



FREE

RUSTLING

by

CHAD

KIMBALL

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by Chad Kimball

P4P#1

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My car is rattling. My lantern and heater are hitting each other. They are propane powered, portable, for camping. Everything in my car is rattling. It's the sound of leaving. I hate leaving here. I've been in the back country of Big Bend, my favorite place, for the last week. You have to get a permit to be out here alone. And you have to let them know which trails you'll be on and when you plan to be back. Then they take a picture of you at the welcome center. At first I thought they were just being nice, welcoming, as the name implies. Turns out it's for the rescue crew. That way they know who they are looking for, what you look like and what you're wearing in case you get lost. Or attacked by a cougar.

I'm on my way out of the park now. Took me a day to hike back to my car, where the lantern and the heater were still tucked away in the trunk. I never toted them in. Would have been helpful to have either. Helpful is subjective though. I mean, I left them in order to keep my load light, but sometimes you want to be able to see what's rustling around next to you while you're curled inside your sleeping bag at night. In places that quiet, everything is a loud and strange sound. Skunks are loud. I don't think they have any stealth tactics.

I guess they don't need any. I mean, if they come around, I take my cue and leave. I hear javelina are quite loud too. And aggressive. I guess if it were a cougar though, I wouldn't hear any rustling. Just the sounds of my intestines being gnawed on.

I wonder if I taste good.

I wonder if they go for the torso first.

I'll be down to the desert soon. The roads will be paved, and there will be the occasional house sprawled out in the distance. Eventually I'll arrive in Fort Stockton where there are a few gas stations and hotels. I will start to get homesick for this place. I'm afraid the sickness will only grow as I approach the larger cities of Kerrville and San Antonio. It's hard to get used to the sudden invasion of chain restaurants and towering houses. It causes a shock to my system similar to the surprise of rich food on a sensitive tooth.

I'm headed to Mississippi from here. It's not where I live. It's where my mother's family lives, where she's from. She'll be there too. I talked to her a few weeks ago. I haven't seen her in a few years. It ought to prove interesting. She calls me every couple weeks now. When I was twelve she didn't. I'm not even sure what state she lived in then. Sneaky one, she was. Lately, she calls me every couple weeks. Her interest is fine, I guess. It's just I don't know her, really. She left when I was eleven. Now she pretends she is my mother. It's an easier job since I don't need one. Could have used her that time I fell off a rock face and shattered my knee. My dad's

soothing words, “Suck it up, son. Walk it off,” were all I had. I could have used her that time the love of my (high school) life handed me a letter explaining she had been having sex with a bull rider with the most beautiful blue eyes. I live in Texas. We have bull riders. Now that I’m grown and I’ve spent so much time without a mother, it makes little sense to have one now.

After I get through most of the state—a big one it is—and I get used to the depressing change from wilderness to development, I stop off in Houston for a shower and a shave. A Holiday Inn Express no doubt. I half-heartedly, mostly for my amusement, try to fit in with the business suits at the counter even though my beard looks like steel wool and I smell like a yeti. The oily sheen of my hair and peeling skin doesn’t help either. I do as they do. I slide the side of my jacket behind my arm so as to access my pants pocket to tuck my hand in. Only one though. The other hand stays out, firmly gripping my cell phone, even though it has no charge. And instead of turning my head simply to the right or left when something irrelevant gets my attention, I slant it chin first in the direction I want to look and raise my eyebrows. I don’t mind my appearance, I enjoy it even, but it’s rarely appreciated in places like this. The clerk is an attractive Latin American, with an emphasis on American. Not much of an accent and well settled in to American customs as I gather. I thank her for the keycard and am quick to cover my survival knife on my side, so as not to frighten her, when I bend down to

reach for my bag. As I walk away she gives me a kind of half-smile like she wonders if I'd be cute if I took care of myself. So I'm sure to lift my free arm up and have a good sniff at my armpit before I exit. Her half-smile is quickly depleted from her face. I make a quick exit before a smile enters mine.

The shower feels nice. I am thorough. I shave and cut my hair. I turn on the television for about fifteen minutes before I remember why I usually keep them off. I don't have acid reflux. I don't like Pizza Hut. I don't enjoy fictional soap-gossip, whether primetime or daytime. I don't have a fascination with giant men running around a field or a court for nothing more than a trophy. So I find little reason to keep it on. I decide to go for food instead. I go down and ask the clerk at the counter where I might get a nice meal. She commits to the smile this time, and proceeds to tell me about a few places. I choose Ruggles Green from her suggestions. A wise decision, and a nice change of pace from my nuts and berries. I guess development has a few perks. I head back to the hotel after, and she smiles again as I walk through the lobby. I stop briefly to thank her before heading to my room. I can't get comfortable on the bed so I sleep on the floor. It's too soft. I know it's strange; it just takes me time to get used to a bed again after sleeping on the ground for a week, under the stars.

In the morning I check out and head for Mississippi. There's a different clerk at the counter. She's also a smiler. Today ought to be a much shorter drive than yesterday.

I still can't believe I said I'd stay for a week. I'm not sure exactly what to expect. I can't remember the last time I stayed so long. I exit 603N and head for the country. My grandmother lives on a hundred and twenty acres. Her husband, my step-grandfather I guess, raises race horses for a living. Does pretty well too, I think. There's a giant track on the property where the jockeys come to exercise the thoroughbreds. The horses live in plush stables, fit enough for me to live in. And they have very specific eating times and diets, also fit for me.

I pull into the yard with about six other cars. At least two I'm positive don't run. I step out and take in the air. It's just as I remember it. Never changes. Rode my first horse here, bareback none-the-less. It forgot I was riding it and thought it good timing for a full sprint through the field. I was thrown off its back. I did not fall off. I also did not rise to my feet for a while. And when I did, I did not walk on them as if I had any experience walking.

I open the door to go inside, and, as if I never left, sitting on the couch straight in front of me is one of the war vets my grandmother took in years ago. He never speaks. He sits in the same place and position all day. Right there, on the couch, unless it's meal time. At random intervals he raises his left hand to his eyebrow, plucks a hair, then moves his hand to the back of his head and plucks another hair. He gums his mouth violently as he does this, as if it's both painful and pleasurable. It still creeps me out. And I still stare at him. The

other one likes to talk to you but can't speak any distinguishable words. He just talks some nonsense for a minute, grins and elbows you. If you don't smile back he keeps talking nonsense and you miss your window of escape.

My grandmother's in the kitchen. The smell of food here is one of my favorite things. I greet her with a hug, shake hands with my step-grandfather. He's massive. He has one of the deepest voices I've ever heard. He's also morbidly obese and doesn't take care of himself. He likes to make fun of everyone and laugh his huge, deep, southern laugh with his teeth and tongue bared for far longer than necessary. We tolerate each other. My mother comes from the back to greet me. She hugs me and then stays uncomfortably close to speak to me. It's weird. My aunt, who is also there, is grinning at me because she understands that I just want a foot's distance. She was always my favorite. My mother has a strong southern accent. And she uses the wrong tense and verb forms to communicate, "I dint know you was here already kiddo." I didn't recognize this when I was a kid. I guess it just seemed like normal English to me. She also calls me kiddo.

"Don't call me kiddo," I say. She laughs hard and slaps my shoulder. Evidently she found the statement humorous.

I greet the others, and wait as the rest show up. There will be twenty five to thirty people in this house, and twice the amount of food needed. As they all arrive, I greet and catch up. Some cousins I knew as babies are now young adults. It's a strange thing. It used to be me who heard "you're

all grown up.” Now it’s me saying it. They smile. I smile. We awkwardly move on.

When it’s time to eat, my mother calls me over to get a plate. She does not care that I am preoccupied with a conversation and proceeds to talk over it. She, one by one asks me what utensils I want. “Do you want a fork? Do you need a spoon? The knives are right there. Did you get a napkin?” So I grab a plate and a fork and head towards the food. She then begins to name every food item in the kitchen. “There’s chicken and dumplings. Tomatoes and okra right there. Crab and spinach soup on the stove. There’s corn bread. There’s collard greens.” At this point I am eyebrows fully raised wondering how long she’s going to do this. There’s at least fifteen other dishes on the table. “There’s red beans and rice over there, coleslaw down yunder. You like green bean casserole. There’s shrimp jambalaya. You want that? Make sure you get some bread, baby.”

I’m pretty sure I hate baby more than kiddo.

“There’s mash taters and there’s...”

“Save your energy. My eyes work,” I say. She starts laughing.

We all eat. I can only imagine what Christmas dinner will be like. This one’s just a warm up. This family knows food. It’s an intimate relationship. Like a samurai and his sword, or a vintner and his wine. An older lady—her name escapes me, but I’m sure we are related in some way—goes on about the health of everyone who isn’t here. Mostly they

are the oldest. Half of them have cancer. The rest of them had a stroke, or Alzheimer's or some faulty body part replaced with a functioning one. It seems that there are more of these instances here, in the country. Everyone who is old, it seems, is unhealthy. Damn FDA. We'd all be healthier without it. It approves genetically modified organisms for food production, and then it approves the processing and re-processing of the food until it has no nutritional value. Then it approves the use of pharmaceuticals, produced in the same fashion, mind you, to treat all the symptoms caused by the food. Who ever heard of Alzheimer's fifty years ago? Or acid reflux? Then these processed foods, which should be more expensive than natural foods due to all the extra work put in, are sold as the cheapest foods. Here in the country, where poverty is high, these foods thrive.

“What do you do now?” asks my uncle.

“For money?”

“Well, yeah. What do you do for a living?” I have a problem with this question because it presupposes that what I do for money is what my identity should be found in. It's simply what I do for money. I take pride in it. I enjoy it. But it's not my life's goal to make copious amounts of dollars so that I can measure my life as something meaningful.

“I run an export warehouse.”

“Oh.”

“I ship stuff. Overseas.”

“I see. Is it lucrative?”

“It has its moments. I enjoy it.”

“Well good. So what kind of stuff you ship?”

“Anything. Everything. Mostly oilfield products. Hazardous materials. Musical instruments. Mostly items businesses need to run their business. Whatever that is. Lots of sex toys. Frozen chicken. Supplements. Whey protein powders.”

“Uh...sounds interesting.”

“Most of the time.” It would be nice if people would ask what actually is interesting to me, what I like to do. I’d enjoy answering that question more instead of explaining how I make money, a living. Is how I make my money supposed to be the only thing I’m allowed to enjoy doing in life? Seems kind of backward to me. In fact, some of what I enjoy just wouldn’t be as enjoyable if it made me money. I’m okay with that. Why ruin a perfectly enjoyable thing by turning it into a paycheck?

After the meal I wander down to the horse stables with my younger cousin. She’s in high school now. Yesterday she was wearing training pants. She’s a very happy, pretty young girl. I’m really pleased with the person she is growing into. I wish some that I could have been more a part of it. They—my cousins—all know each other well. I feel like a stranger, mostly. I guess divorces do that. And if I had gone to live with my mother after the divorce, I’d probably know them all really well. I also would have had access to these horses daily.

We open one of the horse's stalls and go in. It's a red-head. Short but beautiful. My cousin tells me this one's hers. It makes sense. The others are two feet taller and have aggressive attitudes. She brushes it and I pet it. We clean the stall of the horse's feces. We feed it. Soon my uncle, her father, comes down and we feed the rest of the horses their hay, oats and grains. He gives a couple of the thoroughbreds a shot and examines their teeth. I gather that he takes care of these horses regularly. They all seem to know him. A few get excited every time he gets close. A lot like women, horses, I think to myself. Majestic and beautiful, but moody and delicate: full of special needs: and always loving to be noticed and taken care of. I like horses. I still can't decide if I like women. Life is certainly easier without one. It's also less interesting, unless I go out of my way to make and keep it so.

My uncle and cousin leave once all the horses are tended to. I decide to stay for a bit. I walk up to the largest horse. Its name is Hex. He's very temperamental. He won't come up to me at first, but soon decides to and I slowly pet his forehead. When I feel confident that he likes me, I walk into to stall. He starts to throw a tantrum. "Stop it! Easy! Easy now!" I say. He calms some but still tries to threaten me by stomping his feet as I get closer. He tries to bite me and makes lots of violent snorting noises.

After this I remember what my step-grandfather said to me years ago, "You gotta show 'em who's bowss."

So I punch it on the side of its face.

It immediately calms and becomes like putty in my hands.

It would be easier, I suppose, to treat a woman in the same fashion. I don't mean punching her in the face, of course. But I see it happen often, guys asserting dominance over them by making them afraid of him. They become submissive globs of putty. Trapped and controlled. Dehumanized a little. They might even like it for a time, or to an extent. The problem I have with this treatment is it's not a relationship. Not an equal one anyway, and the respect is demanded rather than earned. The idea of equal relationship ought to, I hope, prevail. I don't want to have to punch the things I love. I'd rather be assertive in order to defend it, not control it. And I'd want them to love me enough that they submit, when need be, on their own. Because love ought to be submissive, on both sides. You can't commit to serve the other person without it.

But then, people don't seem to commit to a relationship as an expression of love as much as for fear of losing it. I don't want the kind of relationship I have with a horse to be the kind I have with a woman.

I put the saddle on Hex and we wander into the woods together. He acts the perfect gentleman and I take him only where I want to go. I give him no say.

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In the morning I wake up and meet my other uncle at his house. We ride to his farm. Two hundred thirty acres. He

raises cattle and has a seven-acre catfish pond. He also grows oats and rye and has various deer stands on the property. Avid hunter. We go out on the Gator and look for a pregnant cow. She's away from the group hiding in the bush. My uncle seems to think she'll have it in a couple days. I wish she was having it now. I'm curious about the miracle of birth in giant animals. After we see the pregnant cow we move through the rest of the property. He explains everything to me. He feeds grains from a local brewery to the cows. He says, "Mostly they eat grass. But the grains are a nice treat, and in the last month before slaughter we keep them penned and feed them only grain to fatten them up. Most places raise the cows from birth this way, which is unhealthy for them. And they pump them full of growth hormones to make them grow faster, and antibiotics to keep them healthy. I raise my own 'cause I know what they're getting, how they're raised, what kind of exercise they get." He doesn't know yet that I'm a vegetarian.

"I think that's good. We ought to know where our food comes from and how it was raised," I say.

"Did you have some of the beans yesterday? They had some sausage from one of my cows in it."

"I didn't. Actually, I stopped eating meat."

"What? You don't eat meat? So you're like a..."

"Vegetarian."

"Ok. I don't think I could ever give up my meat."

"I didn't think I could either."

"Why'd you do it?"

“Mostly for the same reasons you raise your own. But in the city it’s just easier to give it up.”

“Oh, ok. I guess I can understand that.” I’m not sure he really does, but it’s ok. It’s hard to explain sometimes. I like meat. I just don’t eat it.

Once we are done, we head back to his house. My mother is there and a few others from yesterday. We eat. Again. My uncle lives on a river in a giant house. After dinner I walk out onto the balcony with a hot cup of joe and sit in a chair to capture the sunset. My mother comes out and instantly starts talking. I say nothing, but point at the sunset to show her. “Wow,” she says. “That’s beautiful. Mhmm.” I’m hoping for a little silence now that she sees it.

“So, what do you want to do while you’re here?” she asks immediately.

“I don’t know. Watch sunsets probably,” I say. She laughs, but I can tell my tone isn’t very pleasing to her. I don’t know what my deal is.

“Well we could go see some of your aunts and uncles and cousins. They hadn’t seen you since you was a baby.”

“Ok,” I say, same tone. It won’t change.

“Ok! Let’s go tomorrow.”

I know she is looking hard to find my approval. Problem is she’s going about it all wrong. How do people have conversations about this? I’m not even sure I care enough to try. She wants all the privileges of a mom but she wasn’t around to earn them. She treats me as if she never left. It’s

hard to stomach it. If she would just treat me as a person she would like to get to know, it would be a lot easier; but don't try to kiss my cheek, and don't say you miss me, and don't treat me the same as the eleven-year-old kid you left. I tell her none of this, of course.

She keeps talking, smoking a few cigarettes as we sit outside. The coffee is nice. The sunset was a beauty, and a good mediator for my annoyance with my mother.

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I go out riding Hex. We're growing fond of each other. At least I like to think so. We stop at a small pond in the woods. I can vaguely remember it from my childhood. They used to tell me there were alligators in it. Used to scare me. Now it seems foolish that it would be big enough to sustain them. I doubt there's much fish in it either. It's tiny. When you're a kid you believe just about anything a person tells you. Then we get older and mistrust everything told to us. We become skeptics. Seems like life was more interesting and the world was bigger and fuller of adventure when I didn't have to examine every little thing to find a lie in it.

When I get in my mother asks where I've been.

"Just out riding a horse."

"Oh. You ready to get out and see everyone. They'll be happy to see you after so long."

"Yeah, let's go."

"Ok."

"You want to drive, or do you want me too?" I ask

quickly.

“It don’t matter. Whatchu wanna do?” she asks.

“It makes no difference to me. I’ll drive.”

“Are you sure? I can drive.”

“Ok, you drive.”

“Unless you want to, baby.”

“It doesn’t matter to me either way. You know the roads better, so I thought you might want to, but I can drive.” Seemed like a simple enough question when I asked it. “So I will, and you can tell me where to go.”

“Ok, but I can drive too,” she says.

“No, you can’t. I’ll drive, or we’ll end up standing here all day.”

“Ha ha!”

We start making our rounds. Everyone remembers me, but I can’t remember any of them. Every place we stop we have to eat something and drink a cup of coffee. It doesn’t matter how much we’ve already had.

“Here, have some doughnut holes, I made ‘em fresh this mornin’.”

“I got some shrimp gumbo on the stove.”

“Grifthin’s makin’ some fried oysters, you gotta stay and help us eat ‘em.”

At my mother’s aunt’s house we drink coffee and eat crab salad. No, they don’t go well together. But we are doing it. She’s a big lady, rather high voice, heavy accent, more even than the rest. This is my mother’s favorite relative. So

she told me as we were driving up. And I'm figuring out why. She rivals my mother in quantity of words spoken in one hour.

She goes on about one of the county's families. Apparently they are under investigation for fraud during Katrina. "A lot of people only think Katrina hit New Orleans, hun," she says, "but look 'round. We still recoverin' too. They got one million dollars un'counted for. They was s'posed ta dig ditches and get a fair wage." She's pretty convinced they are thieves. "And you know Ronnie, I think they had 'em killed. I think he knew too much, cause you know the FBI was askin' 'em questions and I think he was gonna make a deal with 'em and tell 'em where the money was."

My mother is All Ears! This is her kind of news.

"Yeah," she says in agreement, "I bet that's what happened. When we was kids I never liked goin' over there. He was mean, the dad; and them boys was mean too. I never liked 'em."

"And Ronnie was friends with 'em. He known what they was up to and when the feds came they had 'em killed. The po-lice said it was suicide, I think he's killed."

They go on about this for the next forty-five minutes. Her husband started watching a football game a long time ago. He is the wise one, I think to myself. Problem is Brett Farve is playing. Once they notice he's on, they will start talking about him. I know this because he is from here. He always becomes the subject of conversation when he's on the

tube. I'm ready for this visit to be over. I get up and go outside. Some kids are out playing on the hay stacks. They're probably related to me, but I've never seen them before. Each one is overweight, which doesn't make a whole lot of sense seeing how they are apparently active. Of course this could be a fluke. Maybe they usually sit inside playing video games just like suburban children. Either way it's good to see that an adventure on stacks of hay is still an attractive playground for kids. I walk up to an old tractor. It's rusted up quite a bit. Looks like it's being worked on. The carburetor is out on the seat in pieces. That's the first thing I'd have gone to also. Old gas solidifies inside a carburetor and clogs it so that the gas can't get through it to burn. Old pieces of machinery put me in a good mood. They have character. I imagine this tractor in its prime. It was a real beauty. Time has gotten to it now, worn it down, but it will get some use again, hopefully.

We leave and head back to my grandmother's. We walk inside. It's quiet, but the veteran, like a machine, is still sitting there plucking eyebrow hairs and gumming his mouth. I stare as we walk by, I don't think he notices. My mother asks if I'm hungry.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm still recovering from all the stops we made today." So she walks over to the fridge, pulls out a leftover and says, "There's still some crab and spinach soup left. You want that?"

“No. I’m not hungry.”

“There’s still some red beans in here. You want that?”

“No! I don’t want anything to eat!”

“Ok. I’m just asking.”

“How many times do you have to ask before you hear my answer?” I know it’s rude, but I can’t take it. She laughs but leaves the room. What the hell does she want from me?

I walk down to the stables. My young cousin is there taking care of her horse, and my uncle is in the small office.

“What’s up?” she asks.

“Not much. How’s your gelding today?”

“Ha, you forget his name?”

“Yeah.”

“Sleepy.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Are you ok? You seem sorta down.”

“I’m not too bad. You want to go riding?”

“Sure, let me get a saddle on Sleepy. Who are you gonna ride?”

“Hex.”

“What? Are you sure? He doesn’t let that many people ride him.”

“We have an understanding.”

“What’s that mean?”

“If he disobeys me I punch him in the face.”

“Ha ha!” She thinks I’m joking. We head out on one of the trails into the woods. We stop at an open field cleared

for deer hunting. It's funny that that's the only reason it was cleared. I mean, can't you hunt deer in the woods? Wouldn't it be more fun, more of a challenge? We stop, still sitting on our horses. She is smiling at the looks of the field. I turn and acknowledge it too. Clearings in the forest are pretty, even if man-made. What causes girls to lose this kind of innocence? My mother was this age once. Me too. Was I innocent like this? It seems like the ones my age are just jaded. Nothing excites them, but they measure everything against what used to excite them. They want you to do everything the same as their previous lovers. If you don't then you can never be someone they'd date even though doing those things doesn't excite them the same way anymore. There's a girl at home I'm interested in, but I'm wondering if it's worth it. The truth is I'm tired. I'm tired of breaking down walls just to find they escaped out the back for fear of someone breaking through. I wonder if I could skip on the jadedness by going after women a little younger. I might be able to live with a little immaturity in return for one who is still open, one who still wants to be known.

We carry on riding and then return the horses to the stables. "You ready for Christmas tomorrow?" I ask

"Yeah! It's gonna be great! Everyone will be here."

"Yeah, I figured."

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I wake up to a giant breakfast cooking. Everyone arrives very early. The house gets loud. And is getting louder.

Then my grandmother serves breakfast and the noise dies into the sounds of forks and knives and chewing, with the occasional conversation. My mother, being on the forefront of them, is quick to divulge the news on the Katrina-fraud investigation.

Suddenly my step-grandfather starts giggling. His voice is huge. “I thought you were tryin’ da lose weight! You’re inhalin’ them eggs ain’t ya?” he says to my mother, interrupting her. She laughs a little but is noticeably embarrassed. “You gonna eat the sausage the same way? Huh?” he continues.

“Shut up Gray, you bigger than me!” she responds. He starts giggling profusely, losing food as he does. “Whadya mean by getting all personal? I’m just messin’ wid ya!”

“Ok, Gray.”

“But really, go on and eat those hash browns, let’s see if you can eat ‘em at fast as dem eggs.” I get very uncomfortable. She’s obviously not enjoying this. “Hey, look at me. Look here.” She looks up. “When you gonna get married again?” he asks. “Third time’s a charm.”

“Whatever, just eat yer breakfast and let me be.”

“Ok, ok, fine. Just havin’ a lil’ fun with ya.” He continues giggling for a minute. Some of the others are giggling too, and some are as uncomfortable as I am.

After breakfast we move into the living room and begin to open presents. Presents for this many people takes some time. The kids get impatient. I came mostly empty-

handed. Got my mother some gourmet coffees and a Native American-made necklace and my grandmother a foot massage machine. I didn't think until now that she probably already has one. Probably I didn't care that much either when I bought it. Now I wish I had something more thoughtful, but then I don't know her well enough to have done that.

Gray decides he wants to start in at my mother again, "You can't fit them jeans!" he says when she unwraps a pair. "You gonna split 'em." She's says nothing and the next person opens a gift. And the next person after that. When the round has been made to my mother again, she opens the gift I brought for her. "Look at that!" says Gray. "You lef' yer kid years ago and he still gotchu somthin'." He is giggly and loud and obnoxious. "Maybe he's forgiven ya for all the years you weren't 'round." At this point I've had enough.

"You need to watch your mouth." I say.

"Don't talk at me like that boy, I'm just messin' with yer mother," he says, still smiling.

"I'm hardly a boy, and no one is enjoying this."

His face turns serious at me but he says nothing. My uncle interjects with, "Ok, ok. Who's next? Let's not spoil the day."

"Oh yer a man are ya?" says Gray.

"Just stop talking. Everyone's irritated with it."

"Oh no, the big man here wants ta show his big man feathers."

"Not really. Mostly I just want you to shut up." At this

my mother grabs my arm to stop me from saying any more.

“Well then, how does it feel spreadin’ ‘em so wide?”

“You’re an idiot. It doesn’t take a man to confront a coward. Just shut your mouth so the rest of us can enjoy the day.”

“Whoa ho, boy. Careful now. We’s all ok here ‘fore you came.”

“Oh stop it, Gray,” says my grandmother “You ain’t gonna kick him out.”

“Ok,” says my uncle, “now let’s get on.” Gray and I are eye-locked. Inside I find it a little humorous, but outside I’m all business. He finally looks away from me with a half-smile and we go on opening gifts. Everyone is silent now. I realize that maybe I should have just let him do his thing, make his fun like normal. At least then everyone other than my mother would still be of decent cheer.

I apologize to my grandmother after we’re done. She just smiles and says, “Oh, naw hun, just don’t let him get to ya so much. We glad you are here.” She says it and I realize that I’m not glad to be here. I keep thinking I should have stayed in Big Bend. My uncle comes up, “I used to do the same thing as you. He never stops.”

“I gathered that.”

“Don’t let it bother you too much.”

“Good advice, probably.”

I leave the crowd while there’s nothing much going on. I walk the property for a while. It’s chilly outside. I’m

underdressed. If the wind were calm it wouldn't be so bad. Eventually I end up at the horse stables. I figured I would. I go into Hex's stall to greet him. I reach for his face to pet him and he backs away in fear. I realize that I was reaching for him in the same spot I punched him. No matter what I do he won't let me close to that side of his face so I reach his neck and pet it. I apologize out loud for hitting him like I did. I don't try to reach for his face again but I stay for a long time and brush him. When I leave I give him a pat on the neck and say, "see you later."

As I'm walking back to the house Gray is on his way to the stables. We both stop when we're at arm's length, but neither of us says anything at first. Then he starts, "You're lucky your grandmother's here or I'da kicked you outta ma house."

"If she weren't here I'd probably not have come."

"Well, you sure got a mouth on ya."

"I do?" I ask with a smirk, implying he's the one with the mouth.

"I always pick on yer mother."

"Does she ever enjoy it?"

"There you go with that mouth again."

"It gets me into trouble."

"I imagine."

"Alright, I'm heading back up."

"Food's 'bout ready. I'll be up in a minute." He continues down to the stables.

Inside, everything is upbeat. Much different than earlier. Everyone's waving hands and telling stories. The kids are running around with their new toy guns. My mother is still talking about the fraud case. Big surprise. I give a wink to the one she's speaking to. It's amazing how many of these people I don't know. I make it my point to learn everyone's name and engage in at least a few sentences with them. This is what home means for them. I don't have much connection with it, but I can see why it's appealing. The only place I've ever really felt at home is in the wilderness. At the moment I'm embarrassed by this fact. Any other time I'd pride myself on it. But right now I'm wondering if I shouldn't be just as comfortable with my family as I am in nature.

We eat like kings! The food is everywhere. It's harder to find a place that's not covered with food. Some are leftovers. A lot of it was made today. I fill my plate.

The conversation dies again, except for my mother, of course, while everyone eats. I don't know how she does it. My cousin smiles at me. So does my aunt. Everyone understands that she never stops, but they just let her be. She talks, and she's going to keep talking. It's just the way it is. Gray, who has come back in time for food, remains quiet. I can see on his face that he wants to make fun of someone but he keeps his composure. I am proud of him.

A few hours later, when it's well into the evening and many of the family members have gone to their homes, I'm sitting at the table with the remaining few. My mother,

grandmother, Gray, and my aunt and uncle. The talkative, incomprehensible veteran is behind us, talking, with his arms deliberately and elegantly flailing around. It has to be a great speech. He doesn't seem to care that no one's paying attention. The other vet is in his spot lost in his usual routine. I'm far away, but I feel like I see just the tiniest hint of a smile of contentment on him. My mother is reading a cookbook. Every other page she says, "Ooh, that sounds good." Then she reads off the ingredients as if she's meditating on them. Gray is reading about the races with his glasses at the tip of his nose. My grandmother is taking her collection of meds while she converses with the rest of us. "Those will stunt your growth," I tell her. She just smiles at me.

My mother gets up and walks into the kitchen. From there she asks if I'm hungry.

"No." I say. She rustles around for a bit. "There's some pun-kin pie here. You want that?" She asks.

"Yeah, I'll have some."

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After breakfast, my cousin and I decide to go riding. I walk into Hex's stall and greet him with a good pat on the neck. Just out of curiosity, I reach for the side of his face I punched. He hesitates briefly but lets me touch it. "You're a brave horse." I say to him as if I'm a proud father. I'm pretty sure, and I want to believe, I see him perk up upon hearing this. I ask him if he's ready for a stroll as I put a saddle on him. We spend a few hours riding. My crotch feels it. I real-

ize that I never needed to punch him. I only needed to know how to respond to his fear. Aggression wasn't the answer. It only silenced the fear, gave me control, but didn't expel it. Now we are partners. We return the horses to their stall when we are done and I know that I'm going to miss Hex when I leave. It seems childish. I give him some good pats on the side thanking him for the stroll and we head back up to the house.

"You hungry, baby?" asks my mother when we step inside.

"Indeed I am." I keep the words "don't call me baby" from leaving my tongue. She warms some lefties for me and I eat. "I'm glad you came," she says to me.

"Me too," I say. And it was easy to say. I know she's afraid of me. I can see it now. It's ok, I want to tell her. I don't hold it against you. Instead I say, "It's good that we're taking the time to get to know each other. You make a pretty good pumpkin pie." She laughs.

"So you go campin' a lot, huh?"

"Yeah. I need it. Its like water to me."

"So what do ya do when you there?"

"I hike mostly. Build fire, prepare food. I take care of my most immediate needs, and I enjoy the quiet, the scenery."

"You like when no one's round to talk ta?"

"I do. It allows me to examine myself. And remember what's important to me."

“But you need people too?” She says it like a question. Not for her, but for me.

“Well, yeah,” I say without thinking. But it sticks.

The thing about the wilderness is that it’s easy to get along. There’s no one there to ruin my agenda or argue with. It’s home, yes, but it doesn’t require anything of me. It’s the getting place. But here, around people, if you want to make it your home, you have to give. You are going to have to put away a little of yourself. And maybe that’s been my problem.

“Yeah, I need people.”

“We all do.” I know she is afraid. I know she wants to say something. Maybe she will, eventually.

I wonder how I’ll respond.