the biggest bull market in memory. He was a genius, she said. She so admired that in a man.

He'd grown bored with his second wife, who once had seemed so much more exciting than his first wife, had been part of the transition to the more substantive life of a stock broker. But with Sylvia's attention he felt like he had finally arrived. She was a woman of culture and sophistication who had seen plays on Broadway and been to the opera in Milan. All he had to do was listen, be the attentive, sensitive man, and she came to him, just as everything had always come to him.

But now, in the room with her, he felt like something was slipping away from him; something ancient that had been stirred in him, driving up the valley. He didn't want to let go of it. He felt like taking a stand.

"Suppose I quit," he said.

"Quit what?" she said.

"Working rooms, measuring people by how much money they have, angling to make some of it mine; telling people what they want to hear instead of the truth."

"What are you saying, Bryce?"

"What if I quit my job? We could move here. You have enough that we could buy a small place; run a few cows, put up some hay. You could breathe the mountain air every day, fall asleep to the sound of a brook. We could live a real life, Sylvia."

"You've lost your mind, Bryce. How do I fit in? Dutiful wife pulling your boots off at night, fresh bread in the oven?"

"No, I'm serious, as serious as I've ever been. My whole life, ever since I left this valley, has been nothing more than going through the motions, doing what came easily. But here, in this landscape, a man can really get a measure of himself. When I was just a kid I built the straightest, tallest hay stacks in the valley. It meant something."



“My God, Bryce, anyone can build haystacks. You have so much more to offer.”

“Like what? Kissing ass all day, picking people’s pockets? There’s more to it than just stacking hay. It’s the smell of your sweat mixed with hay dust. It’s the way you feel in late afternoon when the storm clouds roll in, watching them bounce back and forth off the mountains, the smell of rain in the air. It’s the tiredness you feel in your bones when you lie down at night. It’s the knowing you’re a part of something, something bigger than you.”

“I’m glad you had that experience, Bryce. It obviously made an impression on you. But people grow and change. You went on to build a great career; that means far more than some haystack. We have a wonderful life, Bryce. Let’s get a bottle of wine and celebrate your remembrance, and then we can go have dinner.”

He looked at Chief Joseph on the wall; Bryce wondered if the picture hung in every room. Reduced to a curiosity, the noble man might as well have been stuffed and mounted in the lobby. But he had lived once, his very being entwined with the landscape in which they rested. By the time the picture was taken it was too late for the Chief, but it wasn’t too late for him. Bud had done it, made his way back. Always the black sheep, the failure in the family, Bryce now saw the dignity of his life. It was a dignity he himself had known in his youth but had let slip away.

The great open room, all varnished logs and fir plank flooring, was dominated by the rock fireplace rising to the gabled tongue and groove ceiling; in front of the fireplace a sitting area with large overstuffed sofas and Navaho rugs, copies of Field & Stream and Orvis catalogues on the coffee tables. The entire west wall was a bank of windows and glass doors looking out past an expansive deck to the dark waters of the river meandering through the meadow.

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Sylvia picked out a Pinot from the Napa Valley and she and Bryce mingled with the other guests. They visited with a mortgage broker from Chicago, a commercial realtor from Seattle and a couple from Los Angeles who had brought their teenage boys, who were playing video games in their room, to Montana so that they could “rough it a little and gain a true appreciation for wilderness.” Sylvia was vibrant, engaging everyone with charm and sophistication. Bryce managed to listen sympathetically and make an appropriate comment or two, but it was Sylvia’s presence that filled the room. “He’s in investments,” she managed to work into each conversation, “a simply brilliant man.”

They dined at a table next to the window looking out at the meadow, river and rose-hued granite peaks beyond, the evening’s light reflected by the dark cumulous bellies floating above.

“What could be better?” Sylvia sighed.

“Maybe a Great Falls Select with the boys down at Clint’s?” Bryce wasn’t ready to surrender.

“Could you behave yourself for just a little while?”

“How long’s a little while? Another thirty years?”

“I was thinking of the rest of the evening.”

“Don’t you see how out of place all this is, Sylvia, this island of luxury surrounded by ranches where the people who stack the hay, brand the cattle, repair the equipment, the people who live and work here, can’t even fish the river because it’s reserved for rich people from LA?”

“I don’t feel out of place at all. As a matter of fact, I think I am in my element here, looking out at that marvelous view, drinking a divine wine, eating a scrumptious meal and conversing with intelligent people from across America. These are the moments I live for.”

“I tell you, I feel guilty just sitting here. I should be out there with them.”

“Who? Who should you be with?”

“Chief Joseph.”

“What?” Sylvia looked at him as if he were losing his mind.

“Chief Joseph. There’s a picture of him on the wall in our room. These fat cats we’re having dinner with stole his land, then, when he fought back they chased him all over Idaho and Montana killing his women and children. He finally had to surrender, move onto the reservation with the rest of us.”

“You’re not making any sense. I think your brother’s death has you unsettled.”

“It hasn’t got anything to do with Bud. It’s about them, these fucking rich bastards who won’t be happy until they own every goddamn square inch of this earth; until they’ve squeezed the life out of every man and woman that actually knows how to do an honest days work.” Bryce’s voice rose with his emotions. He ordered another bottle of wine.

“Are you O.K., Bryce? Perhaps we should go back to the room.”

“Stop patronizing me, Sylvia. I know damn well what I’m talking about. There was a time when I actually did an honest day’s work; ten hours a day, seven days a week during haying season. When it rained and was too wet to put the hay up, we were up at four in the morning, the horses saddled and us headed to the summer range to check on the cattle. There are people here still doing those things, giving their sweat and blood and lives to this land which they can’t even fish on because it’s all reserved for these assholes who think the Vigilante Inn is roughing it.”

“If you don’t calm down right now I’m going back to the room.”

He was crossing the line; he could see that in the severity of Sylvia’s expression; she was serious about it. But it felt good, standing up for something for once in his life.

“Take that fat fucker with all the turquoise, for instance.” He pointed at the man sitting with his wife not more than four feet away from them. “I heard he’s buying the Olaffson place and turning it into a golf course.

There's going to be stables and riding trails so he can make a fortune selling million dollar homes that a bunch of rich bastards will live in one or two weeks a year. Meanwhile the local ranch hands that have lived in this valley with dignity for generations will be turned into butlers and pool boys. No wonder Chief Joseph weeps."

The man he was targeting grew red in the face, staring at Bryce. His thick fingers clenched the table cloth until the silverware fell to the floor.

"Yeah, that's right pal. I'm talking about you, you fucking cocksucker!"

The words thundered up from his diaphragm, rolling off his tongue like a golden tablet delivering a long forgotten message. Bryce felt the surging bigness within him, stunted and festering for years. He glared crazily at the man, who, kicking back his chair rose to a much greater height than Bryce had anticipated. Bryce flew like a human battering ram head first into the man's midsection, throwing them both to the floor, where they rolled kicking and biting, knocking tables and patrons asunder. Sylvia vaulted them screaming, the carefully groomed seams of her life slashed open; the ugly sore she had not sensed suddenly exposed, infecting her with its putrid truth.

The other diners were joined by the staff in separating the two men, snot spewing from their flared nostrils, each struggling to get at the other, their crazed eyes locked in a beam of rage. After hasty but firm testimony from the other diners Bryce was forcibly removed from the building. He made his way back to his cabin. The door was locked. He knocked softly, calling out to Sylvia. He knocked harder, demanding that she let him in. The curtains were drawn; he could see nothing. After a few minutes he stumbled to the road. The sun had set behind the mountains, its light now reflected off the highest clouds coloring the peaks to the east in pastels of pink and blue. The forested shoulders of the mountains darkened like deep waters above the sage covered benchlands; the hayfields and willows, brilliant yellow, gold and green in

the day's last burst of light, were now softened, the earth submissive to the coming night. Bryce noted how still the world had become. He walked through the fading light absorbed in the evening calm.

The trout would be feeding now, rising indiscriminately, the flash of shadow through the water, the balletic leap into the sky twisting and kicking, the crashing splash and tug, the thrilling run: the fierce determination of life.

He could do it without Sylvia. He didn't need to own land; he could start out like Bud did, feeding cows in the winter, looking after them in the high mountain range in the summers. He would become a part of the landscape; it would nourish him in ways no woman could. Finally he was back home. Walking into the quiet night Bryce planned his new life. He hadn't read Whitman or Thoreau since college, but now they would be his constant companions; he would live shoulder to shoulder with them.

He was almost sober when he walked into Clint's; the dim lights above the half-round bar, the syrupy twang from the jukebox, the faces of the slumped figures turned toward him hoping for some relief, some elevation, a moment's entertainment. His buoyancy pierced by the opening of the door, the sudden remembrance of the room's reality, he hesitated a moment, as if to retreat; then realizing that he had nowhere else to go, he stepped forward, walked steadily toward the bar as if no one was looking and sat apart from the half dozen other patrons. He was keenly aware of the staring faces: some worn out, barely cognizant, others menacing with their sneering grins; the women eagerly evaluating, imagining the weight of him, the thrusting, the size of his wallet. He nodded nonchalantly, as if he lived just down the road.

"Two shots of Jack," he told the bartender, a big-breasted, big-toothed woman well past her prime, thin brows painted over store bought eyelashes. "Set them up and bring me a Select."

“They ain’t made Select for years,” she said, wiping the bar in front of him.

“Well then, bring me a Highlander.”

“Look Mister, I don’t know where you come from, but you got your choice of Miller, Bud or Coors.”

“You ain’t from here, are you, mister?” Bryce squinted across the bar to locate the figure from which these words had emanated. “You dressed like a city boy, ain’t cha? Don’t he just look like somethin’, Beef?”

Bryce found the man, a short stocky figure, the pearl snaps of his short sleeved shirt half undone, his straw hat set back on his head. He was smiling at Bryce but there wasn’t anything friendly about it.

“He somethin’ alright, Scrapper,” the giant next to Scrapper answered. Beef’s beady eyes and fat cheeks rested corpuscularly on his broad sloped shoulders, from which massive arms projected, too thick to rest at his side.

“Did you see them shoes, Beef? Look like dancin’ slippers to me. Hey mister, you one of them ballet guys?” Scrapper rolled his head toward the giant, the both of them snickering.

Bryce had wanted to wear tennis shoes and a sweatshirt to dinner. They were in Montana, after all; no need to dress up, he’d complained to Sylvia. But she had insisted that he wear the tassel loafers and blazer with his jeans. “That’s an appropriately casual look for the occasion,” she had said.

“Ah, you tore your shirt, honey, and you got a black eye. Did you have a little argument with your boyfriend?” Scrapper was digging in, extracting as much sadistic pleasure as possible from this unexpected encounter.

Bryce calculated that it was too late to make a peaceful exit back into the quiet night.

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“My wife and I are staying at the Inn. I used to live here, just down the road. I didn’t enjoy the company at the Inn; I wanted to come to a place that I remembered from the past, have a drink with the locals.”

“Your wife, huh?” Scrapper winked sarcastically, poking Beef in the ribs. “Hey Beef, put on some dance music. Mr. Pretty Boy is goin’ to give us a dance lesson.”

Bryce looked pleadingly at the barmaid, hoping for intervention.

“Ain’t you gonna drink them shots?” she asked flatly, her dead eyes fixed on his.

*I've got a tiger by the tail it's plain to see.....*

The same lyrics had played in this dingy room for nearly forty years, eliciting in the occupants some emotion that the alcohol could wrap itself around. Scrapper slipped off his barstool and shuffled across the floor, his arms raised in a festive pose, hips swaying and boots kicking.

“Hey Beef, how am I lookin’?” he called across the room, his false teeth gleaming through sneering lips.

“You could use some help all right,” Beef contributed to the skit.

“That’s what I was saying, Beef. Ain’t I lucky Mr. Twinkle Toes come along?”

Scrapper swooshed across the worn linoleum floor and grabbed Bryce’s hand, jerking him off his stool.

*I won't be much when you get through with me....*

“Ah come on, Honey, I just want a dance,” he said seductively to Bryce, who again looked beseechingly at the barmaid.

“I think she needs a little encouragement, Beef.”

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On cue, Beef moved in and, with his hands in Bryce's armpits, maneuvered him around the room like a puppet.

"I know what's wrong; she forgot to put her makeup on. Hey Sally, get me your lipstick."

"Let him be, Scrapper. He don't mean no harm."

"Don't you be talkin' back to me!" Scrapper's rage shot out like a projectile. "Just get me your goddamn lipstick."

The room froze, everyone watching Scrapper fearfully. Chastened, Sally slid the lipstick across the bar.

"Now hold still, Missy," Scrapper said tenderly, the cruel thin smile back on his lips, as Beef's massive hands immobilized Bryce's head. Scrapper smeared the rouge on Bryce's lips.

*I'm about as helpless as a leaf in a gale....*

"Don't you look pretty!" Scrapper gushed. "Just look at her, Beef. Ain't her mouth sexy? I get a hardon just lookin' at it. I don't think she's in the mood yet, though. How about if I buy a round for the house; would that get you in the mood, sweetheart?"

Scrapper grabbed Bryce's wallet and tossed it on the bar.

"Here, Angel. I'm buying the house a round."

The barmaid looked in the wallet, then started pouring shots and pulling schooners, the rich foam rising above the sparkling ale, as the jukebox wailed its song of woe.

Bryce sat propped at the bar, wedged in by Scrapper on one side and Beef on the other.

"You drink up, Honey," Scrapper said to Bryce. "We'll all relax and get in the mood."

Angel took some bills from the wallet and handed it back to Scrapper.

"Take a look at the I.D.," she said to him.



Scrapper opened the wallet and looked at the driver's license.

"So?" he said.

"See the name? Bryce Douglas?"

"He's Bud's brother, Scrapper. Bud's brother for Christ's sake, and look what you gone and done to him." Sally's courage returned. "Yer just plain mean, Scrapper, and now you done desecrated the dead, and Bud to boot."

"We didn't mean nothin', did we Beef." Scrapper said as Beef slid over a few bar stools toward Sally. "We was just havin' a little fun. Nothin' wrong with a guy havin' some fun, is there?"

"No hard feelin's, ain't that right, Bryce." Scrapper stuck out his hand to Bryce who, ignoring him, used a napkin to wipe the lipstick from his face.

"That's what ya always say, Scrapper. 'No hard feelin's,' 'never meant nothin' by it.' Like the time ya hit that horse with a shovel and blinded him in one eye, not to mention what you done to me. Yer as worthless as tits on a boar, Scrapper, an ya always was. If Ole Bud was here he wouldn't stand for it; he'd tell ya like it is." The moment had turned in Sally's favor and she was riding it. Scrapper glared at Sally who was half hidden by Beef's bovine presence, then swaggered to the juke box and studied the song list that hadn't changed in a decade.

The door burst open into the clear night and Bryce sprinted across the road. Vaulting the barbed wire fence, he splashed through an irrigation ditch and then cowered in some willows, watching the door of the bar for a few minutes. The building looked benign, inert; the name "Clint's" spelled out in white bulbs, arched over a red neon bronc rider. The parking lot light hummed steadily as it cast a conical beam across the deep black sky, lighting the three lonely trucks nestled up to the bar.

Bryce inhaled the rich grass perfume released by the evening dew, was carried into the chanting of crickets and frogs, and gradually his beating

heart slowed. He looked up into the sky, the light of a million worlds just beyond his reach. He should have stayed, he thought, and asked them what it was in his brother that they loved.

He was in Dutch's meadow, a small refuge of the native nut grass grazed for millennia by buffalo, only a quarter of a mile from the ranch house. It had been so long; he had nowhere else to go.

The blue light flickered in the house window; beyond, the barn and shop, painted flat on the night's dark canvas by the yard light, sat silent, still. A figure darted from the shadows into the barn. Hushed footsteps climbed the stairs to the prickly soft bed of hay, the womb of youth, sleep.

Dawn's light filtered through the slat roof, particles swimming in bars of light. Outside, the engine of a truck turned over, gears ground into place and the whine of the transmission faded into the distance. Bryce rose slowly to consciousness, like a free-diver returning from a bed of pearls.

Standing back where he could not be seen, he looked out the loft door. The ranch was quiet. Across the road he could see the cemetery, where the undertaker was readying the casket to be lowered into the ground. Soon, cars would carry the mourners to the graveside and he would stand among them, Marla and Scrapper and Sylvia, as they bowed their heads, joined together by the thread of his brother's life.

For a moment he felt that the world was in its place. He was in the barn again, looking out at the willows and sagebrush hills; Bud was just across the way. In the evening, after the hay was stacked, they'd grab their poles and head to the river. The morning wisps of white, feathering the sky, would build to afternoon towers of light and shadow, voluptuously embracing the mountains. The air would still in the softened light, enticing mayflies to their dance toward daylight and the

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frenzied feeding of cutthroats and browns. After, the fish lined up in the grass, he and Bud would sit quietly, waiting for the dark to come.