

*MULE PEOPLE*

A Written Creative Work submitted to the faculty of  
San Francisco State University  
In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree

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Master of Fine Arts

In

Creative Writing

by

Dirk Raso Petersen

San Francisco, California

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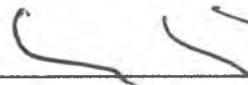
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Mule People* by Dirk Raso Petersen, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a written creative work submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at San Francisco State University.



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Chanan Tigay, MFA  
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*MULE PEOPLE*

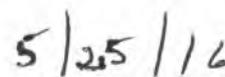
Dirk Raso Petersen  
San Francisco, California  
2016

Mule People represents the thesis for my MFA in Creative Writing. The work is a non-fiction personal narrative that traces my own family's journey through the process of acquiring riding mules and gaining entree--to varying degrees--into the unique subculture that surrounds these equine. At its heart, the piece represents a coming-of-age story for the narrator, in which he learns to navigate elements of his own identity, as well as his relationship to his family members, both two- and four-footed. I hope for the work to also serve as a window in a facet of U.S. culture through the vehicle of the humble mule.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this written creative work



\_\_\_\_\_  
Chair, Thesis Committee



\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply and forever indebted to the instructors of the San Francisco State University Creative Writing Department for fostering an environment in which students have the opportunity to chase their artistic dreams. In particular, I would like to thank my committee members, Chanan Tigay and Peter Orner, as well as Andrew Joron, Junse Kim, and Michelle Carter. Alongside my instructors, I owe endless high fives to the peers who have made my experience so much richer, both in-class and outside of it. You know who you are. Lastly but not leastly, the department staff, with their resourcefulness and forbearance, have been invaluable.

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My greatest thanks go always to my parents, brothers, and dogs, without whom none of this could have happened. And, of course, thanks to all those mules.

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Intro: Into the Paddock

A bray shatters the brittle silence. A wind snakes along the ground, coiling itself around fenceposts and rattling the remaining husks of weeds and summertime grass that edge the boundaries of the fields and poke up through the days-old skiff of snow. A lone figure in an olive-drab, military surplus jacket, one size too small and straining around the belly, stands in the middle of a sandy paddock, the desert wind sucking the moisture from his tongue and leaving bitter grains of sand and dust stuck in his teeth and throat. He drags a cart on bicycle wheels across the stiff peaks of sand, the bright blue polyethylene the only flash of color in the early afternoon. Stopping and releasing his grip on the finger-numbing aluminum handle, he draws a tool from the stained blue well. Wrapping both hands around the wooden shaft, he squares his hips, draws back, and thrusts the tool toward something on the ground—Poseidon, hurling his trident!

A split second after making contact, one of the plastic tines snaps off on a frozen heap of manure.

He sighs. That was his favorite manure fork. And now he could no longer claim, with a gravity rather more befitting a baby-saving ER surgeon than a pre-teen chore-master, to be the only member of the family who never snapped a tine, but at least he would no longer have to go through the effort of hiding his preferred fork from his dad, who, in feats of frustrated brute strength, had snapped between one and every tine on all the other manure forks. Yes, no more need to tuck the fork behind the haystack, bury it

under splintery old boards beside the ditch, or ferret it away in the bird poop-laden barn loft. As he trudges back toward the run-in shelter and tack shed, ruminating on this nearly-silver lining, several pairs of eyes gaze at him from the windlessness under the metal roof, hoping that, instead of looking for an ice-busting shovel, he's actually come back to give them hay, grain, cookies, carrots, or...really, any edible thing. Flabby flanks shudder with the sputtering noises of anticipation; long ears twitch. Mules.

And yes: that lone figure, gently straining the seams of his pilling Army surplus jacket and thinking 'Things weren't always like this...' is a younger I. While, in the final analysis, I have to admit that this is mostly my story, these pages also dole out the tale of a world crafted and curated by the lovers of those most singular equine, and how that world ended up having an inexorable and enduring—if, at times, not entirely welcome—impact on the lives of each member of my family.

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### Wait, a What?

Most people who live in the United States are familiar with horses. The horse occupies a special place in the national imagination, reaching its apotheosis in the twin pillars of Bluegrass-country horse racing and the “Wild West.” *Seabiscuit*, Trigger, Man o’ War, and “Hi-ho, Silver!” Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show and the manicured spectacles that let the sweating colonizers in the crowd pretend they “won it” fair and square. The rodeo circuit, and that high ’n’ lonesome sound. And car after car: Mustang, Bronco, Pinto, Colt. And you want the best Bud money can buy? You better believe it comes thundering in behind a team of Clydesdales, their dinner plate-sized hooves drumming the ground in time to the jangle of their traces.

But another equine makes its way through this nation. Little-known to many, but adored with singular devotion by those few who swear by no other steed, this animal is the mule. Before we go any further, then, it may be helpful to answer the question, “What is a mule?” (And pardon me if you already know; this will take but a moment.) A mule is a hybrid achieved by breeding a horse and a donkey. Specifically, a mule has a donkey father (a Jack) and a horse mother (a mare). If the hybrid has a horse father (a stallion) and a donkey mother (a Jenny), that hybrid is called a hinny. For whatever reason, hinnies are rare, though people in the know (i.e. Mule People) will assert that a mule and a hinny are two distinct beasts. A hinny is allegedly more horse-like, evincing less robust bone and fuller, more horse-like manes. I have met one confirmed hinny, and felt sure that I

had met two others, but who knows—maybe they were just gracile, mane-y mules. And maybe the “science” of hinny-mule differentiation is crap. But it has its believers—and, I’ll be honest; I think “hinny” is just fun to say. Anyway, a horse-donkey hybrid, by whatever name, is a sterile animal. Because horses have 64 chromosomes and donkeys 62, their offspring possess the odd and fertility-inhibiting quantity of 63. Except, once in a long, long while, through some mild genetic mutation, one of the chromosomes gets lost in the conception and a fertile mule is born. However, none of these mules have ever been males (John mules); fertility falls only upon the females (Molly mules). If you don’t believe me, just check the back issues of *Mules ‘n’ More* magazine. I do believe they have every miraculous mule birth on record.

Moving from genotype to phenotype, mules always have the long ears of donkeys, though the shape of their bodies can range from very donkey-like (small butts, no withers,<sup>1</sup> large, heavy-boned heads) to somewhat horselike (moderately beefy haunches, modest withers, smaller, finer-boned heads). Mules also have the benefit of a longer life span than horses. While a horse will make it to 30 at a stretch (25 is more typical), their usable life is often over by 20, after which time they are mainly suited for casual ambles around the field with little kids on their backs. In contrast, mules have a commonly advertised usable life of 35 years (though that number is a bit generous), and

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<sup>1</sup> not the scapulae, as one might initially think, but the spines of the anterior thoracic vertebrae, which give horses their pronounced “shoulder hump”; they serve as anchoring points for muscle

can often live to be 40. A select few can even make it to a heroic half-century of life, which is the upper end of a donkey's common lifespan.

Sonically, they are quite equanimous offspring: many mules split the difference fairly exactly between their horse and donkey parents when it comes to the sounds they make. A characteristic mule call is a sort of "whinnibray," a mash-up of a whinny and a bray. The first half could easily be mistaken for a horse's call, the second half for a donkey's. It sounds something like "NEEEIIIGGGHHH-hey-hey-hey-hey...HEE-HAW! HEE-HAW! HEE-HAW!" Go ahead—try it out.

Of course, not all mules are so even-handed in representing both parents, and those who favor one parent's voice almost always operate on the donkey's side of the fence, using the bray as their calling card. Some mules also go their own way, with sounds that are altogether unique. Pedro, my family's sweetest and shyest mule, sounds like a small-displacement engine with the idle speed too low, a subtle and endearing putt-putt that says, "Please sir, I want some more." Other mules are more terrifyingly chimerical in their vocalizations. Imagine yourself on a cool evening in rural western Colorado. You and your friends have just finished an hours-long band practice, and have decided that you deserve a dip in the hot tub to unwind, make fun of each other, and talk alternately about new song ideas and the romances in your lives. The night is moonless, though stars fill the sky overhead, the milky way not yet lost to the march of city lights. Your drummer is in the middle of a story about the importance of shaving one's nipple

hair when the night is splintered by a high-pitched, lusty cry, so much more than a screech or a howl, more even than a scream, a sound that seems to start somewhere in the dark uncertainty of the adjacent field, but almost immediately swells until no one can say for sure where it's coming from. You all yell in terror and dive beneath the hot, foamy water, as if some safety exists in a giant outdoor bathtub. Western Colorado is a place where coyotes pick off cats and small dogs so regularly no one really bothers to comment on it; where a mountain lion was seen hiding in the brush in a wash, watching elementary school kids get on and off the bus; where another crazed mountain lion tried to take down a draft horse, leaving long, bloody gashes in the huge horse's flank; where a bear tore into a pen and killed an alpaca. In other words, a place where being terrified by sudden, primal outbursts of sound is not unreasonable. Was it some slavering, ravenous, mutant mountain lion, raised on uranium tailings and family pets?

No. It was Max the mule, complaining because more than an hour had passed since he was last fed.

So that's a mule in the broadest sense, but surely another question comes to mind: "*Why* mules?" At least, that's the question I've often been asked when telling people about the passions that governed much of my childhood. The pitch goes something like this: mules are much smarter than horses, which means that they are more dependable

riding animals in many ways. A mule is much less likely to bolt or “blow up”<sup>2</sup> than a horse, because they have a thinking mind—they will consider if something is really worth being terrified about. Furthermore, if you’re some young hothead galloping a horse through the mountains at night, just be prepared, because you could make a horse run plumb off a cliff. A mule would never do that. No sir, a mule would come to a skidding stop-on-a-dime and let you go hurling off the cliff on your own.

Beyond this heightened instinct for self-preservation, mules are vouched to be more sure-footed. This means that they are genetically predisposed to be better at putting their feet in the best possible location while ambling down a precipitous and rock-strewn trail. A few reasons are offered to explain this tendency, all of which point to mules’ donkey heritage as the key. One of these reasons goes something like, “Because they are. It’s instinct.” People who dwell upon this point in a Darwinian light conclude that, because donkeys evolved in arid landscapes that were characterized by steep, narrow, rock-strewn canyons and washes, a heightened “mind your step” instinct was more important to survival than for horses, who evolved in wide-open grasslands, where blind, brute speed was the most important key to evading predators. However, because not all Mule People subscribe to the theory of evolution, the explanation often stops at “Because. It’s a donkey-mule thing.”

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<sup>2</sup> This bit of equine lingo is not much of an exaggeration. Equine are fiercely strong, and a panicked equine is profoundly irrational. Imagine snapping leather, steel posts pummeled into scrap metal, riders flying through the air like sack of potatoes launched from a cannon.

Another explanation given for this sure-footedness is the compact dimensions of mules' feet. A mule will have smaller, rounder hooves than a horse of its same size, and the thinking is that a smaller foot can more easily find a secure perch. As with "instinct," mules' foot size is also due to their donkey genes. No one argues with that.

The third reason, and my favorite, is the assertion that mules' eyes are positioned farther back on their heads, allowing them to see all four feet at once. This last argument is often given as the *coup de grace* in a demonstration of the intrinsic superiority of the mule over the horse. Because, sure, some horses can have small feet, and a real seasoned trail horse with a good mind *could* learn how to be *nearly* as intuitive as a mule about picking a safe path, but your horse is never going to be able to scoot his eyes back on his head and see all four feet at once. So take that, Shortears. As with the two reasons above, this wide-eyed trait is also attributed to donkey heritage.

In fact, most everything positive about mules is attributed to donkey heritage: their longevity, their strength, their endurance, their thoughtfulness, their sure-footedness.<sup>3</sup> So why not just use a donkey as your riding animal? Most people are probably familiar with the conception of donkeys as lazy, but, as someone who has ridden donkeys, I would argue that that old opinion is a misjudgment. What many people call

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<sup>3</sup> Likewise, almost every insult a mule could receive is related to that same donkey heritage: "jugheaded," "coarse-boned," "sway-backed," "pot-bellied," "ugly," "damn ugly," "rumpless," "ratty-maned," and the list goes on. These are, of course, subjective judgements assigned by the horse-supremacists one often encounters in the brush country of Western Texas.

laziness in a donkey is actually a side-effect of their not inconsiderable intelligence.

Simply put, a donkey is smart enough to wonder why the presence of an ape on its back, feebly kicking it in the sides, should make the donkey feel like going for a long stroll that it had no intention of taking. The result of this pondering is often a decision to stay put. So to be blunt, while horses certainly can be very intelligent, a mule needs a little shot of horse-brain to dampen the critical thinking skills of its donkey father.<sup>4</sup>

Invested with the potency of such rhetoric, these Longears came power-walking into my life one winter day, and, as they say, things ain't quite been the same since.

That muley winter day, however, was not my first brush with equestrian dreaming. Long before the first copy of *Mules 'n' More Magazine* had entered the equine-free, in-town house of my early childhood, I had fallen hard for the high romance of the noble cowboy. I was not content, though, to let this fixation be constrained to the open range of my ravenous imagination. No way—I was going to bring it out for the world to see. Step one: the boots. They appeared one day in a closet or corner of a room, bright red and just my size. Put those on, and there was no trail I couldn't gallop through, no errant cow I couldn't track down. The jeans were easy, because this was America, but the belt—the belt was a talisman. On the tarnished brass buckle, a cowboy clung to a flailing bronc, one hand trailing in the air and his hat making a dramatic exit. Cinch my trousers with that belt, and I could feel the dauntless brass cowboy's riding skill course through me.

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<sup>4</sup> Sorry, horses, but you gotta admit it's true. You know I love you, though.

The shirt, a snap-fronted double-breasted number in navy blue, just like the cavalry or John Wayne used to wear. Tied loose around the neck, ready to be drawn over the nose and mouth in the event of a high desert dust storm, a bright red bandana to match those buckaroo boots. And lastly, a tight-woven straw hat with a high, narrow crown, cinched under the chin with a stampede string, just to make sure I wouldn't lose it like the cowboy on the buckle.

So there I was, dressed for action. And what was the action? Oh, a trip to the mall with my mom to do some errands, or dinner out with the family at a restaurant. One time, in the food court, a kid, maybe a year younger than me at the time, jumped up, eyes wide, and shouted "Look at the cowboy, Mommy!" I whirled around, hoping to catch a glimpse of just such a hero. And then I realized: the kid thought *I* was the cowboy, all four of five years-worth of me. 'Wow,' I thought, 'I guess my costume is really good!' And then, '... but I'm not really a cowboy.' Caught up in the embarrassment of my success, I soon abandoned the practice.

Where would such a buckaroo yearning come from? The effort I invested in my yee-haw show still baffles me (and how I wish I could summon such dedication for all my undertakings these days!), but before I write my masquerade off as entirely cringe-worthy, just imagine that you grew up in a place where a slice of the populace did wear cowboy boots, snap-front shirts, big belt buckles, and cowboy hats. A place that was on the big-league pro rodeo circuit. A place where ranchers still ran cattle all over the

mountains, and still rounded them up with horses as often as with ATVs. Then, you can imagine my excitement at the prospect of equine in my 7-or-8-year-old life. Horses! At last! I could finally live down what I had begun to consider the shame of being a huge poser as a younger kid, because I would be the real deal.

“No, not horses son. Mules.” What? My shoulders slumped. All those hours of reading *Black Beauty*, *The Black Stallion*, *My Friend Flicka*; all those nights filled with dreams of sitting astride a snorting horse as it galloped across the sand and stone of a desert that it glowed like embers beneath the flames of sunset...so nearly fulfilled, and yet—mules? Why? Well, for all of the reasons mentioned above. And just to prove it, my parents produced a low-budget VHS checked out from the Mesa County Public Library (housed in a leaky former Safeway, because taxes [and libraries] are for communists, according to Western Colorado) that explained how mules are the only mount sure-footed and trustworthy enough to carry tennis shoe-clad, white-knuckled Easterners up and down the narrow trails that lead to the floor of the Grand Canyon. I saw a lot of that video in the next few weeks and never found it entirely convincing, but my credulity was a moot point. The deal was sealed. We were to become Mule People.

### Who Are These People?: my parents and the dream

Though mules may be riveting, their intrinsic properties could be insufficient to convince some readers of the “why” behind my parent’s decision to go whole-hog for the Longears lifestyle. However, a biographical two-step should serve to tread the way to enlightenment for the disbelievers.

My dad was born in 1942 in Lincoln, NE. At the time, my grandmother was taking a pause from her teaching career to be a homemaker and my grandfather was a social worker in the county’s child welfare service. My grandfather was born to drayman, hotelier, restaurateur, farmer, and hopeless romantic, Chris,<sup>5</sup> and grew up in various small towns in Nebraska. His mother, my great-grandmother Clara, left when he was an infant, and he was subjected to various stepmothers, at least one of whom was wicked. My Grandma Petersen was born to the Kline family, fervent fundamentalists of Pennsylvania Dutch and Scottish extraction who generally lived heroically long lives, especially on the Scottish side (a distinguished gentleman, great-great-grandfather Monacle, lived to the ripe age of 102 without once brushing his teeth). The Klines scraped a living out of the eastern Nebraska soil.

By the time they met at Kearney State Teachers’ College (now University of Nebraska-Kearney), my dad’s parents seemed determined to avoid the rural lifestyle of

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<sup>5</sup> or more accurately, Christ, in the Danish; somehow, it looks odd that way in English

their pasts. Shortly after my dad's older brother and he were born, and before my dad's younger brother was born, the family skipped Nebraska for the Eastern Seaboard, where my grandmother worked in education and my grandfather in mental health. However, every summer, the family of five would make the long, pre-interstate trek to Nebraska and then on to Colorado, visiting family and The Promised Land, respectively. In childhood visits to his "favorite relative"—by-then-just-farmer but still-hopeless-romantic, Chris(t)—my dad determined he was going to be a farmer himself. However, both of his grandfathers and his parents warned him off it, saying they couldn't afford to set him up with a farm large enough to be profitable, so he became a surgeon instead.

Now, the jump from wannabe-farmer to doctor wasn't so stark or sudden as that, but I think two observations are crucial here. The first is that I have never met anyone who was as delighted with their profession as my dad was with his. Leaving at dawn and coming home after dark was no chore when patients were in need, and he would take their phone calls for any sort of medical advice long after they were officially discharged from his care. The knots on his ties were perfect, plump, crisp Full Windsors, and surgical journals and reference tomes marched across bookshelves.<sup>6</sup> He was always going to "the hospital," "the office," or "a case"; never in my memory did he say he was headed to "work." The other observation, though, is that he never talked about what inspired him to

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<sup>6</sup> Those journals also made their way to the kitchen table not infrequently, were one could gaze, for instance, at full-color photographs of abscessed bowels—the perfect side dish to any meal.

become a doctor, whereas he loved to talk about his childhood visits to Nebraska and his dreams of being a farmer, and, once he had acquired his beloved John Deere, few activities were as dear to him as working the acreage.<sup>7</sup> If he had believed he could have spent his career atop a tractor and still provided for his family, I don't think he would have thought twice.

And the dream lingered, farm or no farm. Throughout his medical school days in Denver (during which time he lived in his parents' summer cabin up Coal Creek Canyon, motorcycling his way to school), my dad could be seen riding a horse through the mountains, snap-front-shirted, cowboy-hatted, a pack roll tied behind the cantle of a Western saddle, looking for all the world (and, allegedly, to many touristic passers-by) like something he was not. Sound familiar?

By the time he was through residency (a brief detour in Kansas) and settled in Grand Junction, he had acquired a black, 17.2 hand Tennessee Walking Horse, Sadie, whom he rode bareback through the sandstone and Pinyon-Juniper forests of the Colorado National Monument, in the days when an eccentrically-placed Bison herd still roamed the site. He and his then-wife lived on seven acres at the base of the Monument, their homestead complete with a breeding pair of Olde English Mastiffs, a horse barn, nineteen chickens, and an orange Dodge pick-up truck with 4x4 and a granny gear. Of

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, while he rode the tractor, someone else toiled in the dust and diesel fumes alongside it. Who could that could have been?

course, the grounds also contained a Volvo station wagon and a Volvo sedan; everything in moderation.

The marriage didn't last, and my dad found himself selling the Broadway property<sup>8</sup> and uncertain what to do with Sadie. Fortunately, the head nurse at his practice lived on an acreage with a horse barn, fields, and space for another animal. He gave her Sadie, with the agreement that, someday down the line, when he had the right set-up, he would be given one of Sadie's offspring. The date was not firm in anyone's mind, but, since the agreement would have to be fulfilled within the limits of Sadie's brood years, the transaction had to take place within a decade. The seed lay dormant, ready to germinate.

My mom was born and raised in Grand Junction, like her father before her, though her forebears had fled the farming life at least a generation earlier than my dad's. My grandma, who I knew as Gammy, was a homemaker with a keen eye for fashion and a dedication to both "the Modern" and Japanese garden aesthetics. Grandfather Raso was a lawyer and rather distinguished, in a small-town way, involved equally in the progress of commerce and development in his hometown and in the well-being of the Italian immigrant and Italian-American community of which he was a part. Although piles of pictures attest to my great-grandfather Raso's penchant for shuttling his family up onto

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<sup>8</sup> In Western Colorado, Broadway is a road that features horse properties and small farms.

the slopes of the nearby Grand Mesa for picnics—quite an arduous event, in the 1920s, especially because no one was ever wearing less than a full-length dress or three-piece suit (and great-grandfather Amore always managed to find a shotgun to hold)—by the time my mother was growing up, my grandfather Raso and Gammy had disavowed this adventurous past and limited their outdoor activity to the golf course.

This staid state of affairs, however, didn't stop my mom from becoming enamored of the mythos of the Wild West, which may have reached its greatest comestibility in the 1950s, as the proliferation of television sets gave visual drama to the radio tales of the Lone Ranger, Tonto, Silver, Roy Rogers, Trigger—and, last but not least, Dale Evans, sweetheart of the prairies. One of my mom's most prized possessions as a kid was a Dale Evans Cowgirl Outfit, complete with plastic six-gun. Gammy didn't approve of such unladylike and unglamorous carryings-on, but even she relented in the face of repeated pleas. One plea, though, remained unequivocally denied by both parents, and that was the plea for a horse. And not some hokey little pony, but a *real* horse, like Dale Evans rode, like the Cisco Kid rode! No, no, Shari Ann, much too dangerous. And anyway, think of all that dust! So, aside from a few rides on bored dude string horses, my mom had to content herself with imagination.

The dream stuck, though, and expressed itself in other ways, like a brief phase of wearing cowboy boots *with spurs* during her first year of college in California (she was

from *western* Colorado, after all) and, around the time of my birth years later, purchasing a small pickup truck. “If *your father* could see *his daughter* driving around in a *pickup truck...*” Gammy couldn’t even finish the sentence.

So, whatever their differences, whatever the variations in the weaving of their pasts, however awkward it may have been that my dad’s divorce lawyer—a colleague of my mom’s—set them up on an unwilling (but apparently successful) blind date, my parents’ dreams shared common ground, and, after just over a decade of marriage, those dreams were ready to sprout. 1997 was drawing near, and my dad was planning to semi-retire at age 55 to spend more time with his young sons and maybe pursue some non-medical interests (for instance, he promised me a remote-controlled biplane—one of the earlier obsessive and random desires in my life). Sadie was also aging. My parents knew that they could get a Tennessee Walking Horse foal, but my dad began to say, “You know, I’ve always heard that the smoothest ride is actually a Tennessee Walking Mule.” Where did he hear that? When? From whom? Nobody knew, including him. If asked, he would answer, “Oh, you know, around; you hear that around people who know Tennessee Walkers.” My parents began to ruminate on having Sadie bred to a high-quality Mammoth Jack,<sup>9</sup> but realized that, instead of waiting for a foal to be born and then subsequently raised and trained—which would take at least four years in all—they could

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<sup>9</sup> Donkeys come in three sizes: “Miniature,” “Standard,” and “Mammoth.” Mammoth donkeys easily reach the size of the typical saddle horse, and are the sire of choice for saddle mules.

just buy a mature, broke mule and dive right in. In my love of baby animals, I didn't quite understand the rush. But there we were, poised on the muley brink.

The Trappings and the Trader. And Red.

The first thing you need, if you want to become a Mule Person—aside from a VHS about mule tourism and a few issues of *Mules 'n' More* or *Western Mule Magazine*—is, of course, a mule. In many communities in the United States, interested persons can find stables where they can rent time using a horse, whether to take lessons, ride in the arena, or even hit the trails for a little adventure. For whatever reason, mules are in far shorter supply at these fine facilities, leaving most would-be mule riders with two options. The first option is to find a friend who has a mule that she or he is willing to lend out for the occasional amble. As to the likelihood of succeeding in this endeavor, consider your surrounding geography. Are you in the Ozarks? If not, refer to the aforementioned mule scarcity. In most cases, then, the budding enthusiast is left but one option: buying a mule.

But if you're like my family, the complications don't stop there. While my dad had owned and spent many hours riding horses during his previous marriage (a time, apparently, of ignorance about the true nature of both equine and love), they were gone by the time I came around, and I spent the first eight years of my life living "in town," in a comfortable split-level house with a walk-out basement and multiply themed garden planters, all situated on a quiet cul-de-sac off a quiet cul-de-sac. While this property did have a kennel for the safe storage of our canine companions—that is, when a ruinous

branch from the immense and immensely brittle cottonwood trees wasn't busy smashing it—the yard had no suitable enclosure for equine.<sup>10</sup> After all, you can't have mules just the other side of your walk-out basement's sliding glass door. They'd walk right in. So the only option was to find a boarding facility.

Fortunately for us, boarding facilities abound in horsey, pick-up-trucked, cowboy-hatted Western Colorado, and my parents already had one picked out. Several months before the first livestock acquisition, my mom had begun to indulge in the equestrian dream by finding a place to take some riding lessons. Although there were no mules in sight (or earshot) at Reimer's Rainbow Ranch, she nonetheless began to cut her chops on lesson horse extraordinaire: leggy, lovely, and now long-dead, the mighty DT. Under the tutelage of Jennifer Wilson, rider and teacher extraordinaire, my mother, younger brother, and I all learned to walk, trot, and canter from the back of the 16 hand appaloosa.

But the problem with a great lesson horse is that everyone else wants to always be booking lessons on it, and anyway, DT wasn't a mule. That led my parents to cast their eye a-roving over the valley, in search of a suitable steed. Now, horsey though Western Colorado is, mules do periodically float up and break the surface, swelling the ranks of some herd or another. One of these vaguely mulish warm spots was the facility of Scott Lowry, a "horse trader" in the rural hinterlands who happened to wheel and deal

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<sup>10</sup> Some people might also wonder about zoning issues, but Grand Junction is close enough to its rural roots to not trouble with such inanity. Throughout my youth, a sheep ranch (albeit a small one) still operated a scant couple blocks away, between my old house and the hospital.

Longears once in a while. Like all good horse traders, Lowry had a couple pickups and a couple different horse trailers on the premises, along with various sizes and shapes of pens cobbled together from pre-fab panels and wire and pins. A glad-handing jovial gent with a firmly ensconced cowboy hat and a lanky comportment, Lowry was the source for Red, my family's first mule. The ensuing transaction was also when I first learned that people are allowed to say "twenty-four-hundred," or "twenty-two-hundred," instead of "two-thousand four-hundred."

And what a first mule Red was. Sorrel, a bit sway-backed, and an easy-keeper who could sprout a gut overnight, with a massive head and a bony hump on his snout that looked like the roll bars of a go-kart, Red was the most profoundly difficult animal to catch that I have ever met. Conveniently, he was also one of the first equine I ever had to catch or witness being caught, so all my subsequent catching experiences have seemed thoroughly expedient. Indeed, my mom, for whom Red was best behaved, would often have to commit fifteen minutes to catching him—in a 12'x40' run.

Even though we got him on Valentine's Day, no one was ever going to say Red was gorgeous, although I always did think he was handsome, in his way, which may have been a view that not even my mom shared. There was something compelling about that huge head that I imagined weighed as much as my 8-year-old self, with its heavy brow and the way the skin sank so deeply behind the prominent arch of the bone above his eye.

eye. I liked to run my finger lightly over that depression, fascinated by the hollowness below the skin, as though there were some piece missing. And once my parents pointed it out, I grew to appreciate the heft of his leg bones, which surpassed that of just about any of the horses at Rainbow Ranch. If he were a rig, he would have been a diesel for sure. But a turbo-diesel, because he could walk with at least as much piss and vinegar as the gray-haired lady, who, in her fingerless gloves, jog-trotted up and down the street past our house everyday, much to my younger self's bemusement. Indeed, when Red hit the trail, he often seemed to have but one objective: get out and back as fast as possible. Which could have been because food always waited on the other side.

As we walked him through the grounds of Rainbow Ranch, horse owners would whip their heads around and stare, open mouths belying the alarm in their gazes. Then, they would turn to their horses with worry widening their eyes, before wheeling back around to watch our progress. What run is he going to be occupying? Oh, please, say it's not the one next to my dear Guggenheim's Lucky Munificence Lollipop! Periodically, his whinnibrays—more conventional than Max's screams, but no less full-lunged—would tear through the grounds, and legging-clad dressage riders would fall weeping to the wood chips.

The party was over, horse people. The mules had arrived.

And my dad was happy to declaim their superiority to any horse person who

would stop to listen—or to accost those who did not—with something suspiciously like smugness tucked in the upturned corners of his mouth.

Into the Ozarks: Thomas, Tommie, a rodeo, a couple mules, and true love

So that was Red: piss, vinegar, a big head, and a bigger appetite. But the thing with mules is that, like potato chips, electric guitars, or Ferraris, you can't stop at just one, especially when you have a family of four who you're trying to get saddled up. And, once we'd reeled Red in, we'd pretty well exhausted the best that the Grand Valley could offer in the hybrid department. Indeed, about the only other hybrid available in town was Tex-Mex, and, in an agriculture-dependent, semi-rural area with big city-beating Mexican restaurants on every corner, you'd have to be real desperate (or, more likely, some knucklehead tourist) to wash up on *those* shores. No option was left but a journey to the beating heart, or at least the musty rhizome: The Ozarks.

Now lest you think my parents rash, we didn't all just pile into the wagon and ship out for the nebulous interstices of Missouri and Arkansas in one fell swoop. Instead, the preliminary expedition was carried out by my dad alone. He (and no doubt a few cowboy hats, and at least one pair of Ariat boots) hopped in his still-pretty-new Cadillac and put the pedal to the metal—which is no hyperbolic figure of speech, in his case—burning down I-70 for the Kansas-Arkansas border and a little town called Baxter Springs, KS. Destination: a rendezvous with Thomas Jones, Tommie Yeargain, and a little event in Joplin, MO—the mule rodeo.

I am not sure how the conversations transpired that led to that first set of

encounters, but we can imagine the weird wonderfulness of it all. Rockville, Maryland-raised, Harvard-educated surgeon from Western Colorado (a place caught pinned and wriggling somewhere between 1886 and 1995, which often seems to average out to about 1973) grabs the phone and dials up Ozark born-and-raised welder, raccoon-hunter, and mule-person Thomas Jones and says “I saw your info in *Mules 'n' More*, and I’d love to come see what you’ve got.” Thomas says, “I may not have everything you need, but I bet Tommie Yeargain might. Why don’t you come on down, and we’ll show you around.” The dates were set, and the rubber hit the pavement.

I don’t remember too many of the details of my dad’s first trip, partially because he wasn’t always the most detail-oriented observer. I have no doubt that he described Tommie Yeargain as “a real character,” and probably said the same of Thomas, although less emphatically. He probably described their physical presences, perhaps even something about their “body habitus”—Tommie was a wiry, lean, salty old guy perpetually in overalls, Thomas Jones a little more robust, a little more mulleted, a lot younger. And without a doubt, he regaled my mom with tales of every meal he ate during his absence (though this tendency would not reach truly dazzling heights until later years). But the only story line which really stuck with me—aside from the Tommie/Thomas coincidence—was that of the mule rodeo. What feats of agility! What dazzling displays of equine exploits! Because, while a mule rodeo contains, alas, the same cruel

bullshit that usually comes packaged under the name—the calf-roping and hog-tying of the PRCA (which, naturally, includes Grand Junction, CO, as one of its circuit stops)—a mule rodeo is simultaneously something much more like the great athletic events of Olympia, Delphi, Nemea, or Isthmia.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps I exaggerate, and perhaps I digress, but if you had heard the account firsthand from the dazzled lips of my dad, seen the amazement in his eyes and been caught up in the contagion of his admiration, you could never question such illustrious allusion. A mule, just a little mule, barely more than 14 hands tall, clearing a 6-foot-tall barrier in a single leap! And was it a running jump? No way! The human walked the mule up until it was nose-to-rail before the obstacle, clicked or whistled, and—wham!—the mule mule crouched, leaned back, and was over that top rail before you had time to finish putting that next handful of kettle corn in your open mouth. I can imagine him shouting his enthusiasm (“*All right!!!*”, just like when Elway threw a perfect end zone bomb, or on the rare occasion that I didn’t cringe away from the ball in soccer), while Tommie cackled and Thomas smiled quietly, arrayed on the bleachers to either side. They must have been certain that this little trick would make a believer out of anyone. And it wasn’t just the standing jump that we heard about—the rodeo was full of feats of agility and trick-riding—but that standing jump was what served to further seal the deal for our muley future: “a horse could *never* do that!” And my dad was right.

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<sup>11</sup> Alright, maybe Olympia and Delphi are a little rich, but surely Isthmia is not inappropriate, and, lest we forget, those Ancient Greeks were lovers of mule-cart races, for which many a tyrant or his underling was wreathed in glory.

Those folks in Joplin sure knew how to make their mules shine. If there had ever been a chance for my childhood get unhitched from that mule train, it was swirled away right then and there like a last sip of sarsaparilla beneath the Missouri moonlight. Warren A. Petersen, M.D., had made up his mind—and the rest of ours along with it.

But the purpose of the trip was mule acquisition, after all, so most of my dad's time was spent eyeing the eligible Longears. The primary objective was to find a mule for my mom and a mule for me. For my younger brother—who was, after, barely 6—my parents had just purchased Blackjack, a seasoned old pony of that legendary type that would step under a kid to prevent him or her from falling off. And, since my brother's equestrian prowess was on par with that of a sack of potatoes, Blackjack's instincts were well worthwhile. But put a grown-up on his back, and that pony was raring to go, with some sort of gaited shuffle of his own invention that would even give Red a walk for his money. Jo Wilson, the mother of our lesson teacher Jennifer, even said, "If you ever don't want this horse, I'll take him, because he reminds of a pony I had as a kid." So our herd back at Rainbow Ranch had grown to two in short order, and Dad was on a quest to complete the hand.

When he arrived at Thomas Jones' place, my dad met Joe, a bay John mule, taller and less robust than Red, with big, sad-looking brown eyes and the softest, finest hair on his nose. Thomas Jones' son, Tommy, who was a couple or so years older than I, had been

riding Joe around quite a bit, so Thomas vouched that he was a tractable and stable mule for all ages. However, Thomas didn't have any stock on hand that fit the bill for my mom, so they headed on over to Tommie's place, which was located just outside of Jane, MO, a speck of a town in the southwesternmost corner of the state. And that is where my dad met his girlfriend.

Oh, those eyelashes! Such long, thick eyelashes, surrounding those big, light brown eyes, which would regard you from beneath the lassy flutter. Flaxen hair, of such luster as Yeats could only dream, vying in splendor with the Sun itself. And those ankles—their fine, slim bones, their delicacy that gave onto the small, shapely feet. And, O! the way she would stamp and snort and fart and swish her tail, impatient to go go go, wherever you wanted, the farther the better, the faster the better. Oh yes—Babe. And a babe she was. “Just put 500 miles on her, Doc,<sup>12</sup> and she'll be perfect for your wife,” Tommie said. And he was totally wrong, because a mule with that much get-up-and-go was never going to suit a nervous novice rider, and just eager enough for the sale to probably know that he was totally wrong. My dad probably also knew that Tommie was wrong, but none of that mattered—he was in love<sup>13</sup>.

Alas, although I have no doubt that my dad would have welcomed Babe into that

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<sup>12</sup> Every mule person (and assorted other “old timer”) was always calling my dad “Doc.” He loved it. They loved that he loved it. The cycle went on.

<sup>13</sup> And Thomas probably knew that Babe was the wrong mule, too, but had also probably already grasped the futility of trying to talk Doc out of anything to which he'd set his mind.

Cadillac (in which his children were only mostly welcome), his large-format lover was not passenger seat material, so it was arranged that Thomas would drive the two new family members roughly halfway to Grand Junction, where we would meet him for a swap. My mom—who, aside from roughly a decade of school and life in the San Francisco Bay Area, was a Western Colorado lifer—began to feel anxious and unmoored by the horizon, which, devoid of mountains, mesas, or monoliths, extended on every side to its vanishing point. Thinking, as I often did, that I should do, think, or feel whatever my mom did, I gazed around and tried to feel freaked out. However, this game quickly became less interesting than whatever books I had on that trip. *Hank the Cowdog* and *Billy and Blaze*, though *The Hardy Boys* were never far from reach. Cowboys, dogs, horses, and sleuthing, because no one had yet written any good mule-themed youth mysteries. And anyway, I still hadn't gotten over those red cowboy boots and the feeling of a bandana sticking to my face. I just hoped some cowboy somewhere rode a mule.

For his part, I'm sure my younger brother was bored and disgruntled, attitudes which he manages to preserve toward mules (and, especially, to mule-related chores) to this day. My dad, however, was in his element, infomercial-approved Blues Blockers driving glasses firmly ensconced, hands loosely wrapped around the steering wheel, gazing at the expanse of plains that reminded him of Nebraska summers on his grandfathers' farms. None of us could have understood his excitement then, but I have no

doubt that he had flaxen hair on his mind.

We met Thomas Jones in a motel parking lot next to a service station, a place where he and my dad could find enough room for their rigs. As we walked up to Thomas' rig, the thud of stamping hooves made the outside shudder, and I felt my insides twist. The trailer held big, powerful animals with rock-hard hooves and hot breath. My books and bandanas weren't going to help me there.

The mules were unloaded and paraded about the parking lot, where I witnessed at least one torrential urination. There was my dad, singing Babe's praises. And here came Joe, while my dad turned and said, "Here's your mule, son!" I gazed up. Joe was at least twice as tall as I had imagined. *But he's supposed to be a kid's mule*, I thought, feebly, watching him swish his tail and stomp a bit, his widened nostrils and lifted head testing the scents and sounds of that new place. There he was, though, and I knew I'd be sitting astride him soon, because I was nothing if not an obedient child.

The Story of Joe: a glimpse of the underbelly

Despite my initial trepidation, I warmed to the idea of Joe pretty quickly, whose sad eyes and soft muzzle were far more reassuring than piss-and-vinegar Red or snort-and-fart Babe. I even grew to appreciate the distinction of his color. Sorrel mules like Red and Babe (“flaxen mane and tail” notwithstanding) are a dime a dozen, but an almost-black bay with an orange cream muzzle? That carried a whiff of elegance. For all my cautious affection, though, I never even got to ride him.

While I am sure that Joe was a stable and kid-friendly mule, I was not yet much of a rider, thanks in large part to a most un-cowboy-like store of fear heaped in my gut. In the meantime, my dad decided to put some miles on Joe in order to get to know him and let him get to know us. It was a school day, and my dad and some companions were taking a ride on BLM land in the desert that surrounds my hometown. The ride was going along well, with speed-loving Warren Petersen tossing in some cantering for good measure. Then, at some point, he reined in hard on Joe, who bucked wildly and sent him flying through the air. Tucking into a roll as he arced toward the ground, my dad managed to not smash his head or break his neck, but the distal end of his left clavicle was snapped. I came home to that terrifying story of what my mule had done, as my dad leaned against the brick wall of our kitchen, his arm in a sling—though cheerful, in a way that few people other than a surgeon would have been after a fracture. He told me in

detail about the anatomy of the clavicle and the nature of the break, how the distal end was the worst spot for the fracture and would take longer to heal. He also told us about his good fortune in having gotten off with just a broken collarbone. "You know, I think it's because I took Tumbling as a boy, so I know how to fall," he ruminated. Just in case there were ever any doubts, my dad never failed to insert a comment into each conversation that demonstrated that he hailed from a bygone era. But the bad news was yet to come.

No one could figure out what had caused Joe to snap like that. Tommy Jones, Jr., had been riding him around for months, cantering here and there without incident. But, after he bucked, Joe had gone wild-eyed, and was terrified when my dad tried to approach him. He was opening and closing his jaw, chewing on the air like a dog trying to get peanut butter off the roof of its mouth. This was no case of a simple scare. My parents managed almost immediately to get him checked by a vet, who, after mildly sedating him, opened his mouth for inspection. Nearly all the way back on Joe's tongue, the vet found a thick grey line of tangled scar tissue, which ran all the way across and almost all the way through. At some point, years before, Joe had his tongue nearly cut off. Though the bit my dad was using that day was a simple, short-shanked curb bit of a

kind<sup>14</sup> that no one would have expected to cause injury, it sat just far enough back in Joe's mouth that it had cut into and reopened the delicate scar tissue on his old wound. While my dad hadn't really been blaming Joe for the accident before, he certainly wasn't now. Instead, he became wracked with guilt for hurting the mule, who had started to tremble whenever my dad came near. And while I would not have been able to help feeling that same guilt, the blame rested exclusively on the shoulders of whoever had treated Joe with such cruelty.

And here is where I will tell you the word for someone who uses mules, the mule-world's equivalent of "cowboy" or "equestrian." That word is "mule skinner."

"Mule skinner" is derived, so the tradition states, from the image of a wagon driver, standing up there in the box and whippin' the mules fit to skin 'em. An ugly word for an ugly image, and one that betrays a harsh truth about this little world: mules are often seen as unworthy of sentiment, as tools to be literally whipped into shape, as dumb brutes who deserve brutality from people who would never treat a horse the same way (though many of these same people would treat a horse this way). Someone had gotten a hold of Joe and tortured him in an effort to make him submit.

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<sup>14</sup> A bit is a metal device that goes in an equine's mouth. It is held in place by the bridle, and the reins attach to rings that are located either directly outside the mouth or at the end of shanks. The longer the shank, the more pressure a rider can apply to the equine's tongue, the roof of its mouth, and its cheeks. A curb bit has an arch in the middle, allowing some tongue relief.

That someone, however, was not Thomas Jones.<sup>15</sup> When he learned what had happened, he was horrified and apologized over and over. He and Tommy Jones had been using a bit that, by a stroke of luck, did not hit the scar tissue. The wound was so far back on the tongue that only a vet or someone who was searching for a problem and had pulled the tongue forward for inspection could have seen it, so Thomas never knew of its presence. By the time he acquired Joe and began to work with him, enough time had passed, as well as enough owners, that the injury was only a painful memory, dormant under Thomas' care. But, once it had been unwittingly awakened by my dad, Joe could no longer be our mule. Thomas took him back and found him a loving home where he is still living out his days with owners who know how to be careful of his physical and psychological hurt.

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<sup>15</sup> And we never did find out who it was, which is just as well. My dad had steady hands and good aim.

### Where to Put a Mule

If a person gets a hankering for a hamster or starts jonesing for a gerbil, some lifestyle changes are required. One has to, for instance, clear the detritus of their days off the top of their dresser in order to make space for a tiny enclosure (a home—don't call it a cage). One also has to make sure to refill a pint-sized drip bottle and dish out some pellets, some seeds and nuts, some little tooth-whittling treats. And of course, the most riveting part—scooping out and disposing of wood chips or recycled paper bedding soiled by the activity of tiny bladders and bowels. Furthermore, one cannot simply leave home for days on end without making provisions for the care of the little heart that beats above the underwear drawer. The joy of a rodent's companionship will engender a lifestyle change.

Scale this activity up through increasing sizes of non-human room-mates and the commitment is commensurate. Cats need scratching posts, lest they turn their critical artist's eye to remodeling the curtains; dogs need to be walked, to run, to have balls or frisbees or cats to chase. And though no one has decoded the emotional life of hamsters and gerbils as thoroughly as we like to think we have decoded that of cats and dogs, it is probably fair to say that these larger, more involved animals also need larger, more involved affection; a handful of pellets and a nub of carrot dropped from above simply will not do for Fido and Desdemona.

From before my birth, my family's household was never less than a two-dog affair, and sometimes featured three or even four. Beyond this, the parties involved were no mere lapdogs, but consisted at various points of a breeding pair of Olde English Mastiffs (the male of whom, in addition to being named Chaucer, also weighed a feathery 185 pounds), an Airedale terrier, two Rhodesian Ridgeback mixes, and a German Shepherd.<sup>16</sup> My first Chores® and lessons about Responsibility™ came round age five in the form of making sure that each dog had a proper portion of food in the widely spaced bowls in the basement, while my younger brother had to ensure that their water was topped up. For our pains, we were even, within a couple of years, awarded the tax-free sum of \$0.50 each week, with the possibility of upgrading to an entire change-free \$1.00 a week if we managed to perform our jobs well over time. For boys whose grandmother could elicit high-pitched and quickly hushed yells of delight by hiding nickels, dimes, and, occasionally (the jackpot) quarters around her family room, that chore allowance was serious business. And it came with serious consequences: the discovery of a bone-dry water bowl could mean no pair of quarters that week.

With these canines came a large fenced yard that took up at least half of the 3/4-acre lot. A patio sat directly outside the kitchen, beyond which a hill ran down toward the far fence line, where a set of monkey bars and a slide resided, a structure that was often

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<sup>16</sup> a 30ish-pound Keeshond stray with a cantankerous streak did somehow sneak in there in those early days. Some things are inexplicable.

turned into a ship with the application of scotch-taped paper flags bearing inscrutable insignia and the occasional lumpy Jolly Roger. Multiple garden planters hugged the walls of the house and processed down one side of the hill, each with their own theme (tomatoes, herbs, desert succulents, various flowers, and even the disappointing strawberryless strawberry plants, which my parents planted as ground cover and my brother and I considered a minor crime). There were three steps down from the sidewalk to the grass, which were made of redwood. In addition to not being a wood that my 5 or 6-year-old judgement considered “red,” these steps were painted gray. I stood by and watched my dad do it, confounded by this collapse of nominal logic.

With this yard—which was, according to my mom, for 1) the kids, 2) a pleasing scene, 3) kitchen accents, and 4) the dogs, and, according to my dad, for 1) the dogs, 2) the kids, and 3) to look good—came the labor of upkeep. Leaves had to be raked, planters weeded, dog-gnawed chain link reattached, plants watered, grass cut, and dog poop removed. All of which is to say that the act of upsizing to equine was not without some logistical precedent.

But that yard was not fit for the hooves and heft of a herd, so, with my parents’ mule acquisitions beginning in earnest, other arrangements had to be made. Enter Reimer’s Rainbow Ranch, a commercial “horse-boarding”<sup>17</sup> operation located a twenty-odd-minute drive from 627 Fletcher Lane. Reimer’s cut it for a little bit, but the greater

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<sup>17</sup> Alas, mules and donkeys are excluded even in the nomenclature of much of the equine scene

intimacy, nearer location, and opportunity for our herd to share a corral as a unit drew my parents to Reflection Farm. They would catch their mules, tie them to a hitching rail, and get to brushing and bonding and tacking up. I would crouch on my heels by the edge of a small, just-for-show pond in front of the property owners' house and watch the tadpoles that swarmed around the water's edge, looking on as they threaded stalks of grass and thin, patchy blankets of algae, looking on as they grew larger visit by visit, until one day there were only frogs hiding out of sight and no more tadpoles. And always, my parents voices would come calling sooner or later for me to saddle up and ride.

Despite the smooth set-up and idylls of Reflection Farm, the desire for something more was brewing in both my parents. Brewing, had I only known, for years, long before my birth. One day, that desire gathered itself and rose up, and Jack and I learned that we would be moving.

I do not remember the words or even the moment that the decision was revealed to us. I only remember the feeling of the impending motion—*moving*. I cannot speak for other children, but for my Jack and me, few possibilities in those elementary school days were more terrifying. The words seemed to float around school in a hush, in the breathy tones that are saved for subjects like the boogie man—subjects that, if they hear you name them, can come and claim you as their own: “Abby’s *moving*. Sean is *moving*.” Maybe the fate accumulated such gravity because no one ever seemed to know why they

were being moved. Moving always seemed to have something to do with parents, grandparents, guardians, jobs, marriages—categories that floated above the understanding of most grade-school minds, and that involved something utterly beyond any kid's control: the decisions of *grown-ups*. Bedtime stories, snack items, and sandwich contents could be chosen, and sometimes things like activities could be appealed (a bike ride instead of a walk, for instance), but “moving” carried the weight of inevitability, the weight of a logic that was not the logic of peanut-butter-and-jelly or monkey bars. It seemed to emerge from nowhere, but to be even more unbudgeable than a fifth-grader hogging the high slide.

By this time, Jack had already experienced the vagaries of that gerund. Kimberly, brown-haired, blue-eyed, bedimpled; Kimberly, with whom he had already picked out each of their four children's names; Kimberly, who once gave him a big wet mushy kiss inside the cardboard house in the preschool's playroom, imitating whatever daytime television drama was playing at home when the half-day was over; Kimberly, the love of his preschool life, had moved away. In their sorrowful parting, she gave him a portrait of herself, ensconced in a white ceramic frame that was shaped like a teddy bear with its arms encircling her face. The painted blue ribbon around its neck matched the blue in Kimberly's eyes. For years that picture sat in his bedroom, and still sits in the project room of my parents' house, amidst the sundry hardcopy photos of another era.

I had nothing to compare with that loss, but even secondhand, I knew that moving was nothing I wanted any part of.

“No!”

“But—!”

“My friends!”

“The playground!”

“The attic!”

“Why??”

“Nooooo!”

The protest was stirred up by all of these reasons, and others—the trampoline that our next-door neighbors, the Kelleys, let us use freely; the ravine (aka “The Ravine”) between our two houses that provided hours of exploration and endless opportunities for commando squirt-gun skirmishes; the excellence of the Kelleys’ steep yard for sledding in winter and rolling down in summer; the lowing of cows that drifted in the evenings from the field below the far fence; the way the train whistle could just be heard at night, a faint keening as you drifted off to sleep; and even the tiny brown bat that lived next to the light by the door in the carport. In short, all those things that add up, that weave into a place and make it home.

My brother and I sprang to the defense of staying put. For my part, I emphasized

how close our current house was to the hospital where my dad most frequently worked, and how downtown, where my mom kept her office, was only a couple minutes further on. And what a great school Pomona Elementary was, Mom and Dad! Think about that end-of-year program we put on last year—wow! Each of my classmates and I, dancing in paper dinosaur masks we had made ourselves while tossing multicolored scarves into the air to the tunes of “The Locomotion” and “The Twist”—remember? Where else were you going to find a performance like that? Or Mr. Lasse, the principal who knew every single student by name, along with most of their parents. And all the neighborhood walks, and how City Market was only a hill away, and really, the *yard*—I mean, I hate tomatoes, but look how many tomatoes we have here! And just...what a nice house! What a great house! It’s just...a great house. I mean...look at it! It has a carport! And that tree out front is great for climbing. And that tree on the patio out back is great for climbing. And it has a great big attic that could hold almost anything, even a mule. I mean...the house...!

My brother, for his part, took a more cunning tack. Our neighbor three houses over was the venerable Gene Taylor, founder of Gene Taylor’s Sporting Goods, the outfitting mecca of Grand Junction, CO. How many Gene Taylor’s price tags—affixed to lanterns, vests, hiking boots, tents, sleeping bags, jackets, pairs of sunglasses, etc.—had been snipped off at 627 Fletcher Lane? More, I suspect, than those of any other establishment. In addition to being the local mogul of the great outdoors (that are, I

submit, greater in Colorado and Utah than in most other places), Gene Taylor was also a good-neighbor-turned-family-friend who lived on a seven-acre parcel that had somehow snuck its way into our 1960s-era subdivision. Most of the land was undeveloped, given over to the brambles and scrub like that which lodged in the maw of The Ravine. Lying dormant. Just waiting for somebody's great idea.

Perhaps it was my parents who first broke the news to Gene about the probable move, but it was Jack who saw an opportunity. With the tactless yet innocent guile that characterizes some children (he was known to yell "I get the fullest!" when glasses of chocolate milk were being passed around preschool), Jack somehow directed Gene's attention to the 5 or 6 acres of unused space that stretched beyond his yard. Surveying the territory, something sparked in Gene's eyes. In short order, he presented my parents with a proposition: "There's plenty of space down there for a pen. Even a few pens. Keep a couple mules and your boy's pony on the place. It's no problem. I'd be glad to have them! Hate to see you all move away."

"Well, thanks Gene," my dad said. "Really appreciate the offer. But we want to have our own place to keep our critters. Besides, if we put them down there, where would I keep a tractor?"

No one could answer that question.

The Semi-Retirement of Warren A. Petersen, M.D.

The mules and the move meant that many things would change about daily life in my family, from the school Jack and I would attend to the grocery stores we would frequent with our mom to the views that would greet us daily. No more multiply themed garden planters, no more trike- and bike-friendly cul-de-sac, no more attic, no more Kelley's trampoline—a host of things that gave shape to my days would soon cease to do so. In concert with the little pieces of daily life that would vanish in the transition, new pieces would appear. The mules themselves were the most obvious, along with things like a tractor and the possibility of repeating my early-childhood cowboy masquerade in a less drugstore vein, but perhaps the biggest addition of all would be the presence of my dad.

Being any sort of physician is a demanding job. After the slog through years of school, a person lands in a position which can take well over forty hours a week of commitment. This can become especially true for those specialties that require on-call time, with notifications to report immediately coming at any hour of the day or night. As a general surgeon, my dad had a private practice, in which he made consultations and performed outpatient surgeries, as well as being a staff member at both of the hospitals in the community. His weekdays were filled with assessing moles, investigating hernias, diagnosing inexplicable pains, writing prescriptions, making referrals, and scheduling more major surgeries at the larger facilities—almost always St. Mary's Hospital, which

was only a block from his office, and about a mile from our in-town house. In the case of inpatient surgery, he would also make follow-up visits to his patients in the hospital to check their progress, sitting at their bedside and answering questions, while offering a smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes, an unguarded look of attention and compassion that his colleagues would brag about to my mom.

He was no stranger to being on-call, either. The human geography of the Western Slope means that Grand Junction is the largest municipality for several hours in any direction. Denver, the nearest big city, lies four hours east, and Salt Lake City five hours northwest. Albuquerque is eight hours to the south, and, heading north, one wouldn't really hit a city until, I suppose, Regina, Saskatchewan (though don't tell Billings). Because of this, the medical facilities in Grand Junction represent the largest and most advanced for a great swath of land. And most of this land consists of trackless mountains and desert, and much of the rest of ranches and farmland—in other words, places where injuries can happen easily, injuries which, like illnesses, are often compounded by the long journey to care. While recent years have seen a growth in medical facilities in more remote locations, as well as a growth in the number of specialized healthcare personnel in Grand Junction, the 1980s and 1990s were a time that required some jacks-of-all-trades in the local medical community, and my dad was one of them. This role was perhaps most exemplified in his on-call routine, which saw him responsible for both attending to

emergencies in the in-patient wing of the hospital—surgical complications, for instance—as well as working as a trauma surgeon in the ER.

The upshot of all this is that it sometimes seemed like several days would go by without me catching more than a passing glimpse of my dad. He was often out the door before I woke up, or at least on his way, dressed in a three-piece suit, the unmistakable thud of his footfalls—something like dropping a sack of rice on the floor, an ambulatory signature—traversing the kitchen, followed by the thud of the carport door slamming closed. But morning was when I wondered less, with the sun already bright and garden planters to explore, dogs to play with, school buses to catch.

Evening was when I felt his absence, an absence that was defined by the closeness I felt with my mom. Any one of my dad's long days in my earliest memories could have ended like this:

Summertime when I was five years old. My mom returned around 5 pm from her office on the corner of 3rd and Main, and was met at the carport door by Jack and me, accompanied by three dogs with whom we had to jostle to get to her. The high-pitched tones of our joy stopped just short of echoing off the hard surfaces of the brick and tile. Standing in the kitchen just behind the welcome herd was Mary Montaña, whom Jack and I called Auntie.

Auntie had shown up that morning as she did most mornings Monday through

Friday, just as Jack and I were finishing breakfast. She came and patted us each on the head, gave us a hug and a peck on the cheek while we drained the last of the orange juice from our glasses. She and our mom talked for a moment, exchanging smiles and a laugh or two, and then it was time for Mom to take off. She wrapped Jack and I each in a hug, saying "Be good for Auntie and have fun today! I love you both." And, in her shoulder-padded blazer, Mom was out the door. My eyes lingered on that gap through which she had disappeared, and a familiar small cold space opened inside me.

Mom had come into Jack's and my bedroom that morning, half-singing a rise-and-shine song, and sat at the edge of each of our twin beds in turn, brushing her hand across our cheeks. The warmth of her touch was like the warmth of the sun now filtering in through the blinds she had opened, and I sat up, blinking away the sleep from my eyes. "How did you sleep?" she asked us, as she scooped up stuffed animals that had gotten kicked to the floor in the choreography of slumber.

"Good," I answered.

"I had a dream about a clown!" Jack declared.

Then Mom was dressing us and then we were following her to the kitchen where she popped four slices of 100% whole wheat bread into the toaster oven. Many mornings, breakfast would be Cheerios or Grape-Nuts, but today was one of those lucky days when I got my favorite morning food: cinnamon toast. When the bread had become toast,

Mom smeared a bit of butter across it, gave it a few good shakes from the cinnamon jar, and scattered a scant spoonful of sugar across the top. Perfect. When she set the cinnamon toast down in front of me, I leaned forward and breathed in that smell that was like nothing else: the warm tang of cinnamon, rounded out by the sweetness of the grain in the bread and the dripping thickness of just-melted butter. My mouth was already watering, and my stomach was grumbling, reminding me that it was high time to top it up. Jack picked up his toast and ate it like a normal person, which is to say that he simply bit into it and chewed it and swallowed it, starting at the crust-side nearest his mouth and traversing the toasty space toward the hand that held the toast. I was not so direct in my approach. Holding the piece of toast as near to the edge as I could, I began to munch away the crust, moving first clockwise and then counter-clockwise until the toast was carefully de-crust-ed except for a space that was just wide enough to grasp between the thumb and index finger of my right hand.

Where did this de-crusting impulse come from? I was never sure, and generally didn't spend much time questioning it, but I had been, in even earlier years, a crust-hating child, and tried to avoid eating them. My parents would never let me get away with this avoidance, though, and would not let me leave the table if crusts were still lying on my plate. One day, feeling compassion, perhaps, for my distress, as well as what I can only imagine was a strong desire to not have to keep policing my crust consumption, my mom

was struck by inspiration. I was sitting there whining, two L-shaped bits of crust the only evidence that my stomach was contentedly rumbling around a piece of cinnamon toast, not understanding *why* I should have to eat those crusts, when Mom got the idea. Her voice simultaneously brightened and dropped a notch as she stepped closer, like she was letting me in on a secret. “You know,” she said, “Superman eats *his* crusts.”

Superman? That guy with the cool cape who can fly around and do stuff? Though the truth was that I hardly paid attention to Superman, I was still impressed enough by his ability to fly that the crust-consumption-to-flight correlation became compelling. Maybe her great idea was nothing more than a seat-of-the-pants Popeye riff—after all, how gladly did Jack and I chow down on spinach after seeing only an episode about that old salt—but it worked: I never again left my crusts untouched.

It was probably my eagerness to get the less-desirable crust out of the way that inspired the first phase of my cinnamon toast ritual. Once the piece was crustless, I began to eat in toward the center from every side, my teeth moving like a planing saw that buzzed off one layer at a time until I was left holding a roughly frying pan-shaped remnant of toast consisting of the most cinnamon-y, sweetest, butteriest heart. After performing this prep-work, I was ready to experience the true bliss of cinnamon toast. Inhaling once again that warm, sweet, thick smell of cinnamon, sugar, bread, and butter, I bit into that coveted center. The time I had taken to prepare for this moment had allowed

the butter to soak into the toast, softening it until it nearly took on the texture of sponge cake, bolstered by a last bit of crispiness on the bottom side of the toast and the crunch of granules of sugar in my molars. I paused a moment and let the syrupy combination slide around my tongue. My eyes slid shut and I began devouring my hard-earned prize in tiny chomps, the toast vanishing into my mouth as if being delivered by a conveyor belt. The warm sweetness of the toast mixed with a warm glow that spread across my chest.

Cinnamon toast, this magic treat, was something my mom had created just for me—well, and Jack, I guess—a special treat that no one else could have, because only my mom could make it. I knew I had to be one of the luckiest people in the world. Feeling loved by my mom, knowing what that love meant, came from many things—being tucked into bed at night, watching her clap and cheer when I performed a shadow puppet show, feeling the warmth of a hug encircle me when I'd tripped and skinned my knee, and most definitely from the wonder of cinnamon toast.

A sharp pain in my finger and thumb jarred me out of my reverie. My eyes snapped open and an unbidden grunt burst from my toast-filled mouth. So deeply had I fallen into this moment that my churning jaws failed to register the end of the line. Angry red grooves lay just beyond my finger- and thumbnail. I held my right hand up to my face and inspected it. No broken skin, no blood. I shook my hand to clear the memory of the chomp. The sweet taste was still thick in my mouth, outlasting any accidental act of auto-

cannibalism. All was well. More than well, in fact—all was perfect, Jack and I with our cinnamon toast and our mom standing in the kitchen behind us, the sun brilliant on the leaves of the ash tree just beyond the kitchen table's plate glass window.

That was the moment when Auntie arrived. In only a few more minutes, Mom would be gone for the day. I never begged her to stay, never demanded to know why she had to go, always accepted that she would return like she always had, but I still didn't like seeing her leave. The small cold feeling in my chest widened as the door opened, and then snapped like a rubber band as the door filled the doorway again. The anxiety of Mom's departure had given way to the simple fact of her absence. In those elemental days, her return felt as certain as that of the sun itself, and at least twice as exciting.

And it was hardly suffering to spend the day with Auntie. She knew all our favorite ways to stay busy. The steady breezes that most days offered meant that she could take us outside with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles kite, where Jack and I would take turns holding the yellow plastic spool of nylon line, feeling it tighten and sing as the mylar shape of a head-banded turtle bellied full of wind. A spring day like today was the best time for this, the breezes more certain, and I stood there in the backyard that late morning until after my fingers had begun to grow numb from the remainders of winter's chill, until long after Jack had wandered off to swing from the monkey bars, until I had outlasted even Auntie's patience—stood there just watching the simple act of flight to

which I was tethered. One of my earliest words had been “bird,” and, as an infant, I would not infrequently dedicate myself to pointing out every single bird in sight; perhaps the wonder I felt that morning, and every time I launched a kite, was connected to that fixation with birds, to the magic of watching them leave the ground and light amongst the trees. That kite was the closest I could get to joining them.

Eventually, though, Auntie placed her hand on my arm, and I had to reel my kite back down and head inside. But there was plenty to do there, too—learn songs from cassettes on our bright-red plastic boom box, put on puppet shows, eat Spaghetti-os. Amongst all this, Auntie also somehow found time to wash, dry, and iron all the laundry and generally tidy and spot-clean the house. “You don’t have to do that!” my mom had protested on several occasions.

“Oh, it’s no trouble—I like to stay busy,” Auntie had replied. After a few such discussions, my mom had no choice but to cede to her good fortune.

Despite the fun with which Auntie managed to fill the day, Jack’s and my shouts (and the dogs’ wagging tails) always marked my mom’s return. After Mom got a re-cap of our day and behavior (there had been no quarrels or accidental pooping of the bath today, thankfully), Auntie offered her own goodbye hugs, and we began the evening with our mom.

Mom cooked most of our dinners, and on some midweek evenings like this one,

she took a bit of a break by enlisting the assistance of the Hamburger Helper. Fortunately, this saucy, noodly dish—enchanced by some peas, corn, and chopped carrots, for health’s sake—was quite alright by Jack and me. Even though the thought of the large white glove-creature from the product commercials, jumping around and waving a spatula, was a little frightening to me, I still knew all the choreography. Sitting down to the table, Mom told us that our dad would be at work until after dinner.

“He had to stay late to check on patients in the hospital,” she explained, in a tone that was no different than the one she would have to used to answer a question about what the weather was supposed to be like tomorrow, an even tone that did not carry the tang of apology, the thickness of sadness, the heat of anger, anything about how she felt about the offered fact. Only something I almost didn’t notice, a slight heaviness sliding along beneath her words, something I would not come to know as weariness for a few years yet.

“Oh,” I said. Jack started eating. We had both already learned how likely we were to hear this news on any given weeknight. “Will he be home before bedtime?” I continued.

“We’ll see, honey; he’s not sure how long it will take.” Her voice had softened. Maybe something had crept into my own voice, an upward slide in pitch, the way words stretch thin over the space hollowed out by expectation. The way you can ball your

fingers into a fist around nothing, extend your hand toward a dog, and watch its eyes widen, the end of its nose twitch, the tip of its tongue slip out and lick its upper lip as it waits and hopes for a treat.

“Okay,” I said.

Jack and I kept marching through our platefuls of veggie-laden noodles and hamburger. After we’d sopped up the last of the salty brown herb sauce, my mom cleared the table, and it was time for a near-nightly after-dinner ritual. My family was a big milk-drinking family, and Jack and I were given full glasses to drink at breakfast and dinner. Jack loved the stuff, and chugged it down right away. Ever the experimenter, he would even try adding various elements of the meal at hand to his milk—some broccoli florets here, some corn kernels there, a noodle or two, a chunk of whole-wheat bread. My parents, looking on, would warn Jack that he would have to consume his milk no matter what he put in it. As if determined to flaunt the futility of their worry, he would grab the tall plastic tumbler in both hands and half gulp and half chew whatever potion he had concocted. His smile and the gusto with which he polished off his modified dairy treat—a gusto emphasized by the “Mmm!” and “Ah, yes!” he would slip out between mouthfuls—seemed to say *Look what I have created and get to enjoy while the rest of you have to stew in the unimaginative normalcy of your meals.*

“Ohhh yuh,” my mom would say, her face still holding a shadow of a smile, even

as she shook her head at this habit.

“Pretty silly,” my dad would say, if he were there and in a good mood.

“Goddammit, son, just eat your dinner!” he would yell, if he were there and not in a good mood. I just watched this milky mash-up, wondering, sometimes aloud, why Jack was so determined to be a weirdo, even as a part of me was—though I would never have admitted it—slightly impressed and even a little jealous of his ability to devour nearly anything with what looked like such ease.<sup>18</sup>

Milk was a less exciting prospect for me. Straight from the fridge, it didn’t taste like much other than cold to me, and I began to regard it like I regarded other medicinal foodstuff—steamed broccoli, microwave-wilted spinach, steamed cauliflower—an experience to be endured for the greater good.<sup>19</sup> But there was a certain magic that could make its way into a milk glass, a transformation no less wondrous than that enacted by the wand-waving of some fairy godmother. Chocolate.

It could have been one of those hazy, barely-remembered afternoons at the small formica table in my Gammy’s kitchen when I first discovered this treat. A little yellow container, oval-shaped, with a tight-fitting flexible plastic yellow lid that got peeled off

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<sup>18</sup> Only once did his modification get the better of him—it was a meatloaf night, and he heaped peas, carrots, and chunks of meatloaf into his glass, finishing it with a healthy squirt of ketchup. The triumphant smile slowly slid off his face with each successive sip. My mom eventually gave him a reprieve and dumped the contents down the garbage disposal. My dad’s own triumphant smile was more telling than any “What did I tell you?” could have been.

<sup>19</sup> Not unlike how I regarded running a mile in gym class during my middle school days.

with a hollow, sucking *pop*. And inside, finer than the fine Grade-A sand that filled the green plastic turtle-shaped sandbox in our backyard, a dark brown powder. One of the home healthcare aids who spent their days and nights with Gammy during the last years of her life, probably Louise or Sharon, dipped a spoon into that yellow container and dropped two heaping spoonfuls into the tall green glass with its payload of fridge-cold skim milk. Several seconds of brisk stirring, the stainless steel of the spoon making bright clinks against the rim of the glass, and I was presented with a glassful of something much more than the thin coldness of plain skim milk. The milk still spun around inside the glass, carrying small bubbles with a tinge of brown in their shining surface. After watching the bubbles for a moment as they gradually slowed until the more-than-milk became still once more, I raised the glass to my lips and took a sip.

Sweetness sparkled back from the tip of my tongue as the cool liquid flowed in, followed by a soft bitterness that curled like a trough inside my mouth and brought depth to the taste, a texture and dimension far greater than the flatness of milk alone. The suspended fine powder thickened the sip, coating the insides of my cheeks, my teeth, my throat. The cold slid down my chest and sat a moment in my stomach, bracing as the blast of a squirt gun on a 100-degree July day. I sucked my teeth, trying to coax out the last of that bittersweetness from between my molars, then licked my lips, finding crunchy crystals of sugar and chocolate that had come out of suspension as they slid across my

skin. My eyes widened. “Wow,” I said aloud to nobody in particular. Bringing the glass to my lips again, I chugged down most of the liquid in a rush of gulps, only just managing to stop short with a last few sips sitting at the bottom. I regarded this sudden absence with surprise. It was the fastest I’d ever gotten through a mandated serving of milk. On the one hand, I was nearly done with a chore before I’d hardly begun. On the other hand, though, I was also nearly done with something delicious, something worthy of almost the same relish as cinnamon toast. I was caught off guard for a moment, but realized that there was nothing else to do but treat those final few sips with all due respect. I took each sip more slowly than the last, curling my tongue and letting the milk run over the sides and around my gums, puffing out my cheeks and drawing them in again, before swallowing. When the glass was finally empty, I turned it straight upside down and, with my mouth open wide, let the last drips, with their extra cargo of imperfectly dissolved sugar, fall onto my tongue.

I was a fan.

And though my parents, governed as they were by my dad’s relentless nutrition facts label-reading and proportion-of-carbohydrates-from-sugar parameters, were not about to let me drink all my milk with this sugary modification, few nights in my early childhood went by without a small glass of chocolate milk finding its way into my just-before-bedtime hands.

This night was no exception. Jack and I got up from the table and joined Mom at the counter, where she had set two plastic tumblers full of milk. We watched as she opened a cabinet and, from a shelf far above our heads, took down that now-familiar yellow container. Popping the lid, she took a spoon and dropped two spoonfuls of powder into the first tumbler before handing it to Jack to stir. She did the same with the second tumbler before handing it to me, and soon we were both stirring away, the sound of the stainless steel spoon against the plastic rim a duller thunk than it was against the glass in Gammy's kitchen. Carrying our prizes to the table, we sat again, our mom between us, and sipped away. As we sat, she wondered aloud whether our dad would be home soon—except she didn't call him "your dad" or "Dad."

"Daddycakes could be home any minute. You just might see him before bed."

Daddycakes. Years later, I would connect the dots between him calling her "Babycakes" (a little cringeworthy to me to this day) and her, in turn, coming up with this handle for him, but that night, and many others like it, I was baffled. Daddycakes? I knew him as "Dad," much like he seemed to know me primarily as "Son," although I was aware of the fact that his name was also "Warren." But "Daddycakes" seemed to me like it just might be a different version of the same person, not so unlike how Batman sprouted from the same stalk as Bruce Wayne. Mom only ever mentioned Daddycakes at night, nights when he hadn't been home for dinner, nights when he might not be home

before bed, and always in a tone of voice not so different than the energetic, playful, higher-pitched tone she used when playing with the dogs or bringing a puppet or stuffed animal to life. Gone was the slight drag that her voice had carried at dinner. What about Daddycakes had occasioned this change? Was it the word “cakes” appended to his official parental title? If so, who could blame her? After all, few things were more exciting to me than a good birthday cake, especially if it was a Dairy Queen ice cream cake.

And if that were true, then did that mean that Daddycakes would show up with cakes in tow? Was that a person’s reward after 12 hours in the ER? Was there a cake dispenser in the surgeons’ lounge?

I didn’t find out that night. The minute hand inched around the face of the clock over the carport door, and it was bed-time, Daddycakes or no. I’d just have to hope to find the answer to that mystery another time. And though I was a bit disappointed to not see my dad, his broad shoulders filling the doorway, his warm, deep voice filling the kitchen, the hoped-for cakes in his hand, I was not particularly sad; I’d had my chocolate milk, and I still had my mom to tuck me in.

In the morning, to my surprise, he was still at home. Mom got Jack and me up, and we came down to the kitchen table to find our dad sitting in a chair. His upper body was slumped against the half-wall by the patio door, and his mouth was hanging open. A

sound like an amplified version of the heavy zipper on our 8-person family tent was tearing into the air every few seconds. Mom held her finger to her lips, beckoning Jack and me to be quiet, and whispered, “He’s snoring.” Snoring, I repeated to myself, turning the word over in my head. So that’s what the old man was doing in that raining, pouring song. And that was the word to explain the sound that sometimes came slipping through the walls into Jack’s and my room when I lay awake in the middles of nights. I filed this new definition away and then did a quick scan of the countertops...no cake boxes in sight. But maybe he had put them in the fridge!

“Look,” my mom continued, “you can see his beard growing.” I snapped my attention back to my dad, running my eyes over the thick hair that surrounded his open mouth, mostly a glossy black that caught the morning sunlight, though shot through with streaks of gray. His size and his voice separated him from me, defined him as a grown-up, but these same categories also separated my mom from me. This glossy black hair on his face, though, was one of the traits that was unique to him, that most made him *Dad*.

And it didn’t stop there—although it grew much less thick away from his face, this same hair marched all over his body, up and down his thick forearms and disappearing beneath the sleeves of his t-shirt where they stretched taut over the swell of his biceps, before carrying on across the breadth of his chest and down his back, where I would see the individual hairs holding droplets of water on the rare times he was able to

spend an hour splashing and tossing Jack and me up into the air in the pool at a hotel or public park. Those immense-seeming tosses filled my whole body with a shiver of joy at the wonder of flight: a second or two free of the weight of water and gravity before crashing once more into the pool and my dad's embrace, where we would beg to be tossed skyward again until we were breathless, a little terrified, and exhausted with delight, while he seemed no more tired than the trees that raked the sky beyond the fence; and even then, I noticed the way the hair-caught water droplets glistened in the sun, and the way his hair channeled the water into tiny streams all over his body as he climbed out from beneath the water.

These same hairs stood out on his legs when he wore bright blue nylon hiking shorts and carried us on his back on a tricky section of trail, or when he appeared in black spandex bike shorts before vanishing into the gray dawn or the gathering dusk, bike lights flashing. Only the top of his head stood bare, as if to say that, with his face and even the backs of his hands covered, there had to be someplace for the sun to shine unfettered.

This hairiness—which was, to my mind, not so very different than a milder version of the furriness of the dogs that circled us in the kitchen—made my dad seem more different to me than my mom, who, as far as I had ever seen, was just as hairless below her scalp as I was. Even those group bath sessions with my dad, Jack, and me, during which Dad explained our genitalia to us, as well as proper hygienic practices

thereof (all of this in an even, professorial tone as I looked on with the studiousness of a student in a dissection lecture, brow furrowed, somewhat confounded by the proper testicular count due to a then-yet-to-be-mitigated undescended testicle) only increased that sense of difference. For all its nominal similarities, his body was so unlike mine.

Yet this hairiness also seemed connected to one of the things that made me feel closest to my dad in those days: his physical warmth. Perhaps, I thought, it was because of all that hair insulating him like a thin blanket, giving him extra heat to share. Or perhaps—and this was his explanation—it was because of the broadness of his shoulders, the thickness of his limbs; “body mass,” he said. Even if he were mostly right, I figured that my insulation theory still had to contribute something to the overall effect. Whatever the exact reason for his warmth, nothing chased away a chill like sitting on his lap. On Sunday nights, when we would make the short drive to Los Reyes Restaurant for a family dinner out, I would almost inevitably start to shiver at the end of the meal, after gulping down an ice-choked plastic pint glass-worth of Dr. Pepper while the swamp cooler blasted the gray, low-pile commercial carpet. Just before my teeth began to chatter, my dad would beckon me onto his lap and place his arms on the table to either side of me. As I clambered up, I would feel the heat rising off his body with almost the same force that it shot through the grates of the forced-air heating system at home. Settling back against the broad stretch of his chest, the chill would seep back out of me as my head and eyelids

would droop, Dad's warmth and the weight of the meat-and-cheese sopapilla in my stomach tugging me toward sleep. Despite being surrounded by the bustle of a busy restaurant, the chatter and faces of strangers all around, I knew I was safe as long as I leaned back against him.

Even better than nights at Los Reyes were the times I got to hear him read me a bedtime story, which was a treat that I had only recently been enjoying. Often, when he got home when I was still awake, my dad would disappear into the formal living room, a space that, along with the formal dining room, was set off from the rest of the house by heavy swinging doors. Clicking on a crane-necked brass lamp, he would settle into an off-white wing-backed chair, laying a manila folder open on his lap. From his pocket, he would pull a small, black device, easily contained in the palm of his hand. Clicking it open, he would pop in a mini-cassette, snap the device shut, push a button, and begin to speak. His dictator.<sup>20</sup> He would describe cases, procedures, referral recommendations, concerns, prognoses, and the staff at his office or at the hospital would transcribe the dictation, creating a patient history for their files. When scarcely more than a toddler, I was drawn by the depth of his voice as it resonated off the walls and found its way through the propped-open door to the dining and living rooms. Following this flow of sound, I wandered into the room. "Who are you talking to?" I asked.

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<sup>20</sup> a denomination that caused some confusion when I later encountered it in the context of history class

“Damn it, son, I’m doing a dictation!” he nearly yelled, clicking a button on that little black device. “Get out!” The sound of his fingers snapping punctuated this line. It felt like someone had thrown a cup of cold water in my face. I spun around and ran back through the doorway, fleeing his sudden anger with a knot of confusion in my chest. I didn’t know what I had done, but I knew I didn’t like the consequences.

My curiosity got the better of me, though, and I repeated this same maneuver a few more times, each with the same result. Finally, getting a bit wiser, I began to crouch down just outside the door, listening to the sound of his voice warm the inside of that room, a room that usually sat empty of people, filled with the sharp angles and thin, stiff cushions of a couple deceased generations’ formal chairs and side-tables that had funneled down to my mom. Compared to the heavily-trodden family room, with its dog-and-kid-worn, overstuffed, stain-resistant furniture, that living room was an odd place, a no-dogs-allowed, kids-allowed-only-under-supervision place. That it was the site of my dad’s dictations only made the act and the room each more mysterious—and him most mysterious of all. What was he up to in there? And why? The many hours I spent with my mom—breakfasts, dinners, getting tucked in at night and woken up in the morning—only served to underscore this mystery. So I listened to him dictate, my head leaning against the door frame. I didn’t understand much of what he said, but it still seemed like the more I heard his voice, the more clear he might become.

Once, getting up to use the bathroom, or maybe to freshen the Scotch-on-the-rocks (“though never more than two”) that he often paired with dictating, he caught me at my eavesdropping post. I flinched, thinking I might be in for another finger-snapping scolding, but he smiled instead, his voice taking on a bit of a lilt. “Well, well, look who it is! Listening to your dad do his dictations, eh, son?” A ripple of relief shot through me. I wasn’t exactly sure what I had done wrong when I had earned his anger on previous nights, but I was certainly glad to be doing something right—or at least not-wrong. “Curious about what I’m up to?” Never a person who needed to be prompted to offer some education, he began explain what a dictation was and why he did them, why patient records matter, and so on. Something about my stillness seemed to particularly invite his didactic streak. I couldn’t pinpoint the source of my willingness—even eagerness—to devour whatever lesson he delivered, but it seemed to please him, a smile creeping into the corners of his mouth as he intoned, and I wanted him to be pleased, and to be pleased with me. When he had finished telling me what he was doing in there, he delivered a judgement that turned my relief into something like a quiet delight: “You’re welcome to stay out here and listen, as long as you don’t make any noise or try to distract me.”

Yes! Not only was I not in trouble for getting caught in the middle of eavesdropping, but I had even earned official eavesdropping clearance. From then on, it felt like the dictations were something my dad and I did together, a way for us to spend a

little time in a shared activity, him in his chair narrating to the tiny spinning reels of tape and me in the hallway just outside, listening to his words unfurl.

Sometime in the months before I turned five, my dad's and my co-dictation was augmented by the introduction of the bedtime story. The catalyst was the gift of James Gurney's *Dinotopia* from my great-uncles Jack and Jim. The gorgeous illustrations were like a magnet: dinosaurs, in all their leathery-skinned, sharp-clawed, gigantic majesty stood, crouched, lumbered, and soared through jungle and savannah, attended by humans, whose settlements rose from the earth with nearly the same grace as the trees or cliffs. Most exciting of all were the pictures in which humans rode atop the backs of the dinosaurs. My eyes widened. Humans could only have ridden such huge animals if the dinosaurs themselves had *wanted* the humans to ride them, if the dinosaurs had welcomed them onto their backs, I reasoned. That meant that they had to have all talked about it somehow, had to have shown the humans that they were welcome. I was hooked—nothing sounded more exciting to me than talking to other animals, and no animal looked as fun to talk to as the huge, strange, beautiful dinosaurs in those pages, with their armored plates and horns and bodies that were shaped like no creature I'd ever seen. Even though I already knew that dinosaurs were extinct, *Dinotopia* offered another possibility, a wild hope that, just maybe, a few survivors were still around, if one only knew how to find them. Where was this place? How could I get there? That was where

my dad came in, because he could read the words that filled in the gaps between the pictures. As I pawed through the pages after unwrapping the book, hungry for the story they held, he had said that he would read it to me soon, and he kept his word.

Accompanying my dad into the living room that first night felt strange, after the times I'd gotten scolded out the door. Still not really knowing why he'd been so angry about me interrupting his dictations, I couldn't quite shake the fear that I'd do something wrong and he'd send me off before I got a chance to hear about how the dinosaurs and people managed to live together. My body was tense as I followed him to his chair. Though my living room experience was limited, I still knew enough to have an opinion about that chair from previous sitting adventures. The cushions were firm, hardly deforming with the weight of my body, and the upholstery was stiff and rough against my skin. It was not an inviting chair, not one I would have chosen for my sitting. None of that mattered, though, as he sat down, the hardcover book in one hand, and waved me toward his lap. I clambered up and leaned back against his chest, feeling the familiar warmth sink into my body, chasing away the cold that almost always lingered in my hands. His arms extended to either side of me, holding the book just far enough away that we could both focus our eyes on the pictures, but still near enough that they filled my vision almost completely. He began to read, his voice resonating against my back. There was a dad who was a scientist, and he was traveling on a boat with his son. There was a

shipwreck, and the two of them made it to an island. There they found things that neither of them could have expected, a world from which dinosaurs had not vanished, a world in which they lived in harmony with humans. I sank into the story, and his voice became as inseparable from it as the pictures. For all the wonder of people riding dinosaurs—especially the winged ones that soared through the air—it may have been the set-up of the story that caught my attention as much as anything: there was a dad and a son, and they were having an adventure... Maybe, I thought, my dad and I could be just like them. Would it be like that if he were home all the time? What adventures could we have, what islands could we discover? I tried to protest when he stopped for the night, even though I was quickly losing my battle with sleep. “We’ll pick it up again tomorrow or the next time,” he assured me. “Pretty great story, huh?”

Yeah, I thought, one of the best. I had found my favorite way to end the day, something even better than chocolate milk.

That morning in the kitchen, though, when I learned the word “snoring,” was a morning after one of many nights when there had been no story time. And for all the closeness I felt when my dad read to me, I did not regard his sleeping form, splitting the air with its full-throated snores, with the same sort of uncomplicated love I felt when I gazed at my mom. The volatility that characterized his dictation scoldings was a volatility that characterized him generally, and for every Los Reyes warm-up or round of

*Dinotopia*, there was at least one outburst—a fit of yelling at my mom, at my brothers, at me, at the dogs, at referees on TV, at inanimate objects, or even, sometimes, at himself.

“Goddammit, Shari!” when she voiced her disinterest at yet another Medical Society dinner.

“Goddammit, son!” when Jack spilled a cup of water in the family room.

“Goddammit, son, I’m trying to watch the fucking game! What the hell’s the matter with you!?” when I wandered, clueless, between him and approximately 1.47 seconds of a Broncos game.

“Oh fuck! Go to your room! *Now*, goddammit! What a crock of shit,” when my older brother, Kaj, tried to defend my obstruction as a hapless little kid’s mistake.

“Goddamn fucking piece of shit dog!”

“Goddamn fucking piece of shit screwdriver!”

“Fucking ref!”

“Oh *fuck me!* Come on, Warren, you fucker!”

How, I wondered, how was this the same person who read to me? Stomping, slamming doors, slapping countertops, shouting ugly words in a voice that hammered my ears like shattering glass, eruptions that came without warning and that seemed out of all proportion to the offense. Given the chance, even a dropped pen could earn a rapid-fire burst of obscenities. The air would seem torn open, his voice overriding any other noise,

any other voice, as if he believed he could win any argument or bend any situation to his will by overpowering it in volume. I hated it. The way it felt like the air would crackle and darken, charged with some buffeting energy, sending my pulse into my ears and leaving me feeling like a screw was twisting into my stomach. The way he would take over every inch of a room, like anyone else's opinion or emotion was pointless, something to be pummeled down like his churning feet pummeled the floor. This feeling would get colored with an extra flare of anger when his yelling was directed at my mom, especially when he would shout for her to *shut up*. When his rage was turned at me, I felt myself shrinking before the puffed chest that loomed toward me. Even when I knew what had set him off, even when I had come to understand how very short his fuse was, I never stopped wondering why he couldn't just tell me I had done something that displeased him (and in those days, that was indistinguishable from doing something wrong). Why couldn't he explain, in that same voice he used for his dictations, or for reading stories, that I had acted badly? Did he not know how his disappointment alone took the wind out from beneath my kite? His outbursts left it tattered, my hands chafed, ready to give up flight altogether.

When Jack or I had seriously erred, the sting of his words turned into the sting of his hand on our bony little-boy butts. There was a classificatory structure to this form of punishment. When his words were not enough, when his yells grew mottled and choked

with the rush of his anger, the first unit was a *swat*. His left hand would clamp like a vise around my left arm, covering the whole upper half of it. His right hand would draw back, and then launch forward, one sharp open-handed blow. By the time a *swat* was assigned, I would have already broken into tears, a wail that only increased as my dad's hand closed around my arm. It was a wail formed from all the pieces of emotion whirling around inside me—sadness and shame over having displeased him; fear of the impending blow; anger over what I felt to be an unfair punishment; frustration over being helpless to avoid it. When these pieces would overflow, driving the wail even higher, he would only get more upset. “Be quiet! Stop crying!” he would yell. “You’re being a baby! Hold still!” And sometimes, when this last tongue-lashing would drive my knot of emotions to the realm of desperation, I would be seized by some impulse that felt no more controllable than how my leg would kick out when my pediatrician rapped my knee with her rubber hammer: I would flinch and twist away from his palm just as it swung toward me. I knew I couldn't break free of his grip, knew that no amount of protest or evasion would spare me from the *swat* I had been assigned, yet still my body would ripple and twist away at the last second. If my reflexes had been lucky and left him with only a palmful of air, the *swat* count would grow by one. Two *swats*, one for the original offense, one for the offense of evasion.

On the rarest of occasions, an offense could be worthy of the next level of

punishment: a *spanking*. Getting a spanking meant getting three or more swats. Though I can remember motivations for swats (still being too noisy after the third request to *hush*, trying to argue—or, in my mind, defend myself—in the face of a verbal buffeting), the reasons behind the few spankings I received have been wiped clean.

For all the small, animal terror I felt about the swat system, though, those shouting displays were what I most disliked. Maybe it was because the swat had something finite about it, a conclusion that left him, apparently, relieved of his anger, and Jack or me deflated, but glad to be done with being the object of that anger. And, too, I probably most disliked his shouting displays because, unlike swats, they sometimes had my mom as their object; because they happened so much more often; because, unlike swats, they did not have clear endings; and because they often seemed to lack the causality that swats, for however much I both feared and was made angry by them, seemed to have. When my anger at my dad's shouting reached its highest pitches, I would dive beneath the kitchen table, a green crayon in my hand. There, as I hid behind the two thick wooden posts that ran between the table top and its spreading feet, peering around them as if they were tree trunks hiding me from some rampant bear, I would begin to spit out words, choked little mutters that shot out between my teeth, hard as undercooked beans.

“Witch!”

“Shoot!”

My shoulders would shake with the roiling inside me as I gathered myself between words.

“Duck! Fruck! Frick!”

“Dang it!”

With the fat crayon clutched in my hand, I accompanied these words with slashing scribbles and scraggles in green wax, as if I thought I might get rid of my anger by making some sort of visual record of it.

“Witch! Shoot!...Dang it!!!”

I had seen how cursing seemed to let my dad’s anger vent out of him, but my parents had also told me that those were bad words that I should not, and was not allowed to, say. Their prohibition mixed with my hatred of my dad’s outbursts, and my desire to *not* do what he was doing, and the result was my own censored language of anger, a stew of things I had heard as “kid-friendly” alternatives and rhymes. When we finally moved from that house, my mom caught sight of the heavily crayoned underside of the table as the movers lifted it and turned it on its side. She cried out, her voice thin and hard with anger, and demanded that I tell her how the markings had happened. “I don’t know!” I insisted, hoping that Jack would take the blame without me having to actually blame him. Perhaps realizing that the marking-up of the table could have been done by a toddler a

few years ago, too long ago to be worth punishing anyone over, she dropped the inquiry. I was just glad that my dad was at work that afternoon. Auntie scrubbed away the record of my anger ritual with a ball of steel wool, and the movers loaded the table into their truck.

During my dad's outbursts, as I hid, muttering and drawing beneath the table, a thought would creep into the edge of my mind: even if my dad were home all the time, he and I would never be like the dad and son in *Dinotopia*. That dad never crashed around.

But then there were the times Mom, Jack, and I ran into someone at the grocery store who, recognizing her, came up and said, "Oh, you're Dr. Petersen's wife! Your husband is such a *wonderful* man. And you must be his boys! Wow, are you two lucky to have such a kind, generous man as your dad. He had such a gentle manner when I was his patient." Each time, my mom thanked whoever it was for their compliment while Jack and stared at one another. Was that person talking about the same Dr. Petersen we knew? Kind? With a gentle manner? Even though these uniformly glowing reports—showing the apparent absence of explosiveness in his professional relationships—made me even more confused and angry that my dad only showed that side of himself to his family, they also gave me a little bit of hope. Maybe, I thought, there was some way that he could start being just like his patients described when he was at home, too. And I knew what that would feel like: climbing into the warmth of his lap and leaning back against his chest, where the sore spots from his yelling or a swat faded away as he stretched his arms to

either side of me, opened the cover of a book, and began to read, carrying me into the story with the flow of his voice.

Although I had learned to read for myself by the time the mule-based move and my dad's semi-retirement were announced, he still found time to read to me every few days, longer, more complicated books with no pictures: *Billy and Blaze*, *Hank the Cowdog*, *Black Beauty*. Between read-aloud sessions, I would forge ahead on my own, something that he sometimes bragged about to my mom. A flutter of pride filled my chest each time I overheard his praise, pride over making him happy and over showing him that I had made good use of his time. Trying to imagine the barns and fenceposts and fields that would soon surround me, I could only hope that the bedtime story face of Warren A. Petersen was that one that would most often find its way into our new, muley life.

The Farm. "The Farm."

Alas, while the desire to find an acreage wherein to keep one's mules, dogs, and family blooms readily enough, the fruition of that desire often lays at the end of a less direct road, and this was true in my parents' case. The road was called U.S. Highway 50, and it led them approximately 40 miles east, past the intermittently shuttered realm of Whitewater, CO, across an arid swath of treeless hills, ridges, and rocks that a family friend called "The Great Stinking Desert", and to the town of Delta, CO. Like Grand Junction, Delta was a place where rurality was encountered in spades. Unlike Grand Junction, with its railroad stopover status and location along one of those seismically settlement shifting sinews known as the Interstate, Delta primarily depended upon this rurality for its continued existence. To the south of town lay a slight uplift known as California Mesa, an area thick with mid-to-large-scale farms, and this mesa marked the site of the first of my parents' attempts at the country lifestyle.

165 acres of land, crossed by a creek, with an old, white two-story farmhouse, an open-fronted shed for heavy farm equipment, and a large metal outbuilding that housed a commercial onion packing operation. The farm had been growing onions for years, and most of the fields were given over to their cultivation, but beans did make a cameo in a field along the northwestern edge, and stalks of corn clustered along the crease where the creek hid beneath willows, brambles, and the brittle boughs of cottonwood trees. All told,

a few miles of dirt lanes sliced their way across the acres. As my dad would cruise, windows-down, with an SUV-load of family, kicking up plumes of dust along those lanes, our dogs would sprint alongside, tongues flapping in the wind of their headlong rush, leaping into every mud puddle, sailing over (or under) barbed wire fence lines, dining on cow patties of various ages. They seemed to share his enthusiasm at the expansiveness of this new domain.

165 acres. Not a giant farm, not one of the several-thousand-acre expanses that dot the landscape of the Great Plains, making their own two-story white farmhouses look like lonely grains of salt, yet also no mere 5-acre patch. Were my parents planning on becoming sub-regional onion magnates? Or did they perhaps have visions of flipping the ratios and turning that onion shed into a bean palace? Or was it that something about the scenic scatter of cow pies made them figure that what they really needed was a herd of Herefords?

In short, no. The farm—or rather, “The Farm”, as it was known, though presumably not in the same sense as “He bought the farm”—was intended to be simply a place to live. Other people would continue to lease the fields and farm and pack those onions; the huge-wheeled combine harvesters with their array of head-height reaping teeth would continue to belong to someone else and sit in the equipment shed. A field or two, maybe one of the nearby bean plots or maybe one of the occasional cow pens, would

be remodeled and given over to the hooves of my family's equine. Maybe a few acres would be turned to growing hay, just enough so that my dad could get his own tractor to cruise around on. But, for the most part, not much would change on that little slice of California Mesa.

Something that was going to change, though, was the house situation. I can't say for sure if it was something about the isolation of those farmhouses in the midst of fences, furrows, and center-pivot sprinklers as my family drove across Kansas on our way to early mule acquisitions, or if it was instead a seemingly innate fixation with old objects that first manifested itself in my life as an obsession with dinosaurs (how many times did I read *Dinotopia*? How many dinosaur stuffed animals and figurines did I have? How many species of dinosaur had I memorized, down to the date range of their existence and the morphology of their hip bones? I couldn't tell you now, but the number was large), but something about the idea of living in an old farmhouse carried a certain appeal for me. So when my parents said, "Of course, that house has *got* to go", my first reaction was disappointment, and even something like sorrow at the impending erasure of something old, of something so iconic as a white farmhouse tucked, tree-shrouded, into the corner of a farm. But that was before I had been inside.

You stepped across a threshold and left the brilliance of the Western Colorado sunlight. Through grimy windows, single-paned and warped with age and the elements,

the light tried to sneak back in, only to be slowed further by floating dust motes that always turn up thicker in tractor-churned landscapes. The kitchen opened up straight ahead of you, a place of white formica countertops that had yellowed like an old tooth, dotted here and there with a scorch ring from a too-hot pan or a pock from a forgotten cigarette. In the sitting room to the right, a few pieces of furniture huddled, and you might almost wonder if the previous residents had forgotten to finish moving all the way out. To your left, a staircase carried you to the upper level, but not before making you pause a moment as you navigated a landing, where an octagonal window let a perfect octagon of light fall on the carpet. Upstairs, the sun struggled no less to brighten bedrooms where dust motes flickered no less thickly than below. In every room, something bumped against your nostrils, perched atop your throat, a smell as quiet as the dust motes, and as seemingly sourceless, a smell that felt like the color of the old countertop.

The dust motes, the worn countertops, the curling corners of the linoleum, and the windows were nothing more than the result of age and circumstance, wear that any house would bear after years, and even the smell might have been chased away with time and open windows, but the dimness of the light inside, no matter how bright the day—that quality of light left me feeling unwelcome. After an hour or so inside the house on one of my first visits to The Farm, the outside started to take on some of the same aura of

unwelcome, which was perhaps only a projection from my mind onto the white siding, a premonition of the dislocated light that fell within. And perhaps it was only that light that slipped into my head, but I did not feel sorry that I never slept within those walls.

About eighteen years later, as a twenty-six-year-old, I came across a photograph of my dad and younger brother standing in front of the old white house. My dad is wearing a black felt fedora and a light parka, and has his left arm snugged close around Jack, who is leaning into Dad's waist. They are both smiling, eyes crinkled. My dad's squared shoulders seem to suggest he is proud of his son and his new farm and his life. It is a great picture of them. But my eyes kept sliding past them to the house behind, with its dormer windows that looked like blank, sad eyes, and I felt a twinge of the old unease and, for the first time, wondered if maybe that old house was haunted. I'm not saying it was.

I also can't say that it wasn't, because we demolished the joint not long after that picture was taken. Before the demo company would come do the job, though, our family had to take care of one issue. Thanks to the vintage of the house, that white siding was liberally laced with one of the 20th century's finer materials—*asbestos*. No company would wrecking-ball-and-bulldoze the structure until the siding was removed. My dad decided that the simplest and most cost-effective way to take care of business was to arm himself and Jack and me with hammers, crowbars, and big trash bags. Lest any of us suck

down those salubrious tiny fibers, we were outfitted with surgical masks pulled out from the sundry medical supplies that filled various nooks and crannies of our house. And though surgical masks are hardly as fun to play with as powder-free nitrile gloves, the gravity in my dad's voice as he instructed us to wear the masks sufficed to keep us committed. "Asbestos dust is extremely dangerous," he said, in a more hard-edged version of his bedtime story voice. "If you inhale it, you might get mesothelioma forty years from now and die."

It was one of the most serious jobs of my life.

In my gloved hands, I held the big yellow Stanley hammer, always my favorite, if for no other reason than that it seemed to me that one should always have a favorite. And that black-and-yellow coloration was cool. Dad had the battered old orange crow bar. I never really understood how it had gotten to be so battered. Did my dad have a secret life as a heavy-duty crowbar user? Was he a superhero? Or had he only run over it repeatedly in the garage? Who will ever know? Jack had, I think, a big screwdriver. Of course, there was a hammer ready for him to use as well, but he seemed to have concluded that stabbing small holes in the siding with grunting dagger-like blows was the best way to help. Since he was no more than six, I don't think anyone complained about this probable dip in his maximum potential productivity.

We went to work, my dad tearing into the siding with double-handed crowbar

blows and peeling off big crumbly strips with the same gusto he applied to peeling off scabs, whether his own or his family members'. Feeling tough, I gripped the rubber handle of my hammer and whacked the siding. Along with a half-dollar sized hole and a spiderweb of cracks, my action also released a puff of that serious dust. I cringed, trying to hold my breath. "Oh, son—it can't possibly hurt you as long as you keep your mask on. The asbestos in the shingles is non-friable, anyway; the masks are just an extra precaution."

"But do *we* have to do it? Can't somebody else do it? A professional?"

"Son!"

With the heat that was creeping into his voice, I knew I would just have to get back to work. And anyway, there was Jack, hopping around, jabbing the siding, saying "hi-YAH!" just like we were in karate class; I couldn't let him outdo me. I tightened the elastic straps on my mask and entered once more into the melee, this time with the claw of the yellow fiberglass-shafted Stanley hammer, trying to see if I could manage to rip off pieces as large as those my dad was tossing down. There were stepstools, stepladders, and even a proper ladder-ladder to climb as we progressed up the sides of the old house. Eventually I got handed a small crowbar of my own. Eventually Jack wandered off to kick dirt clods and pull at the grass. Eventually my arms started to ache. And it took a couple afternoons of crowbars, hammers, and black plastic trashbags, but eventually that

siding was all gone.

Without the house, though, where would we stay? This consideration was not lost on my parents, and they acquired a single-wide mobile home and had it set up in the driveway, only about 50 feet from the demolition-in-progress. It smelled like new nylon carpet, and we filled it with bits of furniture that had belonged to Gammy: an octagonal table that I always coveted on account of the semi-hidden bifold door that constituted two of its eight sides; one of my mom's dad's old sitting chairs, which was covered in a low-pile orange fabric that made Jack and me call it The Pumpkin Chair; an old rocking chair with a sand-brown cushion that was known as The Potato Chair; and so forth. Because our family still lived in Grand Junction, we didn't make the 45-minute drive to The Farm more than once a week, but, with the trailer in place, those trips increasingly became overnight affairs.

What, exactly, was the plan? My dad, having nearly attained the age of 55, was planning to semi-retire from surgery, and turn to assisting specialists in the OR part-time, leaving him more hours for his young sons and his farmer aspirations. My mom still had her property-management office in downtown Grand Junction, and would commute on weekdays. The Fletcher Lane house, yard, attic, and all, would be sold. Jack and I would say *adieu* to our boon companions at Pomona Elementary and begin instead to attend school in Delta. The Farm had no yard, no swing set, and no house with an attic. The

nearest bit of excitement was found a 10- to 15-minute walk away, at the Pea Green Store, where Jack and I—and, often, my best friend, Chris Langford, who tagged along on these trips for some reason that I do not fully understand but for which I will be forever grateful—could acquire ice cream, RC Cola, and little paper pop guns. The Pea Green Store sat at the main intersection on that end of California Mesa, and, like the crossroads outside its front door, was a focal point for the surrounding community, from which the store derived its name. Indeed, although the store and The Farm were officially located in Delta (though, confusingly, not within Delta County, but just over the border in Montrose County, whose county seat, Montrose, was located 25 minutes farther east), the people who lived in that patch would tell you they lived in Pea Green.

Inside the clapboard structure, with its big sagging eave of a porch, most of life's necessities were on offer; in addition to the aforementioned ice cream, cola, and pop gun trifecta, one could purchase sandwiches, canned goods, sliced bread, preserves, long-neck Buds, cigarettes either by the pack or—for those quick fixes—individually, and even hot pizzas, the latter of which made for brisk take-out business. One day, as we all stood in the shade of the porch, the clanking shudder and rumble of a tractor made its way down the road, followed shortly by the smell of diesel fumes and, finally, the tractor itself—a common occurrence 'round those parts. Instead of clunking on by, though, this tractor wheeled into the gravel parking lot in front of the store, where it shuddered to a halt, still

idling and fuming. The overall-clad driver hopped off the seat, nodded at all of us, and ducked through the door, returning a moment later with a take-out order of three large pizzas. After hopping back in the seat and balancing the pizzas on the rear fender swell with one hand, the driver sent the tractor rolling back down the road, en route to make someone's day. My mom and I gasped with glee, and I wondered if there were going to be any pizza tractors in my future. It was a quintessential Pea Green pastoral.

For all the good times that the Pea Green Store had to offer, the real crown jewel lay elsewhere. If Jack and I were really lucky—and I seem to recall this only happening on those days when Chris was along, as if the red carpet could only be fully rolled out for guests—we got to stop at Dairy King.

Yes, Dairy King. You are, I presume, familiar with the Queen, and I, too, am fond of her wares on a hot summer afternoon, but I am talking about the King. Right along Highway 50, on the righthand side of the road on the last bend before Delta spreads before your eyes, and just before the turnoff for California Mesa, a couple rows of roofs atop round metal poles stood attached to a trapezoidal building with flaking white paint. A relic of the 50s, complete with the original hand-painted sign affixed to the side of the building, black letters on a white background that spelled "Dairy King" in a loopy font a notch shy of cursive. The King didn't offer anything beyond what the Queen offered, and I don't recall that the King's wares were of a higher caliber (though I am unabashed to

admit that I was more than happy with the caliber of the wares of each), but Dairy King did have one incontrovertible claim: uniqueness. Nowhere else was there a Dairy King exactly like this one. Sure, I bet the name got around, but *this* Dairy King reigned only in Delta, Colorado. It was not a chain, and that, somehow, made the ice cream taste just a little bit sweeter.<sup>21</sup> But most days, even most Chris Langford days, our comestible comforts had to be derived from the chest freezer of the Pea Green Store.

The road between The Farm and the Store did occasionally hold its own excitement. Once, on a rare occasion when my older brother, Kaj, was home from college and visiting the farm with us, all five of my family were driving from the store to The Farm. Just about halfway between the two places, a girl, perhaps a year older than my 8-year-old self, turned her back to the car, dropped her pants, and mooned us with gusto, throwing in a little shimmy for good measure. I cried out in terror and buried my head in my lap, as the hot oil of embarrassment sank into my gut. Pinpoints of white light flickered in behind my closed lids, as if my eyes had tried to censor the sight, and spare me from something so alarming as the sight of a naked stranger, *especially* a girl. Kaj and Dad had spent enough time teasing me, asking which girls I wanted to kiss at school (a fire fueled by the way I circled certain names in my elementary school class directory) or inciting waitresses to put big lipsticked smooch-marks for me on the restaurant receipt,

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<sup>21</sup> Incidentally, the joint was shuttered years ago. The buildings still stand, though, waiting to be revived... If you reopen it, I will come.

that the suggestion of even a little intimacy between a girl and myself (and if lipstick prints counted as intimate in my mind, then getting mooned *definitely* counted) left me fraught with worry. In my reaction (which, in its intensity, if not its justification, was not so unlike that of a just-salted slug), the two fellas saw their opening, and begin to insist that, since she was closest to my age, the girl hadn't just been engaging in a general mooning of the car, but rather that her derriere was directed at *me* in particular. Exactly what I had been afraid of! My gut took another twist. And it seemed an age before they let me forget about that racy encounter.

What, then, was there really for Jack or me at The Farm? Friendless, except for the occasional importation of Chris Langford that would surely become more complicated once the Raso-Petersen home base ceased to be Grand Junction; atticless; yardless, with the open ground so pokey that more than one ball had been punctured to its demise. We began to succumb to despondency, Jack with clenched fists, me with big-eyed melodramatic moroseness.

But wait. Were there not miles of dirt lanes on those 165 acres? How 'bout a bike ride, kids? Yeah, yeah, that's cool for a bit, but the roads are flat. There are lots of stickers. My tires are flat. Riding bikes was more fun in Grand Junction. Boo-hoo.

Hmmm. Well now. How 'bout...go-karts?

What?

Go-karts!

What!?

Yes!

Like Super Mario Kart?

.....yes...? Yes!

Wow!

That's right!

And so my parents found their carrot. "If you boys are good about moving to Delta, you can have go-karts to ride around The Farm." And what else could we say then? My excitement found its outlet in researching the horsepower of small-displacement engines and asking myself, one-seater, or two? Independent rear suspension? Running lights? Red or black roll bars? On trips to the big farm supply store to pick up feed for our still-boarded equine, I busied myself sitting in the black vinyl seats of the go-karts that were arrayed out front next to the ride-on lawnmowers. A tingle would start in the pit of my stomach, the kind of tingle that led to a bump in the thump of my pulse and, in a less shy kid, might have even resulted in a fist pump and a whoop. As it was, I settled for wringing my hands and talking to myself.

When I got my fill of go-kart fantasies, another agrarian treat waited inside. Walk through the automated double doors, turn to the right, and several 50-gallon galvanized

metal watering troughs sat in a cluster, but they were full of something far more exciting than water. Clipped to the edge of each trough was an aluminum-jacketed heat lamp, and huddled beneath the warm rays of those lamps were dozens of chicks. Signs affixed to the outside of each trough identified them by type—Leghorn, Americana, etc.—and I dutifully read the words before forgetting them the next instant because there they were, piles of fluffy yellow cheeping chicks, and who, faced by that prospect, could really care what variety they were? Even my nomenclature-obsessed mind—which knew which dinosaurs belonged to the order Saurischia and which to the order Ornithischia and which insisted on saying “my yellow Sportscraft Action Ball” instead of “my foursquare ball”—jettisoned those chicken breed names like a handful of dirty laundry. Alongside Jack, I would lean down, snatch a chick, and clutch it to my chest, petting its tiny cheeping head with my thumb before putting it back and picking up another. Knowing that I was about to be moved to a farm, it was easy to let myself imagine getting to take home a basket of chicks to start my own egg-laying flock. If I was already going to get a go-kart, how hard could it be to get some chickens? Maybe this farm life isn’t going to be so bad after all, I thought.

But lurking around the edges of my mind was a nameless, inarticulate thought, one that was concerned with what I would not quite say to myself: chicks don’t stay chicks forever. They grow up into squawky chickens, which were decidedly less alluring

to me at that age, squawky chickens that were undeniably related to those chickens whose wings I loved to eat, fried and dipped in hot sauce. So, though I never exactly wrangled that lurking admission, I didn't try to appeal the rapid "No" my parents offered in response to my avian request.

Despite the effort invested in The Farm—all the days wandering the dirt roads, the tearing off of the asbestos shingles, the importation of the single-wide trailer—we never ended up moving to California Mesa. I would be honored to say that the decision was made due to the rhetorical brilliance with which Jack and I argued our case, but, even before our acquiescence was bought with the promise of go-karts, we were never going to persuade our parents one way or the other. Instead, the distance, that tedious forty-five minutes (on a good day) of U.S. Highway 50 that separated Delta and Grand Junction, proved logistically unreconcilable. For his part, my dad probably wouldn't have minded making the trip two or three days a week, but neither of my parents was interested in my mom having to make the trek Monday through Friday. Even if she decided to restructure her job and make a home office, all the real estate she managed was in downtown Grand Junction and would require not-infrequent visits regardless. The GJ roots ran too deep. Looking back, it is tempting to wonder if something about my mom being a third-generation Grand Junction Raso played some subliminal role in preventing her from breaking with the Grand Valley and the Colorado River to roost along the path of the

Gunnison, but such contemplation was far from my mind at the time. Instead, I simply asked the question that even now seems to loom so baldly as to be nearly embarrassing: “So...um...didn’t you guyssss...think about that before you bought the farm...?”

I never quite got an answer.

For my part, despite having to concede that all my life’s work in asbestos abatement was for naught, I could—and can—only feel glad that I did not grow up in Delta. The town is just a notch further away from other places than Grand Junction—which is already 4 hours away from the nearest real city, Denver—and, while Grand Junction’s lone music theater/club, the spilled-beer-smelling Mesa Theater and Club, was already depressingly solitary, Delta’s complete lack of any official venue would have further complicated the career of Crowded Agnes, my best friends’ and my high school rock band that seemed like the inevitable byproduct of my mother’s excellent record collection. More than anything, though, when I think about the two places now, I come to the landscape. Though edged by the Great Stinking Desert, Delta manages to sneak past its reach, just a breath far enough east to lie in the sort of Colorado that most people associate with Colorado—greener, grassier, with bluer mountains: the huddled points of the West Elks, island-like, that seem to lie just outside of town; the sawtoothed Raggeds that slice the sky to the northeast just beyond the Elks’ outpost; and the San Juans, jagged and snowcapped, so perfect as to overwhelm any picture, marching elemental along the

far horizon and walling off the East, letting you know that *this* is the Intermountain West, and you are in its midst. Nearer by and to the south, the inviting bump of Horsefly Peak with its thick stands of lodgepole pine, and the great uplift of the Uncompaghre Plateau. And the desert's edge is not so sharp; pinyon-juniper zones band the Uncompaghre, and sagebrush, prickly pear, and barrel cactus still mingle with the dried grasses on the south-facing slopes of the rolling valley floor.

It is a beautiful place.

But the dirt is not so red, the rock not so bald, the sky not so open. In the Grand Valley, the east is marked by the Grand Mesa, an igneous immensity that rises from the desert floor to hover around 10,000 feet, with a highest point of 11,200. The mesa top's flatness is nearly perfect when viewed from the window of an airplane, as if a great blade had sliced off the bulk of some Himalayan colossus. Lake after lake dots the surface, many ringed round by cabins, lodges, fishing pools, and the footprints of moose. Beyond the sheer edge of this great island, the valley falls away, basalt and granite giving way to sandstone even before the Grand Mesa's base. The Colorado River snakes in from the north, running out of DeBeque Canyon and past the sandstone bulwarks at the feet of the Grand Mesa that give their name to the little town of Palisade. From the southeast, the Gunnison River emerges between the Grand Mesa and the Uncompaghre Plateau, flowing west from Delta where it had been strengthened by the inflow of the

Uncompaghre River. In the broad valley floor, the Gunnison and Colorado converge to become just the lone Colorado, flowing out to the western deserts and an uncertain terminus somewhere shy of the sea. Perhaps more than anything it is this collapse of water, the countless ponds, lakes, streams, and creeks of the mountains falling into a single river, that marks the beginning of the Great Basin Desert. On the Grand Valley's north side run the Bookcliffs, a range of alluvial fans capped by striped layers of sandstone. Their eastern terminus is marked by Mount Garfield, which lends its flat-topped silhouette to the City of Grand Junction's official logo, and they trail off into the west to end somewhere shy of Utah's San Rafael Swell. To the valley's south, the regularity of the Uncompaghre gives way to anticlines and synclines, the sheared and contorted sandstone, balanced rocks, and spires of the Colorado National Monument, where around every hairpin turn in the road, a new hawk-haunted vista of improbable shapes of the earth opens up. In this place where the geology is more legible than if it were a book lying open on a table, the features of the landscape take on elemental, singular names: the Mesa, the Monument, the Bookcliffs. And, wide open at the far end, the great ache of the western horizon. I do not know who I would be if I had not grown up with those vistas before my eyes.

And maybe that is what my gladness over not growing up in Delta really comes down to—who would I have been if that had happened? I cannot imagine. The desert

sank into my blood long ago: many of my earliest memories are full of the red grit that sneaks into every possession after a weekend camping beneath the sandstone-framed brilliance of the sky. Cactus spines, fire ants, not a tree in sight, and nowhere else you'd rather be.

But here's the end of that paean, because, while I didn't grow up in Delta, fate—or the will of my parents (and is there a difference?)—did still ordain that I grow up on a hobby farm, and with family life on *The Farm* no longer imminent, my parents had to go about finding a new site for the dream.

### The Farm: a do-over

While the Grand Valley contains few parcels of land on the scale of those on California Mesa, sites in the 5- to 20-acre range are fairly abundant, and not infrequently billed as “horse properties,” which means that they contain pasture, a corral, and usually an outbuilding or two, like a tack shed or run-in shelter. In addition to these rather recreational plots, one can also find the more agrarian properties, which, while occupying the same size range, are characterized by either orchards or fields of corn, beans, peppers, or hay (though almost never grains like wheat or barley), depending on whether one is looking toward the eastern or western ends of the valley. Despite this apparent abundance of potential mulesteads, though, the search was complicated by the geography of the place—i.e. the fact that the Grand Valley lies within the desert. This climatic categorization is no exaggeration, because the area only receives around 8 inches of precipitation a year. Looking out across the community, though, one might be hard-pressed to believe this number. Trees abound, marching up and down streets and spreading their boughs over lawn after lawn. Only just outside of town can an onlooker get any sense of what the place looked like before being built up. Past the margins, pale brown hills roll out the various uplifts at the valley’s edges, baked hard by the sun. They are known as “The Adobes,” perhaps for their color, perhaps for their solidity. From a distance, they almost look like sand dunes, but up close, they are stiff enough to break a

wrist in a bike wreck. If you pay attention, you can find fossilized sharks' teeth in the erosion-scraped sides of hills, evidence of the valley floor's distant past as the bottom of a sea. Vegetation is sparse, with only the occasional small cactus, a tumbleweed here and there, a few twiggy shrubs with brittle rattling pods, and snarls of dried-up thorny brambles. Also scattered across the slopes are rusting cans, shotgun shells, bullet casings, shattered glass, pieces of burnt-out cars, and bullet-riddled old refrigerators. Once the haunt only of hawks, coyotes, rabbits, lizards, and snakes, The Adobes have long drawn recreational attention of all sorts. Though technically under the care of the Bureau of Land Management, the barren expanse is, in practice, more of a free-for-all zone, where you just might turn a corner on your bike and find yourself dodging bullets from the muzzle of an M16 that someone in a balaclava is shooting uphill across a road. It has been known to happen.

In a word, then, the key to life in the Grand Valley is irrigation. That lone Colorado is dipped into over and over, sidetracked on its journey to flow through a network of canals and into weirs and through headgates and out hose bibs, sprinklers, and pipes. When the water makes its way back into the river, it contains manure, G.I. Joe action figures, fertilizer, discarded wigs, maybe the occasional goldfish, and silt enough to cloud the clarity of the mountain snowmelt. In exchange, it offers parks, yards, gardens, fields, orchards, vineyards. Not until high school did I see a house with

xeriscaped grounds.

Any story of this place is, at some level, a story of water. In the town of Palisade stands a statue of Wayne N. Aspinall, a Palisade local and longstanding member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Colorado's 4th District; the Federal Courthouse in Grand Junction also bears his name. Throughout his career, he lobbied for "western" issues—i.e. land use and water rights. While his career may have included an intense pro-resource-extraction stance and some brushes with environmental lobbies that temper my enthusiasm for one of the Grand Valley's only hometown heroes (the other one is Dalton Trumbo, who was in 2007 finally granted an honorary statue as part of Main Street's Art on the Corner series; read *Eclipse*—with its excoriation of thinly veiled old Grand Junction establishment—and you will see why you may never encounter Dalton Trumbo Square in the civic center), Aspinall's life's work and legacy embody some key concerns for and challenges to life on Colorado's Western Slope, and water is at their core.

While irrigation is nearly universal across the Grand Valley, its boons are not doled out equally, a side-effect of the collision between humans and the finite nature of the resource, a finite nature that becomes inescapably apparent in the desert. Because my parents wanted more than a bare dirt lot for their equine, the irrigation reserves of prospective properties became paramount. Irrigation water is disbursed in "shares." Any given property that has irrigation service is granted a fixed number of these shares, which

is in turn dependent upon the number of shares allotted to the weir and headgate that service the property. In most cases, these headgates are shared by at least two properties; in some cases, they are shared by as many as seven or eight. To make matters more complicated, the amount of water available to any headgate follows no apparent logic—sometimes six properties will have to split 60 shares, while, half a mile away, two properties will live large with 100 shares. These allocations are generally grandfathered in, and incontrovertible. Once the allotted shares have been consumed, even though the water will continue flowing past in the canal, the hawk-eyed Irrigation District employees who patrol the canal—known as the “ditch riders,” a name that always seemed to have something of the vigilante about it—will lock down the headgate, meaning that no more water will be available until the cycle turns over. Not only does this situation mandate planning, but it also demands cooperation amongst neighbors—at least ideally. And the fewer the shares, the higher the stakes. Guns have been drawn over water sharing disputes, and people have been killed. Water access became a make-it-or-break-it consideration in my parents’ hunt. Several properties that met the other key metrics of size, situation, and good views were nixed on account of uncertain water prospects.

Eventually, though, one site made the cut. East of Grand Junction and north of the Colorado River lies a slight uplift known as Orchard Mesa, and immediately east of this place and a notch higher again lies East Orchard Mesa. The former, though outside the

city limits, falls within the postal purview of Grand Junction and had by the mid-1990s already given up most of the orchards whence its name derived. The latter possesses a Palisade address and is thick with orchards, especially those of the chin-drippingly juicy peaches for which Palisade enjoys a mild sort of fame and which make the air heavy with their scent at the end of every summer. Other tree fruits abound (pears, apples, cherries, apricots, and plums, in roughly descending order), as well as squash, tomatoes, onions, peppers, small plots of sweet corn and beans, and, ever-increasingly, vineyards. Roadside stands with hand-painted signs edge every straightaway, offering this bounty in raw form or in the shape of jams, jellies, sauces, and pies. In this most agricultural corner of the Grand Valley, my parents finally found their patch. The property consisted of “20” acres (a county easement had technically reduced that number to 18.8) containing a rectangle of a house with large yards in front and rear, a corral, a 4 acre grass pasture, roughly 11 acres of fallow field, a big red barn, and myriad piles of rusty fencing panels and sharp-edged detritus. Though I had no say in the matter one way or the other, the barn was the real dealmaker for me. A big red barn! How much more classic could you get? I could almost hear the rooster crow as I strode out the door to milk the cows... And another bonus: in a blob of side yard stood 22 cherry trees, bearers of what was then my favorite fruit. My own private orchard! In the backyard stood two apricot trees, and, back behind the barn, a wizened apple tree that, with its solitariness, half-barren branches, darkened

bark, and hunched and twisted shape, struck me as melancholy and even unsettling, a presence in the corner of my eye that often made me do a double-take.

While the barn was a perk, and the fruit trees not unwelcome, my parents were most excited about the ample water (the headgate was shared with only one other property, a Christmas tree farm across the road), the space, and the views of the Bookcliffs and the looming Grand Mesa. What they were not excited about was the house. It was an odd affair, a narrow rectangle that was cut up into rooms in a manner that seemed designed to hinder one's progress as much as possible: walking from the garage on one end to the bedrooms on the other required a host of right-angle turns, with abundant possibilities for further detours. When I think back to attending showings of the property, I am inclined to speculate that, for the previous owners, this maze-like design may have served as a version of the stations of the cross, giving them ample opportunity to dazzle the eyes of visitors with a new array of crucifixes (metal, wood, glass, papier maché) around every corner. But I suppose this speculation is of the chicken-or-egg variety. In any case, my parents were determined to eventually alter the living quarters. Unlike the asbestos-shingled, musty-smelling, and potentially haunted Delta farmhouse, though, the choppy rectangle was slated to be remodeled rather than removed. Since the house had plenty of space and worked well enough, the remodel was put on the back burner in the interest of getting the land ready for the family herd as quickly as possible.

Only one nod to the eventual modification was made right away, and that gesture centered around the fireplace.

Fireplaces were not something that my parents ever supported. Something about smoke allergies, air pollution, soot, and pesky birds gaining ingress through open flumes caused them to join in unified disavowal of the domestic hearth. However, to their dismay, fireplaces are rather common, and seemed to follow our every move. Our in-town house had a “formal” dining and living room, and in a wall by the dining table was a large brick fireplace. With its size and the presence of an attached brick bench that jutted into the room, this particular hearth was meant to be a literal focal point of the room. Some people might have felt stymied by the assertiveness of this feature, but my parents managed to foil it with the help of a large folding lacquered screen that contained a scene of a heron standing amidst the reeds and rushes of a stream. Moreover, that bench attached to the fireplace, that was supposed to intensify its very hearthiness, was pressed into service as the perfect stand for the screen. Raso-Petersens: 1; Fireplace: 0. In light of this precedent, the smaller, benchless fireplace at the new residence never really stood a chance. To illustrate this point, my dad pulled out his brand-new Sawzall all-purpose electric saw, plugged it in, and buzzed the mantle right off the wall in a shower of sawdust. Perhaps my mom and I were imagining things, not yet used to the cast of light in that new place, but we thought we saw a certain gleam in his eye that choked off any

questions regarding the necessity of his endeavor. “Testing out his new toy,” my mom might have said. Thus dismantled, the fireplace sat, awaiting its impending bricking-over.

Outside, though, was where the urgent work lay. While the property came with one established pasture, the acres were largely unfenced, making them less than suitable for containing a herd of equine. Furthermore, the corral was a mess of t-posts, wire and half-rusted modular fencing panels, and the ground within was littered with bits of broken plastic pipe peeking up from where they had once been buried as part of an abandoned drip irrigation system. This detritus did little to inspire confidence as to the safety of the footing: if broken pipes were present, why not nails? Not exactly friendly to the delicate frog of a mule’s foot, that tissue that, not unlike an arch in a human foot, lies inside the the hard walls of the hoof. Ensuring frog friendliness became a top priority. The ground was worked over, first by hand, then—and this was exciting to a kid whose favorite toys included retired pacemaker magnets from his dad’s surgical office—with heavy magnets mounted on moving dolly-like hand carts, the sort that construction crews use to snap up stray screws and nails. While I had just learned about electromagnets, and did find myself wishing that these debris magnets were electrified—“Electromagnets can pick up a whole car! Just think how many nails we’d uncover if we had one of those! Wow! I bet if you had a big enough electromagnet, you could even start tugging on the core of the earth! Gosh!”—I was still having a more jolly time wielding magnets than I had smashing up

asbestos siding. Perhaps it was something about the non-carcinogenic nature of magnets that put me at ease, but who can really say.

The next order was to clean up the fencing. While modular fencing panels are handy, able to be carried by one adult (or a couple kids) and fastened together with a simple pin-and-chain system, some of the panels had crossbars that had been kicked or crushed and broken free of their welds, leaving jagged, rusty steel ends. Useful for booby traps and haunted house sets, less helpful for fostering safe containment conditions. The busted numbers were carried off and piled behind the barn, where a pile of broken-but-maybe-not-entirely-useless-and-therefore-not-thrown-away objects started to grow—twisted bundles of wire, splintered 2x4s, pipe fittings, broken-handled shovels, and other items that looked destined to decorate the walls of the sort of ranch-themed restaurant that is attached to most Nebraska hotels. Those panels that had weathered life's vagaries in one piece were pressed into service to shore up the edges of the de-nailed and rototilled ground. To snug them in place, my dad pounded t-posts into the ground, those classic field and highway-side fence constituents that consist of a steel post, t-shaped in cross-section and with a spade-like triangular plate at the bottom to help stabilize the post once it's been sunk. If the t-post is like a giant nail, and the ground like a plank of wood, then my role in this task was to play the carpenter's non-dominant hand, the one that holds the nail in place while the hammer falls.

Did my dad perform this task with the aid of his sledgehammer? No one remembers, but let us let that be the story, because he was a person who had a bond with his sledgehammer. So dear was this category of tool to him that he even had more than one—the 2.5-pound “baby sledge”, with its short blaze orange fiberglass handle and shiny steel head; the 4-pound less-baby sledge, with its fluted wooden handle and chipped red-painted steel head; and the big kahuna, the one that really got his blood pumping, the 8-pound full-size sledge, with its long, safety yellow fiberglass handle and well-loved (i.e. battered) black-painted steel head. While the baby sledge was primarily for pounding tent stakes, the other two found service in countless other applications. Once, on a rough-and-tumble Utah desert road in the early 1990s, my dad bashed the long rear overhang of my parents’ 1982 Toyota Landcruiser on a slab of rock, the long rear overhang under which the exhaust pipe ran (an admittedly poor piece of design for an SUV). The exhaust pipe was pancaked, and the stopped-up car began to sputter. “What will we do?” my mom wondered aloud. Her face tightened beneath her prescription sunglasses as she considered the situation. Daylight would be running out in only a couple more hours; the nearest paved road lay miles away, and the nearest town miles further than that. We didn’t have enough provisions to stay out overnight—not enough water to stay hydrated, not enough food to keep Jack and me from wailing. Even after staying the night, there would be no guarantee that another car would pass down this

same washed-out, rocky trace of road. Would we have to walk out? And how would my parents retrieve the damaged car? Worry began to well up inside her.

Undaunted, my dad seized a sledgehammer from the back seat and stomped around to the back of the car. After another inspection of the squashed pipe, he crouched down on one knee and launched the hammer at that pancaked metal. My mom gasped. “Warren—!” she began, but he forged ahead, covering her protests and winces with the ringing of metal on metal. After a moment of sledgehammer swinging, he had managed to bludgeon the pipe back open, and Mom had to give credit where credit was due, because the ‘cruiser quit its blubbering and got everyone home. As if to ensure that no one forget that adventure, from that day on, the tailpipe was always a bit more of a drunken polygon than a cylinder, no matter how many times it was judiciously re-sledged. This episode even earned my dad the nickname “Sledgehammer Dick,” bestowed upon him by a close family friend, handyman, and snuff-spitting WWII vet.

So there we were, Sledgehammer Dick with his 8-pounder in a two-fisted grip, me with both 8-year-old hands clutching the t-post in place. Up rose the chunk of steel before plummeting in a blur with a thin *whoosh*. The collision of metal sliced the air, bounding back to us in the same instant as an echo off the broad side of the big red barn. A tremor shot into my gloved palms, up the thin bones of my arms, and rattled my teeth, making my head felt like a bowl of marbles being shaken by a toddler with a sugar high.

My eyes had clamped shut with such force that I felt the crease lingering in my upper lids when they flickered back open. Throughout my childhood, I had always had an autonomous response to clanging noises that involved my eyelids snapping shut, a trait that was occasionally a bit inconvenient, like when a new house was being built next to our Fletcher Lane house and blink-inducing hammering seemed to go on for months, giving even the most casual stroll around the backyard some a faint whiff of the strobe-lit discotheque.<sup>22</sup> How much more intense this present proximity rendered the reaction, my reflexes working overtime to keep up with the rise and fall of the 8-pound sledge. And aside from the overwhelming impulse to blink, I cringed at the thought of that chunk of metal whizzing through the air so close to me.

“Keep it steady, son!” my dad called out between blows. “And keep your eyes open! You want to be ready in case the sledgehammer glances off the post.”

What? I needed to be ready in case I had to dodge a wild blow? What kind of job was this? I knew there was no chance of skipping out of it, though, not when I had failed to get out of the asbestos shingle-removal gig. Besides, chickening out right then would only have earned my dad’s disdain (“Oh, come on, son; don’t be such a baby. I thought you were trying to *help* your dad,” I imagined him saying). I wanted to earn his praise, wanted to keep that storytime version of him around. With my head hunkered down

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<sup>22</sup> Other childhood autonomous responses included acquiring an instant headache at the sound of Bob Dylan playing the harmonica. Fortunately, that one was long-gone before I got to college in Minnesota.

turtle-like into my shoulders and the tip of my tongue jutting out between my teeth in the intensity of my concentration, I managed to honor at least the first of my dad's imperatives and hold still as he swung the hammer. The clay-rich soil wasn't so keen on receiving the dozen or so t-posts, and it took more than a few moments of persistent sledging, but soon enough, the posts were sunk, the panels tied to them and pinned to one another, and the carpenter didn't even hammer his thumb. "Alright, good work, son; we're done for today," my dad said. The corral was fenced.

Or was it a paddock? Before we can finish cobbling together the preliminary Raso-Petersen longears enclosure, a nomenclatorial detour is in order. In the West, the Wild West, and certainly all the cowboy movies, the most common term for an equine enclosure seems to be "corral." The term has such traction that, in addition to literally corralling horses, one might also figuratively engage in "corralling the kids" in an effort to load the mini-van, or in "corralling the cats" in an effort to achieve the unachievable. Cowboy-hatted and pickup-trucked as Western Colorado is, one might reasonably assume, therefore, that the future home of my family's herd was indeed a corral. But not so fast. Warren A. Petersen seemed determined to deem the space a paddock. Wannabe cowboy as I was, familiar with the concomitant lingo as I pretended to be, I had been expecting that dusty ground through which we had all been sifting to become a corral, so this new term stood out like a rock in a sandbox. "But...what's a paddock?" I asked,

when I heard him refer to the new enclosure by that name.

“Oh, it’s just another term for an equine enclosure, son, like corral,” said my dad.

“Oh.” I paused a moment, mulling over this synonymity. Though I was no stranger to the idea of interchangeable words, I still liked to think that each name was unique, that each name was a name for a very specific *something*, a something that no other name could quite capture. It was, after all, a “yellow Sportscraft Action Ball” that I played with most afternoons, and not just any old “ball.” There had to be some reason that he wanted to use the word “paddock”; “paddock” had to be something just slightly different than corral. “So,” I continued, “a paddock...is it a little bit different than a corral? Like, does it have...a different shape? Or maybe a paddock has a different water setup? Or maybe a certain type of shed...”

“No, son. It’s just another word for the same thing.”

Hmmm, I thought, not quite trusting this easy equivalence. “Hmmm,” I said.

After a moment’s reflection, he offered an attempt at clarification: “I suppose ‘paddock’ is the more British term, and ‘corral’ more common in the American West.”

“Ohhh.” Visions of riding breeches, knee-high boots, and hornless saddles filled my head.

“I suppose it just happens to be the term I use,” he concluded.

Why might my dad, with his family’s rural Nebraska roots, his dreams of a farm

Out West, and his big American biceps, have a preference for the “more British” term? Fast-forward a few years: my parents, Jack, and I are in the car on our way home from dinner out. My dad has just been talking about his upcoming week of assisting in the OR, and repeatedly referring to his “shed-jull”:

“Why are you saying it like that?” I ask; “don’t you mean ‘sked-jull’?”

“Well, son, ‘shed-jull’ is the British pronunciation of the word,” he replies, in the same even tone that I imagine he uses with his patients.

“But...you’re...not British. Why are you saying it like that?” I retort, not trying as hard as I might have done to keep a little bemused scoff from sneaking into my voice.

“I had many British friends in college!” he fires back, his voice louder and hot with annoyance. Gee, I thought, did that mean I could start speaking in an Australian accent because I had watched so many hours of Steve Irwin’s adventures?

So there you have one possibility: perhaps he preferred the term “paddock” on account of having had many British friends in college. Of course, another possibility exists: filled with longing for Colorado though he was, my dad did grow up on the East Coast, where English-style riding pervades the equestrian scene—a scene that is, no doubt, characterized by many red-blooded American “paddock”-sayers. Take your pick.

In any case, corral or paddock, British friends or not, the newly-fenced space had to be made ready to receive the herd. A few 50-gallon galvanized steel watering troughs,

just like the ones that housed the chicks at the supply store, had come with the property, and they were dragged into the enclosure accordingly. This work and our move were occurring toward the tail end of winter, late February of 1997, and, though the snow on the valley floor was gone from all the unshady places, the temperatures would still be dipping below freezing most nights for at least another month. To ensure that the equine wouldn't be reduced to licking 50 gallons of ice, my parents acquired electric tank heaters, which plugged into extension cords that ran to outlets in the barn. With their metal heating elements and the coils of stainless steel that wrapped around the elements and the power cords to protect any curious browsers from chomping into live electrical wire, the tank heaters looked exactly like the sort of thing you wouldn't want to plug into a wall and drop in a tank of water. I imagined arcs of electricity leaping off the coiled metal as it hit the water and running up my arms and across my body, making me twitch, maybe even illuminating my skeleton. My dad had to assure me more than once that it was safe to plop the plugged-in heater into the tank, and even then, I had a hard time suppressing a little wince. But just like he promised, no catastrophic shocks came my way; and, I had to admit, he did always seem to know what he was talking about.

With the equine's enclosure complete, attention turned next to the outlying fields. I cannot presume to speak for all rural types, whether of the hobby variety or not, but, for as long as I can remember, I have found something beautiful in the sight of a fallow field.

Maybe it is something like what the painter feels while regarding a fresh canvas, or the skier feels while regarding a layer of untouched powder. Possibility. A fallow field with ample irrigation is a place in which almost anything might be grown, and a few minutes spent driving around East Orchard Mesa would be enough to give many people a lifetime's worth of ideas, from peonies to peaches, lavender to legumes, apples to ancho chiles. I looked out across those eleven acres and imagined stalks of wheat and corn, tiny, soft, and malachite-green after the last snowmelt, yearning upward toward the unclouded sun until they stood at the end of August, swaying under the weight of the grains in their crowns amidst the humming wings of tiny flying things, before being roved over by the churning wheels and teeth of a combine harvester and left to grow brittle and brown in the shortening of days, rattling in the cool air of October and dusted with the snow of late November, lying down beneath winter's darkness until they were churned into the springtime dirt to rise again. I could almost smell the warm sweetness of the fresh-baked bread that the wheat would become, could almost see the steam rising from fresh-picked ears of sun-yellow corn and they dripped with melting butter—all of this, of course, without having yet worked even five minutes on a farm in my eight-year-old life.

My parents saw something else. The existing 4 acre pasture, which was then given over to hay production, would become the warm-season range of the equine; immediately to the south, like a mirror image, a second 4-acre grass pasture would be

plotted, this one intended to yield the hay that would constitute most of the year's feed for the herd. The remaining seven fallow acres, which would hug the new pasture in a fat L-shape, would become an alfalfa field. This plant, a native of the arid places in the Near East, would thrive in the high desert climate. As a legume, alfalfa is nitrogen-fixing and has a different nutritional profile than grass hay, being much richer. A horse, mule, or donkey could become ill from being pastured with free access to this richness. However, this richness makes alfalfa an ideal choice to augment an equine's diet during the harder winter months, when temperatures in Western Colorado drop as low as 0 Fahrenheit not infrequently. Though livestock are more than capable of handling year-round outdoor life, they need the extra octane to keep themselves toasty. In addition to providing a supply for my family's own animals' winter needs, the seven acres would generate a hefty retailable surplus. Because the local market was far less thick with alfalfa hay than grass hay, high-quality alfalfa bales demanded a premium in the pages of the local classified ads. To my parents, it seemed like a win-win situation: the plant was more suited to the desert, as well as offering higher financial returns to the producer. Wheat, corn, chile peppers, pumpkins, and peaches, please step aside. I couldn't believe that haymaking was their agricultural dream. I couldn't think of anything less exciting than growing grass. "Could we at least grow some pumpkins?" I begged, imagining how many different dinosaur jack-o-lanterns I could carve if I had my own private pumpkin patch to harvest.

“We’ll see, son. We can talk about it after the hay fields are established.”

I knew a “probably not” when I heard one. I guessed I would just have to look longingly at the neighbors’ crops. At least I still had those cherry trees to tide me over.

This haymaking undertaking would require several steps. First, the upcoming crop from the existing pasture would need to be harvested, baled, and stored in order to keep the herd fat and happy. This pasture would also need to be fenced in an equine-friendly fashion. Equine-friendly meant that, romantic as a little rusted coil of the stuff can look mounted on the wall as a “Western” accent, absolutely no barbed wire would find its way into our fencing. Instead, the fence wire would be smooth extruded steel, with two wires twisted together to form each strand. I write “equine-friendly” because miles and miles of barbed wire still cross-criss the west, pressed into service for the containment of cattle. Barbed wire is considered anathema for equine containment on account of how the animals can hurt themselves on those little spikes. This consideration is not applied to cattle. Why not use smooth wire for them, as well? The reason given is that cattle will lean their bulk against smooth wire until they break through it, thus necessitating the barbs. If they are such leaners, it does not take much of an imaginative leap to conclude what sort of gashing and scarring must occur in the average cow’s life. My inclination is to respond to this barbed logic by saying “Use smooth wire and just build your fences better, you lazy jackasses.” But what do I know. In any case, a barbless fence was in

order. After this, the fallow fields would be tilled, seeded, and creased with furrows through which the diverted Colorado would flow, before being fenced in their turn. Though the ground was still winter-hardened at the time of our move, Spring came quickly enough, the lengthening hours of sunlight chasing the chill from the soil and moving us closer to the pounding of posts. Bummed though I was about the promise of hay, I couldn't help but be eager to see what sorts of tractors would come rolling my way in a few weeks.

### Rogue Cells

Life had a serious complication to throw our way. We had scarcely moved to East Orchard Mesa when my dad, driving home from a day's work at his surgical office, started palpating his throat, felt a lump on his left tonsil, and declared "Oh shit; that's cancer" to the empty car. And he was right. A few days and tests later, he was diagnosed with squamous cell cancer of his left tonsil, a cancer that had metastasized to several lymph nodes on the left side of his neck. He would be undergoing radical neck surgery, followed by rounds of radiation therapy.

The chill rippled through me when he told us the news, a chill that left my heartbeat hammering in my ears. How sick was he? Would he be cured? And, too, the question that occurred to Jack and me, children who knew nothing about those mechanisms of the body: Did we have it, too? Did this mean that we would get it? In a steady voice, the voice of a lecturer before a screen, my dad dispelled this latter concern. "Cancer is when some cells in a body start to replicate out of control, and it's only inside that body. So you have nothing to worry about; it's not like a contagious cold."

Embarrassment that he had to address our selfish fears instead of our fears about him shot through me, even as I was filled with relief to know I was safe.

"That's an understandable question, though, boys," he continued, and my embarrassment fell away, leaving my fear about his health naked and singular. He began

to address this other concern. With surgery and chemotherapy, his chance of a cure was at least 75%; with the addition of radiation therapy, it increased to about 90%. “Pretty good odds. So you boys really have nothing to worry about—your dad should be fine.” I was sitting in the beige back seat of our beige 1992 Chevrolet Blazer Sport, wringing my hands as we sat in the driveway. I tried to clutch these words, something solid amidst the torrents in my mind. My eyes latched onto the specks of dirt on the seat, the fine dust on the vinyl of the armrests and windowsills, the smudges on the inside of the windows from dog noses, the bits of pale dried mud on the carpet, and the pieces of grass under the back seat, each singular, frozen as I climbed out of the two-doored vehicle, as if I had never noticed them before that moment. Wedged down next to where the seatbelt bolted to the floor, I found a pin that read “Freitag, Gott Sei Dank.” “Friday, God be thanked,” my mom translated. No one knew where the pin came from. I clutched it in my right hand, something tangible while I tried to fit my mind around these intangible new things. Eventually the pin vanished, maybe wedged down next to the seatbelt in some other car.

My dad, buoyed by his early discovery of the tumor, confident in his colleague’s abilities, and having the physician’s benefit of the inside scoop as far as understanding exactly what his apostatic body was doing to itself, was perhaps the least concerned member of the family. Besides, as he reminded us, he had already had one successful bout with cancer: his senior year in college, he was treated for a fiber sarcoma in his right

quadriceps, undergoing a surgery that involved slicing a chunk of muscle the size of a dime-store novel out of his leg. The treatment process may have caused him to have to withdraw from school for an academic year, but he licked that cancer against longer odds than he faced from this new threat. It was going to take more than some rebellious squamous cells to undermine his dream.

By the turning of spring to summer, my dad was in the hospital, undergoing radical neck surgery. His left tonsil was removed, along with all the lymph nodes in the left side of his neck, to several of which the cancer had metastasized. To perform this, the surgeon also had to remove the left sternocleidomastoid muscle, the mass of tissue that runs top to bottom along the anterior aspect of the neck, one to either side of the esophagus and trachea, and gives much of the heft to one's throat. With it gone, his skin draped thinly over the veins and ligaments on the left side of his neck, a change from the shirt-collar swelling bulk he had sported before the surgery. The recovery was slow, and he spent several days and nights in the hospital. My mom took Jack and me to visit him most of these days, which was easier since school was out.

I had no idea what to expect on our first visit. I am sure that Jack and I must have been asking our mom questions, and, even if we were not, I am sure she was filling us in on how he was feeling, how the surgery had gone, how long he might have to stay in the hospital, but all I can conjure of the journey between the car and his room is the silence

of the new elevator as we rode to the seventh floor of the new wing of St. Mary's Hospital. The doors slid open—the first elevator I'd seen with optic sensors to prevent premature closures—and we stepped onto the linoleum of the hallway, turned right, walked, and turned left into his room, where we found him smiling, chatting and joking with the nurses, many of whom he had known for years. The grey plastic bed was awash with buttons, buttons on a panel at its foot, buttons along each side, buttons on another panel on the right corner by my dad's head. Tiny lights blinked and glowed in most of them, green, red, orange, and the whole thing gave off a faint whirring. It reminded me of nothing so much as a spaceship. Excitement came right on the heels of this thought, but any flicker of fantasy was dispelled by the lines and tubes running into and out of the person lying in a thin blue gown beneath thin white sheets, lines and tubes that were connected to a battery of hanging envelopes of fluid and humming monitors that beeped and displayed their readings in lime-green pixels. This was definitely a hospital bed, and that was definitely my dad in it, with the bandaged neck and dark circles under his eyes, eyes that would close for a moment between sentences or chuckles, as lines of exhaustion crept across his face. I was stunned by the sight of my big-armed, warm, loud, hairy dad, who had so recently been swinging a sledgehammer and showing no mercy to the mantle, lying nearly immobile. But he still had smiles and careful, one-sided hugs for all of us. Never one to miss a didactic opportunity, he even began to teach me what the read-outs

meant: systolic versus diastolic pressures, heart-rate, O<sub>2</sub> saturation. A saline solution in this IV, painkillers in that one—though, of course, he was quick to point out that *he* didn't really need to twist *that* dial very often. I tried to lock onto each word he offered. The antiseptic tang in the air, astringent in my nostrils, and the smell of autoclaved fabric and plastic hoses and pharmaceuticals and flesh so recently opened and closed, of chemical sanitation covering controlled trauma; and the vision of my dad, lying mostly immobile, every breath and heartbeat accounted for with a beep and a whir—pinpoints of chill freckled my arms, chased by a hot flush, and something clenched between my ribs. Only my effort to listen to my dad's bed-borne cardiovascular and respiratory lecturette kept my hands from knotting together. After an hour, Mom, Jack, and I left, returned to a quieter house, waited. I tried to read like I usually did in the afternoons, but my mind kept snapping back to my dad, bandaged in his hospital bed.

Summer and my dad's diagnosis had brought Kaj back to the Grand Valley, and my next visit to my dad occurred with him alongside Mom, Jack, and me. When you share a home with a family member who is a medical professional, especially one who has their own private practice, medical paraphernalia has a good chance of making its way into the home. Pharmaceutical companies were responsible for many of these items, little advertising trinkets that got dispersed at conferences or in the surgeons' lounge like party favors at a birthday. These ranged from fridge magnets, pens, and clipboards, to

small household tools, like wine and bottle openers. These items all share a few common features—the brand name of the drug, the drug’s chemical name, and sometimes a little slogan. I still open most of my bottles with a device that bears the tagline “Don’t open without it!” While clever in a somewhat cringe-worthy way, this particular slogan also bears testament to the limited utility of much of this advertising—who, without a knowledge of applied medical chemistry, would have any idea what was being promised by the drug in question?

The second category of medical paraphernalia consists of practical tools of the trade. While some scalpels, forceps, syringes, needles, epi-pens, and vials of tetanus vaccine and local anesthetic did nest here and there on utility room shelves, the most abundant items in this category were roll after roll of bandages, gauze, and tape; stacks of surgical masks; and boxes of powder-free nitrile gloves. Each of these had their moment of handiness, but the gloves were what most often found their way to the light of day, though not always in a manner consistent with their labeling.

Being 11.5 years old than me and a full 13 years older than Jack, with two parents who worked full-time—including one who would sometimes vanish for what seemed like days into the vortex of “on-call”—Kaj often found himself tasked with looking after Jack and me during his high school days. His efforts to keep us entertained and under control took many forms, from predictable activities like group Nintendo sessions to more

creative endeavors, like the time he and a couple of his friends turned his basement room into a haunted house, complete with strobe lights, eerie music, and an obstacle course.<sup>23</sup> I thought it was brilliant.

When brother-sitting was at its most intense, he even had to resort to occasionally bringing his dates over to the house in order to get to see them at all. One of these people stands out in my memory. Each time she came over, she spent the entire evening playing with Jack and me, talking to our stuffed animals, chasing us around the house, helping us make knock-knock jokes, and even getting us to play Twister, while Kaj sat on the couch, mouth slightly ajar. It seemed like a great system to me—he got a break from brother-sitting duties, and Jack and I got to spend the evening being entertained by someone we were probably both a little in love with. After a few of these evenings, though, he quit bringing her around.

“What happened?” I asked.

“She liked you guys better than me,” he said with a quick sigh. “It wasn’t going to work out.”

“Oh.” I briefly considered what this meant. Did she really like Jack and me better than she liked Kaj? Did that mean she had a crush on me? I wasn’t really sure what a

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<sup>23</sup> This latter episode ended with a 4-year-old Jack, who, in his youthful terror, had managed to not realize that the people in scary masks were in fact the same three 17-year-old bros who had fed us dinner earlier, getting “kidnapped” and placed in the trunk of a car, only to be released once someone realized his hyperventilating wails were probably not reflective of a good time.

crush was, but being chased around the house by her was not the same as being chased by Kaj or Mom or even the dogs. I mean, it was fun when those other people chased me around the house, too, but was it possible that it was somehow *more* fun when Kaj's date chased me around the house? Did that mean she *liked* me? Was that the source of the slight tightness that crept into my chest when she talked to me?

But then again, I thought, she seemed to chase Jack a little bit more, by my reckoning; and she only played with Jack's bright red plush dog, Jason, and not with any of my stuffed animals, and who wouldn't want to play with White Teddy? Only a weirdo would willingly choose Jason over White Teddy. And why was she always laughing so much when Jack would do annoying things like crumple up the Twister mat in the middle of the game or make purposely stupid knock-knock jokes ("Knock-knock." "Who's there?" "Nobody. I was knocking on the *table*; that wasn't someone knocking at the *door*. I fooled you!"...far less good than "Knock-knock." "Who's there?" "Bat." "Bat who?" "Batman!"...I mean, why would she encourage the former when she should have been encouraging the latter?)?

Yeah, Kaj was right, I decided. It wasn't going to work out. It was the for the best, really.

Although his brother-sitting/date two-for-one scheme ended up being a bit of a bust, Kaj seemed to have been inspired by the ability of another presence to make his life

easier, and powder-free nitrile gloves were there to help. It was an evening when watching Jack and me was more of a chore than usual. In my memory, it was because Jack was mouthing off, refusing to eat his veggies, snatching my *Hardy Boys* novel out of my hand, purposely spilling my cup of club soda, but I imagine the reality is that we were more equal partners in being annoying. Moreover, Kaj had something he had to do, maybe homework, maybe call someone he was seeing, and Jack and I were getting in his way. We didn't even notice when he left the room, but he was back a moment later holding something in his hand.

“Look, I'm gonna get you guys a friend you can hang out with while I do something for a bit, alright?” He placed his lips to the mystery object and proceeded to blow it up like a balloon. A limp nitrile glove became a big, puffy shape, like a cartoon hand that had been struck with a hammer and swollen to the size of the head with which it shared a body. Kaj pulled a felt-tipped permanent marker from his pocket and sketched a pair of oval eyes on each side between the forefinger and thumb and placed the semicircle of a smile between the thumb and tied-off wrist.

“This is your new friend, Doug. He has a mohawk.”

With that, he tossed the glove toward us and stepped into the other room. High-pitched cries of glee split the air. He must have felt certain that Doug would keep Jack and me entertained for a bit, but he couldn't have known how committed we would

become to our new friend, talking to him, carrying him around the house, and setting up various outfits, scarecrow-like, for him to wear. There were tears when Doug finally popped. Other Dougs were quickly commissioned.

A couple years later, as Mom, Kaj, Jack, and I stepped of the hospital elevator, Kaj must have sensed that we could all do with a bit of mood-lifting distraction. Glancing around at the resources at hand, he caught of a whiff of inspiration from Doug. From a nurse's cart, he snatched three nitrile gloves and handed one to Jack and one to me. Remembering Jack's and my old companion with a small flutter of excitement in my stomach, I brought the glove's wrist towards my mouth and was about to start inflating it. Kaj had something else in mind, though, a next level of glove-based distraction. He turned away from the rest of us, facing a corner of the hallway, hunched his head between his shoulders, and snapped the glove over his head. "What are you *doing??*" we demanded. After the haunted house and the Dougs, not to mention the ever-dazzling trick where he formed little bubbles of saliva on his tongue and blew them into the air, we were accustomed to the wonders of which Kaj was capable, but this glove-on-head performance was a new sight. He gave no response to our question. Instead, as he was still facing away, the glove slowly began to distend, stretching away from his head until he was sporting the same sort of cockscomb mohawk that Doug wore. Then he spun around to face us, and Jack and I yelped like puppies in delight while my mom and a

couple of nearby nurses burst into laughter. I stared at his face, trying to figure out how such a brilliant feat had been achieved. Kaj had snapped part of the glove's wrist under his nose and inflated it by breathing in through his mouth and out through his nostrils, until the stretched nitrile was so thin that he could see through it almost as easily as through a glass bubble. A little grin was etched into his face as he wiggled his eyebrows up and down at us. I couldn't disagree with his grin—I would have been proud of myself if I had come up with that trick, too. With some coaching, Jack and I followed Kaj's example and were soon sporting our own gloved heads.<sup>24</sup> Thus outfitted, the three of us followed our mom into our dad's hospital room, on the heels of a nurse whose body was tense with her effort to not ruin the surprise by laughing too soon. "Dr. Petersen, your family's here to see you!" she called out. At this we burst into the room and into our dad's line of sight.

"Oh, goodness," he said, shaking his head and rolling his eyes as Mom and the nurse let their laughter free once more. I suppose his reserve was on account of not quite seeing the delight in using a professional tool for something other than its intended use, but Kaj had succeeded in his mood-lightening goal: I didn't even think of wringing my hands a single time during that visit.

When my dad came home, several visits later, his neck was still wreathed in

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<sup>24</sup> One of the great sorrows of growing up for me has been the fact that the dimensions of my grown-up skull will no longer accommodate a powder-free nitrile glove.

bandages, and he wore a brace. He was under strict orders from his surgeon (which probably mirrored his strict orders to himself) to not turn his head. If we called out to him and wanted to show him something, Jack and I would have to present ourselves in front of his chair, or, in lucky moments, wait an extra couple of seconds for him to rotate his whole body our direction. After a couple days, he began scolding us for telling him to “Look!” at anything that wasn’t already being presented before him. I tried to walk lightly, watching him from angles he couldn’t see as he sat in his chair and read or dozed. I wanted to sort out how to keep this chair-bound version of dad happy, but, with his unturnable head so often facing the other way, it was harder to guess when his humor was stretching thin.

The sight of him like this became commonplace, because the ideal healing scheme mostly involved him sitting upright in an armchair. However, that idea didn’t quite accommodate his farm dream; the hay pasture wasn’t going to harvest itself. Surgery or no surgery, he was going to make sure that task got taken care of.

### The First Cutting's the Deepest

Harvesting the hay was going to involve several steps. The first of these was to mow the grass and put it in "windrows", which are rows of cut grass spaced a few feet apart that run the length of the field. Would the wind actually cause such a row-forming process to occur? Dubious, but that's nomenclature for you. Where does the nut come into a doughnut? In any case, these first two steps are usually taken care of in one swoop by a specialized tractor known, if you can believe it, as a windrower. The machine has a wide mouth of whirling blades that devour the tops of the grass and funnel them into a few windrows, usually about three or four at a time. Like the teeth of a combine harvester, those of a windrower will make short work of lopping and sorting more than just blades of grass, so to those of you inclined to nap in the soft, cool, insect-humming grass of a hayfield, beware the harvest. I can only speak for the havoc windrowers caused several of my model rockets that vanished into the impenetrability of waist-high grass, but even that was not pretty. Imagine breaking open a bale of hay months after your loss and finding shredded bits of parachute and tail fin twisted amongst the dried grass. Only the smallest bit of silver-sparkle cardboard fuselage left to mourn. Your shoulders slump and you blow a puff of air out of the side of your mouth, because that rocket that you saved weeks'-worth of allowance to buy on the way home from school, that you spent three hours gluing together and covering with decals, that you carried into the living

room to display to your parents with pride rising in your chest like a red-winged hawk on a thermal out over the desert, was never again going to dazzle you with a flash of fire and a high-pitched whine and a trail of white smoke as it screamed into the summer sky. A few windrower-mangled bits in a bale of hay—that's no way to be reunited with *Tidal Wave II*.

Once the grass is lying in its rows, it needs to cure, to move from being soft, damp blades into the drier, crunchable stalks that constitute a bale of hay. In the high desert, this takes as little as two or three days, though in practice, nothing seems to incite the stingy Western Colorado sky to give up a share of its yearly water like the hay harvest. The weather forecast might suggest that the next seven days will be cloudless and warm, but, during the summer months of swirling winds and Rocky Mountain-dwarfing piles of cloud that can appear and vanish faster than lovers in a daytime soap opera, those predictions are approximately as trustworthy as the response a dog or mule might give to the question "Have you already been fed today?" If your harvest is going to get rained on, the windrow stage is the best point for this to happen. Because the cut grass is still fairly loose and scattered, the rain-induced moisture can be chased away nearly as quickly as the fresh-cut stuff's own dampness. The worst consequence of rain at this point in haying is that you might end up with some dusty bales—if the windrows get a good soaking, they need to be turned after a couple days in order to dry the bottom half of each row,

which usually means a little extra soil-stirring. You would be hard-pressed to find a hungry mule who minded some dust in their mouthfuls.

The next phase of haying—when the rows of cured grass get turned into rows of hay bales—is much more sensitive to a dousing. Because the grass is so tightly compacted at this point, any moisture that makes its way to the heart of the bale is likely to linger until the hay goes moldy. If this happens, the harvested product is only good for cow hay, a much lower-ticket item. Equine digestive tracts aren't equipped to deal with a bellyful of fungus, unlike cattle, with their four-piece stomach ensemble that can just about squeeze the nutrients out of a rusty bolt.

The baling phase also involves what is perhaps the most arcane element of the whole haying process. A tractor enters the windrowed field, pulling an implement that more or less looks like a rectangular metal box on two wheels. Fairly innocuous—none of the whirling teeth and blades of a combine harvester or windrower. The front of the implement has a platform that slants down toward the ground and is outfitted with a conveyor belt that has small curved metal teeth. The teeth scoop up the lines of hay and the belt draws them through a small square opening into the darkness within the baler. There the cured grass is compressed into shapes that are roughly 14 inches high, 18 inches wide, and three inches thick. Each of these shapes is called a “flake”, and, depending on the baler's settings, anywhere from 12 to 16 flakes get pushed together to

make a single bale. After the grass is thus organized, two lines of twisted, orange poly twine are wrapped around each bale, cinched tight, and knotted. The conveyor belt moves the finished product to a hatch at the back of the baler, and a neat new bale of hay drops to the ground. Consequently, when a piece of haying equipment breaks down, it is nearly always the baler, with its chain of codependent steps and legion of moving parts churning away in its innards.

This process began one day at the beginning of summer in 1997. I was inside the house at 3339 C Road, sitting at the kitchen table, where sunlight spilled through the south-facing windows. As I gazed out the window at the larch tree in the backyard, thinking that it was really too bad that they called it a “larch,” because it sounded so close to “leech”—especially since the existence of a tree called a “beech” made “leech” sound even more likely to be correct, and leeches were gross and vaguely scary since they gnawed their way through your skin and started lapping up your blood until their bodies swelled to at least twice their original size, an experience I had never seen firsthand but by which I was terrified since Kaj had gone swimming in a pond on a family camping trip a couple of years earlier and come up covered with leeches—as I gazed out the window, thinking again of how badly I missed the backyard at Fletcher Lane, with its climber-friendly ash tree, its mighty mature cottonwoods that simultaneously shaded my sandbox and filled my playtime with a sense of awe at their magnitude, and its hill and

terraced planters that brought far more topographical interest than the plain old every-yard flatness that surrounded that leechy larch in front of me, I gradually became aware of a rumbling drawing near. This rumbling turned into the clunk and shudder of a diesel tractor rolling by on the asphalt that ran just beyond the front lawn. Instead of continuing past and turning back into a rumble that slowly faded out of earshot, the clunk and shudder had stayed put. I stood up from the table and strode to the north side of the house to gaze through the living room windows at whatever was going on out front.

Immediately east of the house and its front and back yards was where the pasture lay, and a large machine was huddled at that margin. At first glance, it looked more or less the same as the combine harvester that sat inside the shed down at The Farm, with the bulk of the wedge-shaped chassis riding over two large front wheels, and the back trailing off into the care of a much smaller pair, except that this machine was a sort of burnt red-orange color—a bit redder than Red the mule, a bit more orange than the Italian sports-car red that was my favorite color. Much better than the dull medium blue of the combine harvester, in any case, I thought. And, on closer inspection, the bristling array of teeth that protruded from the combine's maw were absent, their place being taken by a sort of corkscrew running parallel to the ground and perpendicular to the line of travel. The way that corkscrewish apparatus stuck out in front of the tractor, and so near the ground, made me think of the rotary brushes on a vacuum cleaner's powerhead. Maybe

this was a common association. Or maybe not everyone was as enamored with vacuum cleaners as I had been between the ages of about three and six. I would often beg my parents to let me vacuum, and can be seen striking a dynamic vacuuming pose in more than one photograph, one hand on the vacuum's handle (which was at least as tall as I was), the other on my hip, feet shoulder-width apart, my face unsmiling because, after all, this was serious work that I was up to. I was eventually given my own vacuum, a white and translucent red plastic device of a much more kid-friendly size. Perhaps the immensity of the disappointment I felt upon discovering that my vacuum was, in fact, a just-for-show fake, killed my enthusiasm for that particular chore (a lack of enthusiasm that has managed to remain intact after all these years), but the days of fixation had left their mark: I looked at the new tractor and thought of a vacuum cleaner. That thought only left me puzzled, though—what good could a giant powerhead be for harvesting hay? Eventually, looking at a windrower up close, I figured out that the powerhead-brush-shaped piece of metal was only the post-cut sorting apparatus, and that the actual cutting was accomplished by a pair of flat metal teeth, lying one atop the other like stacked combs. The quick side-to-side motion of one set of teeth worked like a line of shears, and the snipped-off grass was then shunted into rows. It was exactly the same way the barber's clippers snipped my hair into a number-two fade in the summer time, but the low hum of the clippers' electric motor, a frequency that I felt buzzing in my skull and neck

almost more than I could hear it, was replaced by the clatter, reek, and puffing black smoke of a diesel engine. That first day, though, I had to wait for my answer, and, while I puzzled, the person in the tractor's cab revved up the engine, dropped the transmission into gear, and entered the field of gut-high, dark green grass.

The machine headed east, away from me, and left, in its wake, a set of neat rows of mounded grass, a few feet apart on the stubble of the clipped field. Cool! When I had first heard my parents talking about "the cutting"—that is, the hay harvest—my mind had leapt to an image in a picture book I had read about the feudal system in Medieval Europe. Laborers were scattered throughout a field, swinging scythes back and forth, hacking down stalks of grain before tying them into bundles that peppered the field. While I didn't really think that the people who were coming to do the cutting would show up carrying huge blades attached to long wooden shafts and beset the hapless grass, that image was the only point of reference I really had for the act of cutting and harvesting. The windrower, with its two-in-one wizardry, was all the more impressive by contrast to this vision.

When it reached the far eastern end of the field, the tractor swung around, those little back wheels swiveling across the furrows like casters on a chair. I watched the grass vanish into the advancing blades and wheels, where a fine haze of dust hovered, the record of the moment of transformation from grass to uncured hay. With that wide, toothy

maw, the windrower suddenly reminded me of the whale sharks I'd been reading about in my latest *Zoobook*. The picture that accompanied the text showed one of the huge (and, I thought, vexingly paradoxically named) animals with its mouth gaping open, sucking up everything in its path. But the article was quick to point out that, for all their heft, whale sharks were harmless to humans, possessing none of the terror-striking sharkiness that occasionally made me double-check even the water at the public pool before leaping in. Watching the maw of the windrower slice and sort its way across the field, a quick chill slunk through me: unlike the whale shark, I had no illusions about that machine's harmlessness. I tried to imagine the consequences of a collision between those teeth and me. A spray of blood and twisted limbs, though I didn't think that a person would windrow as well as the grass did. I had no interest in finding out.

And another thought followed close on the heels of this one: what about small animals hidden in the grass? The palm-sized toads that sometimes came hopping onto the sidewalks around the edges of the house from the lawn and hayfield beyond; the dark grey mice that sometimes flitted past the corners of my eyes in the bushes, small and quick enough to almost make me believe they were nothing more than a crackle in my vision; the killdeer that hid their nests in the tall grass and that I had seen lead my dogs away from their eggs by running and feigning a broken wing, letting out cries as thin and brittle as tissue paper, as forlorn as overheard, solitary weeping. What chance did any of

those animals have against that machine? I was less worried about the mice, who would have enough warning from the diesel clatter to flee, and I knew that the killdeer adults could fly away at the last second, but what about those clumsy toads, that, in their surprise to see a porch light turn on, would often hop themselves against the brick wall in their effort to escape? The killdeer eggs and nestlings, immobile or good as?

Watching the windrower work, I could only come up with answers I didn't like, visions of ruined nests and squashed toads. I decided that I would have to ask my dad. Surely he wouldn't put toads and killdeer babies in danger. Despite my decision to check in with him, a combination of not wanting to think about the possibility of him giving me an unhappy answer mixed with the still-fresh excitement over that clever new machine, and the question was pushed from my mind before I could remember to ask it.

After staring at the cutting and sorting for another moment, I went back to my spot at the kitchen table. Sometime later, I heard the idle of the windrower move out to the front of the house again. I stood up to look through the north-facing windows, and watched the big machine pull onto C Road and drive off over the drips and rises into the west. I was a little shocked at the way the metal maw stuck out into the other lane, demanding the right-of-way by necessity. I hoped no one came speeding wildly over a blind rise. In the coming years, the sight of tractors and implements moseying down the roads of East Orchard Mesa, making incoming traffic slow and pull over toward the

shoulder, became just a part of normal life. The car drivers and tractor drivers often even waved at each other. But, in that first moment, I was just an in-town-streets kid, and the sight was as novel and puzzling as a first glimpse of some unknown animal in an encyclopedia.

The windrows had their couple days of curing time, and the next haying phase was due. The noise of another diesel engine swung by the house and into the field. This time, the machine was a more “tractor”-shaped, big-wheels-in-back type of tractor, in that same burnt red color. A color-matched implement rolled behind it, shaped like a rectangular box on two wheels, with a sort of chute front and back. I wondered what this device would have to do with the process of turning those lines of grass into tight, pokey bales of hay. I decided I had better stick around and find out. The tractor slowly rolled east, straddling the first windrow, and the front chute on the implement sucked the hay up like a reel winding a kite string. I watched for it come out the back of the implement, but the line of grass seemed stuck inside. What was going on in there? Then, something pushed open the swinging door on the back of the implement and slid down the rear chute to land on the mown field. My eyes widened. A fully-formed bale lay before my eyes, tied off with the same bright-orange poly twine that I had seen wrapping the hay bales at the boarding stables. I had assumed that all the knots on those bales had been tied by people, because I had assumed that, like the knots on my shoe laces, all knots required

fingers to tie them, but I was pretty sure there were no people hiding inside that piece of equipment. The machine dropped another bale, and then another a moment later, several Warren-Petersen-power-walking strides apart. How did all of that—the compression into flakes, the stacking into a bale, and especially the twine-tying—happen within that single closed space? The invisibility of the process meant that it could look like almost anything in there. Without eyes on the inside of the machine, baling looked nearly as miraculous as a giant hen laying eggs up and down the field. My mind leapt to puzzling through the process—how would I design my way through that maze? Visions of cogs, conveyor belts, reels, rods, and cutters kept me busy long enough for the whole field to become filled with bales. Watching the tractor and baler head back down the road, I thought to myself that, though this new life location still felt far from home, at least it was full of mysteries to mine.

The hay harvest was nearly done; all that remained was to get that field's-worth of bales off the ground and into a stack down by the big red barn. Amidst the piles of junk that came with the property were a couple of simple trailers, about seven feet wide and sixteen feet long, made of splintering 2x6 planks fixed to a rusted-steel pipe frame. The trailers each sat atop a pair of wheels that had once been painted white, but had become chipped by stones and pocked by rust, their paint missing in nickel-sized flakes. The trailers had no wiring harnesses, no lights or reflectors, and no DMV registrations.

Homebuilt units. I learned, in time, that this sort of private industry was not uncommon on the farms around the Western Slope—and, I figured, everywhere else farms were found. Even in those first moments of realization, I admired the self-sufficiency of objects being homebuilt, and imagined farmers out in their sheds with welding torches, hacksaws, drills, bolts, wrenches, stealing time between the labors of the land to make their own tools. And after all, I decided, why should they be bound to what they could buy in a store or find on a lot? Who said farming was only digging in the dirt and milking animals? A farmer could be a visionary, a jack-of-all-trades, the planner and the plan fulfiller. Yes, I thought, my mind gathering the momentum of a flywheel on diesel engine—what was not to be dared, what not achieved? Surrounded by animals, cherry trees, swaying heads of grain and ears of corn, a big red barn, and the endless potential to *create*...I didn't know it yet, but my dad's dream was beginning to find its own echoes somewhere inside my head.

But those trailers, like the other homebuilt things scattered around the property—the three-legged orchard ladders for harvesting cherries, the shovels and hoes, the equine shelters—took on a slightly different cast the more I looked at them. The ladders were made of untreated wood, splintering in the arid air, with lengths that were only nearly straight and hardware that was rusted, hinges that wobbled and creaked. The shafts on the shovels and hoes were shimmed into the heads with tiny misshaped nails, and the tool

heads were coated in rust. The shelters had no right angles, and dropped nails from the splitting wood posts and cross-beams that had to be gathered before they could pierce the foot of an animal. During the initial months of helping my parents get the property ready, as I struggled to steady an uneven-footed ladder, as I struck the ground with a loose-headed hoe, as I crouched in the dirt with fine dust filling my nostrils while I checked for rusty nails, a certain uneasiness about these objects seeped into me. The feeling was one that I couldn't explain, a sensation of distance, of displacement, of dislocation between these objects and me. They all worked, in their ways, but I began to realize that they had never been exact: the ladder had been close enough to being even, the head of the shovel had been close enough to being fitted to the handle. As they had worn over the years, the gaps in their close-enoughness had widened, the wobbles and the rust spots had grown; and I, using the tools, couldn't help but feel tugged by those gaps. A word I had just learned came to life: *forlorn*.

What I did not realize then was that those homebuilt items were all born of necessity and had nothing to do with the romance of dreams and objects. In those earliest days, I simply tried to use them as best I could.

My dad recognized the trailers for what they were—flat platforms meant to be towed through a field and loaded with bales of hay. This observation wasn't much good without a tractor, though, and we didn't have one. This lack wasn't of much concern at

first, though, because the same person who had cut and baled the hay was going to come by and do the job with a specialized bale-stacking tractor, known as a stackwagon. The sky had been stubbornly blue and rainless for weeks, and the forecast was calling for more of the same—plenty of time, everyone thought, to get the hay cut, baled, and safely stacked. The fickle western Colorado summer weather had other plans, though: as if waiting for the bales to hit the ground, clouds began to well up around the horizons. My parents put in a call, but the stackwagon man couldn't come any sooner, overwhelmed by a flood of rush orders. It was going to be up to us and those trailers to get the hay put away before the rain came.

Our tractorless state was suddenly an issue. The trailers were meant to be hooked up to the tow vehicle by way of a thick pin being dropped through overlapped holes in the trailer tongue and the tow plate on the vehicle's rear. Our SUVs only had ball hitches, and, even if a different hitch were swapped in, the SUV didn't have the field-friendly high-flotation tires of a tractor, nor the right gearing to chug along at walking speed while the trailer was being loaded. Into this quandary strode our new next-door neighbor. Bob Broughton and his spouse, Esther, who were both a few years older than my mom and a few years younger than my dad, lived just to the west of us, on a property with about 10 acres of pear trees. While Esther taught writing at the local college, Bob and a changing team of seasonal employees attended to the growth and harvest of bushels and bushels of

pears, most of which were contracted by baby food companies. Bob had a tractor.

My parents' greatest concern about the new place they had chosen to call home was how close Bob and Esther's house was. Only a hundred-odd feet and the thin strip of cherry tree-filled side yard separated the two structures, which was not exactly what my parents had in mind for their dream farm. When they voiced this concern aloud in my hearing during the final phases of consideration before purchase, I remarked that the Broughton's house would be closer to us than the Kelley's house, which was the nearest house to 627 Fletcher Lane. While I had already resigned myself to the certainty of moving, I couldn't help but fire off this observation, a little sub-conscious potshot. After all, in my role as obedient son and aspiring adult, I figured that I owed it to them to point out any shortcomings of their great plan, just to make sure nothing was left out. And my comment was a pretty direct hit on what they were concerned about: if my parents were moving to the country in part to have more space, the fact that the new neighbors would be closer than the old neighbors meant that they had failed at some level to achieve this goal. Especially for my dad, who considered any house that was "a stone's throw" away (and he could throw stones quite far) to be too close for his taste, and who rarely restrained himself from voicing his disgust at the property line-hugging big houses that were popping up in new subdivisions (occupied, in some cases, by his colleagues), the

prospect of the Broughton's proximity was grim.<sup>25</sup> However, the water rights, vistas, and expansive blank canvas of 3339 C Road were too good to pass up.

"I just hope they're not weirdoes," my mom had said. "They seem nice, and Esther *is* a professor, after all. But you just never know..."

My dad had grunted in agreement.

We had now been at our new address for about 3 months, and the Broughtons had shown nothing but kindness—waving or calling hellos when we were outside at the same time, chatting while collecting the mail and newspaper, even having my parents over for a sunset glass of wine. Tentatively, it looked like we had lucked out, but who knew what potential for weirdness lurked behind this front?

The clouds were building, though the rain was still a day away, and only a strong possibility. The afternoon sky was streaked in mackerel clouds, the sort that look like fish scales and had, for just over a year, been my favorite kind of cloud. My class was sitting on the grass at the end of P.E. one day in second grade when the teacher gestured toward the sky, blanketed with the most regular clouds I had ever seen, a pattern that repeated almost exactly. "Those are called *mackerel clouds*, because they look like fish scales," she declared. "If you see them, it means it's probably going to rain in the next day or

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<sup>25</sup> Like many Warren A. Petersen opinions and predilections, this hunger for space was never explained except by tautology or restatement of the opinion in question. I realized early in life that there simply were some phenomena for which I would never have the full story: Sasquatch, spontaneous human combustion, certain facets of my dad, etc.

two.” She was right—it did rain the next day; and from then on, I was always on the lookout for those vapor scales. They didn’t always tell the truth—I can remember mackerel cloud sightings after which I waited in vain for a chance to run through the rarity of raindrops, my mouth open and tongue outstretched—but the connection held up more often than not. And there they were again, this time hovering over the fresh bales of hay. My dad’s fuse had been shorter than usual since he got home from the hospital, especially with the new category of scolding that his inability to turn his head had introduced; and, though I couldn’t really blame him, after seeing the tubes running in and out of him in the hospital bed, the dark circles under his eyes, and the swathes of bandages on his neck, I didn’t want to see what would happen if his first-ever hay harvest was ruined by an unforecast rainstorm. I tried to mentally shoo the mackerel clouds, but they seemed disinterested in leaving.

A knock sounded on the west side of the house, at the storm door by the garage, and my mom went to answer. It was Bob. Though not quite six feet tall, he had the same sort of broad shoulders and thick limbs as my dad, a testament to the heft and athleticism that had landed him on a “farm team” in the NFL. He never ended up playing professionally, but, even at around fifty years old, he had hung onto the look, and filled the doorway.

I didn’t know it then, but my dad had made the rounds of our three closest sets of

neighbors, telling them of his cancer diagnosis, his impending surgery, his prognosis and estimated recovery timeline. On the one hand, he always was a sharer—what he had most recently eaten and what he liked about it; the visceral details of a complicated hysterectomy of hernia repair, preferably delivered at the dinner table; the difference between a circumcision and the splitting-the-difference foreskin slit his parents had chosen for him; etc. On the other hand, though, I think he was making provisions for his family, hoping that the neighbors might be able to reach out and step up for us if he were no longer able to do so. And now here was Bob. He and my mom exchanged hellos, and then he said, “Rain’s coming in a day or so. We gotta get that hay put up.”

We? Overhearing this, I decided that Bob and Esther’s weirdo likelihood was low.

My mom showed Bob in, and my dad got up from the chair to meet him, determined to look as well as possible. Bob’s eyes widened a bit as he took in my dad’s condition, its contrast with the sledgehammer-swinging, fencepost-pounding spectacle from several weeks earlier, and he urged my dad to sit back down.

“Oh, I’m fine!” my dad declared, his voice clinging onto vowels just a split second longer than usual, the way it did when he was trying to brush away concerns or questions about his physical well-being. “Just tired and can’t turn my head, that’s all!” Bob (who, time has shown me, has absolutely no poker face) didn’t look entirely convinced, but they fell to discussing the logistics of getting the bales stacked. My dad

brought up the challenges to using the SUV to pull the trailer, and began thinking through them aloud.

“Well, now,” Bob said, “you don’t need to worry about all that; we’ll just use my tractor.”

Definitely not weirdoes, I thought. And then a ripple of excitement—I’d get to be up close and personal with a tractor in action.

My parents were beaming.

One consideration remained, and that was to figure out who would be involved in the job. In addition to not turning his neck, my dad was under orders to not lift anything heavier than ten pounds. At 50 to 60 pounds a piece, hay bales were out of the question. Though I was a large nine-year-old, tall for my age and stocky (my dad always glowed with pride when someone mistook me for a 12- or 13-year-old, basking in this testament to his virility; for my part, I was mostly indifferent, though glad to be able to please my dad with no effort on my part), and though I already knew that I would offer to help even before my dad could voice his expectation that I do so, nobody was under the impression that I would be stowing a field full of bales that weighed half as much as I did. My mom was not about to take on that task, either; nor did she know how to drive a tractor, and was not comfortable learning how to do it on the fly. Bob scratched his head. He had been thinking that he would load the trailers, but if he had to drive the tractor, and Dad,

Mom, and I weren't up to hefting all the bales...

"Well, now," my dad spoke up, "*I* can drive the tractor."

"But, Warren, you can't drive the tractor—you're not supposed to turn your head! You're supposed to be recovering," my mom fired back.

"Oh, Shari Ann," he retorted, his use of her middle name indicating a turn to the pejorative that always stiffened my spine with annoyance, "I can drive a tractor without turning my head. It will be fine."

She shook her head. "Well, whatever you say."

He did later make a concession to Mom's concern and his better judgement by putting in a call to the surgeon who had performed the operation, floating his tractor-driving proposal. Persuaded, perhaps, by knowing that my dad understood the surgical mechanics behind the head-turning prohibition, as well as the very real cost of failing to adhere to it, the surgeon gave his assent. "You know, most people would actually be trying to take it easy, Warren," he added. It was the first time anyone had made such a request of the doctor, especially so soon after surgery, especially in relation to tractors. "Just... well, you know. Watch out for that neck." Dad's *what-did-I-tell-you?* look—the same one he gave when Jack was unable to drink his meatloaf milk a couple years earlier, the look that was marked by a slight uptick in the corners of his mouth and accompanied by a puffing-up of his chest—was not anyone else in the family's favorite, especially

because it tended to stick around a while longer than was necessary for us to all get the message, but surgical assumptions were his professional wheelhouse, and it was his body in question, and this was the first harvest on his long-desired farm, so I decided to settle for being impressed by his toughness.

The next day, just after noon, Bob's tractor started up and came rolling the fifty or so feet between the corner of his orchard and the side of our barn, where the two hay trailers sat. Already the wind was picking up, with the slight, mineral sweetness—like honeyed stone—and heaviness that smelled like rain was on its way. The sky was graying over, the heaped-up clouds of the previous day having stretched out from the horizons to block the pale blue of the sky. Another person was with Bob, shorter and slighter than he, wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat and a denim shirt with the sleeves raggedly cut off just past the shoulder, trailing bits of thread in the wind. This person must be Ben, I thought.

Ben Shipard was our neighbor to the east, who, along with his spouse, Kim, and her parents and brother, lived on a large commercial horse-boarding facility called Alamar.<sup>26</sup> Ben and Kim lived in a little yellow house on the corner on the property, and

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<sup>26</sup> An alamar is a decorative knot tied in a doubled length of braided horsehair line (a *mecate*), forming a loop. This loop is placed around the base of a horse's neck, with the knot sitting down against the animal's chest. In California's *vaquero* tradition, this appointment was a symbol that a horse had attained a high enough level of training to qualify it as a "bridle horse." Alamar's sign had an image of this knot, red on a pale yellow background, along with the slogan "Horses and equipment 'knot' a problem." Are you sold, or what?

did the bulk of the work with both the horses and the human clients. The only thing I knew about Ben at this point was that he was Australian,<sup>27</sup> which I had learned from my dad shortly before his surgery. Dad and the across-the-street neighbor, with whom we shared an irrigation head-gate, were conferring in our front yard, hoping to figure out why there was no pressure coming through the irrigation system. Andy had been trying, with no luck, to water the young pines on his Christmas tree farm, and Dad was confirming that he wasn't running any irrigation at the same time (we had to alternate in order for there to be enough water pressure to run each property's system), when Ben came running across the couple hundred yards between Alamar and where Dad and Andy stood. As he drew near, he was calling something out.

“He just ran up yelling, ‘The *mine!* The *mine!*’” my dad said, chuckling, “and Andy and I just said, ‘What? What? What do you mean?’” Even in the retelling, Dad said this last phrase with a slight click of his tongue and upturned palms, a sign that he had been well and truly befuddled. “And he just kept saying, ‘The *mine!* We’ve got to check out the *mine!* It’s flooded by the *mine!* I think something’s burst in the *mine!*’, and Andy and I just looked at each other, like, What, is this guy crazy? What is he talking about? There’s no mine right around here!”

Apparently Ben just kept saying, “The *mine!* The *mine!*” for another moment

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<sup>27</sup> Presumably due to Ben's nationality, Alamar's sign also had a kangaroo on it. Presumably this kangaroo is the reason my parents and I assumed an alamar was an Australian tradition. In fact, I assumed that until I did a little “just in case” research. Then I wrote these footnotes.

before Andy or Dad managed to connect the dots between things being burst and flooded in or near a “mine,” but eventually one of them got the picture.

“Oh! The main! It’s flooded up by the main line in the weir!”

And Ben was right—the main had burst and was just spilling water into a pointless little pond by the edge of the canal.

‘Oh, how embarrassing for Dad and Andy,’ I thought, imagining how I’d feel if I had misunderstood an Australian accent that badly.

“What a hoot!” my dad said, surprising me with almost the opposite reaction.

“Boy, that Ben’s got a thick accent.”

This story only made me more eager to meet Ben, because I could try my hand at succeeding where my dad had failed—and maybe earn a little dose of private joy by out-experting him in this area where his knowledge seemed, for a change, to have fallen short. But even if I hadn’t had this main/mine tale as incentive, Ben’s Australianness was more than motive enough to want to know him. On the broader scale, the fact that he was from a different country at all was exciting, because knowing him would allow me to begin to give shape to a place that I had only read about in books or seen in an atlas or on a globe.<sup>28</sup> Australia was particularly exciting, though. In part, this extra dose came from how very far away that country was. I had to spin my globe almost exactly a half turn to

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<sup>28</sup> The exception would have been an Anglophone Canadian. I suppose it boiled down to the similarity between that accent and my own, but Canada somehow lacked the romance of *elsewhere*. After two post-college years in ON, though, I can say Canada is pretty romanceable.

be able to trace my finger along its coastline, making it just about as far as a person could go from my family room. This nearly superlative status added to the veil of mystery and spirit of adventure I felt when imagining my way across the ocean.

What really frosted the cake, though, were marsupials.

Ah, marsupials! How deeply you did rivet me, filing the fold-out pages of my *Zoobooks* with full-color illustrations and all those facts-at-a-glance. How much does a wombat weigh? More than you might think, easily 50 and even 70 pounds, and did you know that, due to their burrowing lifestyle, their pouch opens to the rear—that is, “posterior”—as opposed to the anterior openings of most marsupials?

Ah, marsupials! Consider the kangaroo on Alamar’s sign. What sort of animal is that? Something like a big rabbit-deer hybrid, bounding across the Outback. And the platypus...? The platypus! Dinosaurs may have been truly gone, with that secret island having moved into the realm of fantasy in my mind, but at least there really *was* an island, half a world and an ocean away, where fantastic creatures roamed. I was ready to meet their human ambassador.

Mom, Dad, and I left the house and walked down to where the two men were hitching up the trailer. Mom and Dad introduced me to Ben, who, like Bob, had simply announced that he would be helping us get the hay put up. He looked me in the eye and extended his arm toward me for a quick, firm handshake, which I did my best to mimic,

remembering what my dad had told me about the importance of a strong handshake.

“Hi Dirk, nice to meet you. You ready to get to work?”

“Oh, yes, Dirk always likes to help his dad out,” my dad said, answering for me with the same sort of puffed chest he got when someone mistook me for an older kid. It was both a gratifying acknowledgement of my efforts to meet his expectations, as well as a sort of command that I continue to do so.

“Mm, yes, I’m ready,” I said, trying to copy the sureness with which Ben moved through space.

“Good, good; let’s get to it, then!” he said. I couldn’t decide which was more interesting—the way his vowels seemed to have extra depth, extra layers of sound to them, or the tattoos that were scattered across his bare arms. No one in my family had any tattoos, and I had hardly seen any up close, aside from the occasional service tattoo on the upper arm of a veteran. Ben had knots, stars, horseshoes and farrier’s tools, a length of barbed wire, a rose, all in dark green ink.

If this level of tattedness seemed intense, it was nothing compared to what was to come over the years—every square inch of Ben’s arm would become covered with ink, some of it brilliant reds and yellows as his tattoos grew more complex. The crown jewel was a Ned Kelly commemorative tableau he got about 13 years after we’d first met, a richly detailed, finely shaded image of Kelly in his home-made iron armor that covered

Ben's entire left forearm, running right over the pieces that had been there before.

Glancing at each little ink-and-flesh illustration in that first moment, I tried to imagine the needle jumping in and out of his skin and cringed. He must really be tough, I thought, and then tried to decide if this type of toughness was impressive, or perplexing and even a little scary. Here he was, I considered, helping us without being asked, looking me in the eye and shaking my hand, talking *to* me, not at, around, or near me, and not changing the pitch of his voice like I was some puppy in need of simple-sentenced encouragement. Impressive-tough, I concluded.

By this time, the trailer was hitched and Dad had lumbered into the lone driver's seat, hauling himself up with only his right arm, his left tucked against his chest like a broken wing. Bob showed him the clutch, throttle lever, and parking brake release, and then Bob, Ben, Mom, and I hopped up on the trailer and we all when lurching toward the field in a cloud of diesel fumes. Dad steered the tractor in between the first two rows of bales and came to a stop. Bob and Ben hopped off the trailer to either side, ready to each take on a row of bales. Mom and I stayed on the trailer, where we were supposed to be responsible for arranging the loaded bales into a tight, neat stack. I was also tasked with hopping off the trailer and running up in front of dad to guide him as he swung the tractor and trailer around at the end of each row, or to tell him to stop if we had a loading hiccup. Dad throttled the tractor down, and we rolled forward at a crawl.

Within a couple of minutes, Mom and I realized how superfluous we were. Bob and Ben would each grab a bale by its bright orange twine, hoist it to belt buckle height, and, working almost exactly in sync, toss them through the couple feet of air between them and the trailer bed. With a thump like a muffled bass drum, each bale would land in the very spot to which Mom or I would have moved it. Only once in a while did a bale land slightly off-square, and we hardly had time to shift it the needed few inches before another bale, perfectly pitched, would come our way.

Alright, we thought, that makes sense—Bob and Ben can toss the bales just right for this low first layer, but we'll need to be on our toes as the layers stack up. I hopped off the slow-rolling trailer and ran up in front of Dad, wheeling my arms around to show him when to cut the wheel and how hard in order to make the at the field's edge. Even through his large yellow-lensed sunglasses, I could see that his face was tight beneath the broad brim of his sunhat. The unsprung tractor and trailer were sending jolts and shudders through the thin seat cushion and into the raw flesh of his incisions as he swung their tires in an arc across the stiff furrows. I winced a bit with each jolt, thinking of the tug of skin on stitches, but I knew better than to second his mission. As he drove between the next two rows, I ran around to the back of the trailer again, jumping up and scrambling onto the deck with the approximate grace of a koala clinging to a branch in a windstorm. I managed to not fall, despite the slight pucker of nervousness in my stomach.

Though we were rolling only at the pace of a slow walk, I had the seen the scrapes that could come from bailing off even a slow-moving vehicle. Just before my dad's surgery, Jack and I were riding back home with him from an errand, the two of us buckled into the supple expanse of the color-matched leather backseat in his Medium Montana Blue Sedan DeVille Concours. Dad turned into the driveway, the large green digital speedometer reading "7 mph." In a single instant, just as we had crunched all the way off the asphalt and onto the gravel, Jack unbuckled his seatbelt, yelled "James Bond!", flung open his door, and leapt from the moving car.

"Whaaa!?" I blurted, stunned by this stunt. Despite having invoked the superlatively coordinated secret agent, he more or less face-planted in the gravel, his momentum rolling him a couple full sidelong turns before he came to a stop. My dad stopped the car immediately, yet without jamming his foot on the brake pedal, no jolt of panic evident his shoulders. In the rear-view mirror, I saw his eyes slide shut as he shook his head. A sigh slipped between his lips like steam from a rice cooker, and I stiffened, preparing myself for an explosion.

"Son. Get back in the car," he said, his voice perfectly flat.

This was a new tone, and I wondered what it meant, still uncertain what Dad would do. Picking himself up and dusting his hands on his pants, Jack did as he had been told, all the 007 chased out of him. He had scrapes and little cuts on his palms and arms,

and a shallow, lightly bleeding little gash just above the left corner of his mouth.

“Well,” Dad continued, in that same flat voice. “Learned your lesson, I hope.”

Apparently content that the gravel had punished Jack enough, Dad drove us into the garage without another word about the incident.

“That was dumb,” I announced, trying to copy the same detached tone my dad had used.

“Shut up!” Jack shouted back, and I rolled my eyes, feeling a flush of that self-congratulating smugness nearly universal to older siblings everywhere. Had I been honest with myself, though, while I did think Jack’s stunt was foolish, part of me was envious of the derring-do that allowed him to pull it off; I would never have had the guts, preferring to get my adventures from the safety of a book and an armchair.

Whether due to my concentration, my native reticence, or my failure to cry out the name of any action hero, I managed to avoid similar injuries, and was ready to help my mom arrange the next layer of bales. Within another moment, we saw that we were, once again, almost unneeded. Bob and Ben appeared undeterred by the extra height, slinging each bale with at least A- accuracy. They completed another layer, I guided my dad between another two rows, and Mom and I found ourselves still hardly needed. Only my wonder at the spectacle of stacking kept me from feeling the anxiety of uselessness: even though the top of the stack was as high as the top of their heads, Bob and Ben kept on

bucking those bales into place, regular and untiring as the tractor itself.

After a trailer's-worth of hay had been unloaded and stacked beneath the shelter of the shed roof (when Mom and I were, to our relief, finally not superfluous, though we each carried and stacked only about one bale for every three that Bob and Ben did), we headed back into the field to gather the remaining bales. The wind had picked up, and a tiny raindrop would mist my face every couple of seconds. Again, the loading team was pitching the bales just where they needed to go, so I let my mom ride the trailer alone and just walked along behind Ben, waiting until I was needed to guide Dad through another turn.

After tossing several bales onto the trailer, Ben pointed at one and shot me a questioning look, his eyebrows slightly raised. I ran forward and wrapped my gloved hands around the twine, before hoisting the bale up to my waist. Grunting, I turned toward the trailer and tried to mimic the perfect tosses I had seen—swing the bale back, then use its momentum to help drive it forward and toss. I didn't even launch it quite as high as my shoulder, and my toss was far from a perfect hit, but I managed to land the bale on the trailer, and rearranging it gave my mom something to do at last. Ben gave a quick nod and said "Nice job." A smile crept onto my face.

For the rest of the loading process, Ben skipped every 5th or 6th bale, seeming to know exactly the right amount of work to offer without going past my 9-year-old

endurance. In another half-hour, I had a faint ache in my shoulders, and the sky was growing darker still, the rare charcoal color of certain rain, but we were done, and I could say I'd helped. I grinned and stretched my arms as I sat next to my mom. While stripping the asbestos shingles, picking up nails and metal shards from the paddock-to-be, and helping my dad pound t-posts had all been big chores, loading the hay felt like first real moment of *farm* work, and I was happy to have it under my belt. After the second load of hay was stowed, Bob and Ben went back to their houses, trailed by a volley of thanks from my parents.

“Well, guys,” my mom said, as she and Dad watched the two men walk away, “I think we have some pretty great neighbors.”

Dad's eyes crinkled in a smile. “Boy, you can say that again.”

A voice burst into this moment, coming from the living room couch: “Well, I just unlocked a secret race-track on this game, so I'm way ahead of you now, Dirk.” I looked over to see Jack waving his Super Nintendo control in the air. The smugness that his up-turned chin was meant to convey seemed somewhat at odds with the gaps caused by his one remaining upper baby incisor, but he had a point—I couldn't hope to beat him at any of our rented video games if these kinds of chores were going to become the norm. However, the thought of Ben's quick nod and quiet “Nice job”; of my mom's smile as she said, “Good work, honey”; and of both my dad's expectation of my help—especially

given his visible need of a little help—as well as that eye-crinkling smile his face wore after the job was done all helped to soften the blow of Jack’s superior gaming achievements (though I was still bummed out that the Lamborghini I had already daydreamed to victory was getting so unrecoverably left behind by Jack’s trumped-up Corvette).

“Well,” I said, “*I* was just outside doing *grown-up* work.” My need to respond may have given away my disappointment at Jack’s success more than I could have realized, but my dad, whose experience of contemporary gaming ended somewhere around the analog pinball machine era, nodded his agreement.

The Ozarks. Round Two: a family affair

If my dad wasn't going to let a mere cancer diagnosis and subsequent surgery get in the way of the hay harvest, he definitely wasn't going to let those things get in the way of acquiring more mules. After a couple months of healing and ironing out some of the kinks in the new house and property, my parents planned an end-of-summer journey to that epicenter of muledom, the Ozarks. This time, we were making a family vacation out of it, which might not have been the sort of dream trip my younger brother, Jack, and I would have chosen as a 7- and 9-year-old. With our blue Suburban packed, our family hit the road, presumably a mere three or four hours later than planned. My dad had the wheel pointed toward Baxter Springs, KS, where we would be staying with mule man Thomas Jones—welder by day, raccoon-hunter by night—and his girlfriend, Fran. And this drive may or may not have been the time that my younger brother neglected to pee at a fuel stop outside of Denver and, upon demanding that we find him a bathroom only a few minutes after we had filled the tank, was forced to pee in a lemonade bottle. The days on the road do rather tend to blend together...

After hours of driving and an overnight stay in some joyless mid-Kansas hotel room (off-white walls bleeding into off-beige carpet, prints of Pony Express riders and barns and gunmen with waxed mustaches on each wall, and a window with a view of such flatness as an ant might enjoy from the middle of a piece of paper), where Jack and I

spent the night kicking each other in our sleep (this was before the revelation of rolling the standard-issue hotel comforter up and slipping it between our bed-hogging bodies), we arrived at our destination. Maybe the endlessness of the plains had filled my eyes to the brim, glazing my vision with grassy surfeit, but I can't remember anything about what the town of Baxter Springs looked like. My memory of the place only starts at the end of a gravel driveway, where, to one side, a tidy white rectangle of a house sat, with a tiny white doghouse with decoratively scrolled eaves tucked up against it. A collection of mule pens, a tractor, a shed, a stock trailer, and a pickup truck sat on the other side of the drive, and the baying of coon hounds came our way from a kennel that hugged the thick, dark forest at the driveway's end. We piled out of the SUV, and Thomas greeted us with big handshakes, dressed in a long-sleeved plaid shirt and blue jeans, his wavy dark brown hair reaching his shoulders in a neatly brushed mullet. He introduced Fran, whose huge smile pecked two dimples into her apple cheeks and cut my shyness right in two. I felt like we had arrived at the home of friends we'd known for years.

We were going to be staying with Thomas and Fran for several days, and Fran had made up a sofa bed for Jack and me to share while our parents took the guest room, which was an arrangement that we had all been expecting. However, what we weren't counting on were the feasts that were going to greet us each day. Every morning of our stay, Fran served us the breakfast that my younger self began wishing I could have every

morning of my life: biscuits and sausage gravy. The fluffy clusters of just-brown biscuits came up batch after steaming batch, baked in oily black cast-iron skillets, and were then covered in the thick, salty gravy that made my stomach growl at first whiff. Every morning, my mom piled praise upon Fran, swearing that the biscuits were the best we'd ever eaten, and every morning, Fran demurred and blushed and beamed, her round cheeks punctuated by dimples. Throughout the day, my mom would remind us of the biscuits, and even my dad allowed that they were mighty tasty, though of course one shouldn't eat that much white flour and fat *every* morning, and Fran had better be careful because she needed to watch her weight (somehow our family's not inconsiderable collective girth escaped his scrutiny). Those mornings, if he wasn't already gone to work or with his mules or his dogs, Thomas Jones sat unsmiling on the sill or the sideboard or sometimes at the table, watching Fran in her apron bustling about the old and spotless stove. And it was a good thing that we were being fed so well, because, a few days into our stay, I was in for an adventure, and no one wants to have one of those on an empty stomach, or even a healthy, whole-grain bowl of Grape Nuts.

### Run Through the River Bottoms

That day dawned in Baxter Springs as they had been dawning throughout our stay: the sun sliding up above the trees, looking magnified by the moisture in the air, that hazy layer that sat just above the treetops and threw off a shimmer that could only be seen in Western Colorado just above the arc of a sprinkler, or perhaps in the heat waves off the hood of a just-turned-off car in the summertime. To me, it looked almost tropical, or what I imagined tropical to look like, which is to say Mesozoic, which is to say dinosaur-related. Thrilling. But as I stretched and cast aside the crocheted coverlets on the guest bed I shared with Jack, any prehistoric preoccupations fled my head as my groggy brain registered the by-then-familiar-but-no-less-intoxicating scents that filled my nostrils. Breakfast was underway.

Shuffling out to the kitchen, I saw Fran in her lace-trimmed apron, and a pair of dimples flashed my way, followed by a “Good morning!” Before I could respond, her attention was riveted to the stove once again. Like I did every morning, I kept my head half-craned toward her as I made my way to the table, trying to make some sense out of the flurry of activity that would so shortly yield such gustatory rapture. This sense of struggle between wonder and analysis was not entirely new to me. For my seventh birthday party, a magician came to my family’s house and put on a show, to my utter, magic-trick-obsessed delight. And, though I had been studying magic rather assiduously,

practicing every afternoon and insisting my family watch my show every evening, and though I was, in my opinion, adept at making saltshakers drop through solid wood tables and making cotton balls vanish from beneath plastic cups, I never could sort out much of anything that magician did at my party. I realized that night, for perhaps the first time, what it felt like to be in the presence of a true professional, someone whose mastery of secrets made my seven-year-old mastery of cycling *sans* training wheels feel like little more than a cheap cotton ball misdirection. Looking that morning at Fran, I was hit by another blast of that same feeling, sharp and dousing as a shot from the neighbor kid's Super Soaker 500. Sure, maybe I could read chapter books and enumerate the names and traits of more dinosaurs and the AKC parameters (and even a few UKC parameters) of more dog breeds than I care to admit now (especially because that admission invariably comes with at least a dash of teasing from my family on account of the vociferous pedantry with which I was wont to share this knowledge), but I realized in that moment that I knew approximately nothing about what went on behind the curtain to produce the three square meals that I rather obviously never missed. So what else could I do but take a seat and await the show?

And yes, this was not just any east Kansas morning. We were heading out to test drive a prospective new mule, and I was going to be the driver. Tommie Yeargain, the mule trader from whom my dad had acquired his doted-upon, bragged-about, flaxen-

haired girlfriend—that is, his mule, Babe—was going to be bringing the longeared merchandise for our consideration, and Thomas was going to come along to weigh in and shoot the breeze with his old friend. As Fran approached the table with the plates of steaming, bacon-dripping-filled biscuits, the bowl of eggshell-white gravy with its archipelagoes of sausage bits, the pile of crisp bacon, the pitchers of orange juice and milk, I like to think an extra warmth had slipped into her smile and generosity that was meant just for me, accompanied by an extra ladleful of encouragement, another biscuit of good vibes... Was it so? Perhaps, or perhaps I was only imagining things, but in any case, I was happy to take all the encouragement I could get, because, beneath that butch-waxed flattop, I was packing more than just a spare tire that morning. Indeed, it felt like the beginnings of a butterfly pavilion were squirming free of their chrysalises inside my guts. I knew I would get no quarter from my dad, who had already turned down one feeble attempt at a suggestion that perhaps *he* could test drive the potential new mule first. Well, what the heck? Since I had no choice, I might as well enjoy the feast. Say, pass me another biscuit. Today's a big day.

Nervousness notwithstanding, the test-drive was not entirely without its prospects for excitement. On the one hand, I was going to get to ride out to the site with Thomas Jones in his pickup truck. Few things in those days made me feel cooler than fraternizing with adults as if I, too, were an adult (a pastime for which younger brother, to my

puzzlement, did not share my enthusiasm). On the other, more significant hand, I was going to get to experience a new landscape: the river bottoms.

The River Bottoms! Something about the very name intrigued and excited me. For starters, I couldn't help but feel that the phrase was slightly nonsensical. What is the bottom of a river? Isn't that the bed? Then how can a river have bottoms? And how many can it have? But I had figured out that we weren't going to just be clomping and splashing along the beds of flowing rivers, so I knew we were dealing with some other sort of bottom. Looking around at the paper-flat Kansas horizon, I encountered the next phase of puzzlement. What could be more bottomed-out than the plains? I couldn't quite imagine, but I reckoned I would find out soon enough, and from the back of a strange mule. I did my best to reassure myself, though—after all, what could be more grown-up than a journey into such unknowns, riding shotgun with a bona fide mule man? In the excitement, I even forgot to remember bug spray to fend off the notorious ticks that lurked amongst all that green.

When breakfast was finished, and the mules loaded, I hopped in the passenger seat of Thomas's dusty, denim-blue truck. Poring over the details of this new-to-me machine, I was immediately struck by something glaring out from the speedometer. A blaze-orange tickmark, roughly three times the size of the others, indicated the location of 55 mph, which number was likewise magnified and emblazoned. When I asked Thomas

about this arresting feature, he told me about the oil shortages of the 1970s and explained that highlighting 55 mph was an attempt to encourage people to not exceed this speed in order to save fuel. “That was a long time ago, though; they haven’t put those markers in cars for years,” he continued. I certainly had never seen such a marker in any of my family’s cars, in which the speedometer frequently read at least 80 in the 75 zones. Did people ever actually stick to that blaze-orange suggestion? Imagining my dad driving *under* the speed limit was about as difficult as imagining him with a full head of hair. In any case, that moment was the first time I ever really thought about the fact that oil might not come out of the ground forever, and that maybe being careful about how one burned it could be a good idea. Any experience of consciousness-raising, however, was quickly swept aside by my second realization—Thomas’s truck was one of the oldest cars I could remember having ridden in, and, to my vintage-car-obsessed self (books on that topic sat alongside my dog encyclopedias), that was worth some excitement. Sure, it might not have been a 1948 Tucker Torpedo, but I wasn’t going to complain. Following Thomas’ lead, I put my arm on the sill of the open window as we rumbled off down the road.

When we arrived at our destination, the foliage had grown, if possible, even thicker than it was out behind Fran and Thomas’s place. My parents’ and Thomas’s rigs were joined by a third in the parking lot. Tommie Yeargain had arrived, mule-to-be-tested in tow. With the adults all hustling, it wasn’t long before the mules were tacked up and

we were heading down the trail. The mule stepping out beneath my saddle was Bo, two-time winner at the National Championship Chuckwagon Races in the Big Mules category, and how he and I got along on this ride was going to determine whether or not he found a place in the family herd.

I didn't have to wait long to see what the river bottoms were. Our line of mules power-walked down a cut in a steep but short embankment, no taller than a person on muleback. As we descended, the trees closed over our heads, blocking out the already-strong late morning sun and leaving only a hazy light that filtered through the rustling leaves and ricocheted off the moisture hanging above the ground. Some ways off, a break in the vegetation showed where a small river snaked its way through this shallow depression carved into the plains. All the intensity of greenness and water was about as far from the red dirt deserts of home as I had ever been, and I thought it was beautiful. I settled back in my saddle. So this is what raccoon-hunting, mule-riding country looked like, I thought, trying to play it cool, and maybe even feeling a little biscuit-induced swagger.

That saddle in which I settled back had a few extra bells and whistles catered to the task at hand. When one becomes a devotee of riding mules, a few species-specific equipment needs must be taken into consideration. As mentioned early on, mules have very little in the way of withers, which means that the pronounced shoulder "hump" at

the base of most horses' manes is, in a mule (or a donkey), little more than a mild bump. Without these withers, a mule's back has little to prevent a saddle from sliding forward during a descent. Indeed, if a person simply cinched a saddle on the average mule's back and then headed down the Grand Canyon, that person would find the saddle attempting to slide up around the mule's neck in no time at all. And then, of course, the cinch would be goading the mule in the "armpits" and the weight distribution would be thrown akimbo and the rider might be seen only a moment later taking the quickest but least desirable path to the canyon floor. Since pretty much nobody thinks this situation sounds fun, least of all the discomfited mule, one of two extra pieces of equipment is almost always found attached to a mule saddle. The first of these options is called a crupper, and it is a padded leather loop that attaches, via a strap, to a D-ring at the rear of the saddle. The loop is slid up around the base of the mule's tail, and, in this way, the saddle is prevented from slipping forward. The other option is called a britchen, and it consists of a much more thorough sort of rump harness, which is probably more effective.<sup>29</sup> In these early days of mulery, though, we were a crupper kind of a family, so when my saddle was getting outfitted for use on a mule, my parents had to take it somewhere to get that D-ring installed.

While times have changed and Grand Junction in the 2010s offers only one

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<sup>29</sup> and, I imagine, more comfortable for the equine in question, though I can make no claims to understand what it feels like to have a padded leather loop around the base of one's tail.

dedicated saddlery shop, the 1990s were a time when several brick-and-mortar tack outfits could be found. One of these was located right downtown on Main Street, where the proprietor, Ned Norton, once chased off a knife-wielding would-be robber with the submachine gun he kept under the register. While Ned had done some of our saddle work, my D-ring installation was taken care of by a shop just across the river, whose proprietor was named Shirley. When she finished installing the D-ring, she threw in a pair of braided leather reins she'd made. Lucky me, I thought: cowboy swag! This test drive of Bo was the debut of my newly-outfitted saddle.

Within minutes of that initial descent into the river bottoms, I found myself at the front of our party, riding as the "leader"—a position that was offered to me by my dad. Or, rather, assigned. "Son, take Bo to the front of the line," he said, his voice a notch louder than conversational, and with a slight bristle beneath it that was probably unnoticeable to anyone but my mom, Jack, and me. A voice that wordlessly said, *You will do this, and you will not complain, because you will not be a wuss, especially in front of these men.* After all, who wants to be embarrassed by a wimpy kid when they're trying to bring their family into the world of mules? My mind digested his request almost subconsciously, and I braced myself to obey, despite the cold knot of nervousness that sprang into my chest. Though a few possible protests rattled through my mind (I'd never been here before; I didn't know the trail; I wasn't a *real* rider yet), and I mumbled a

couple of “ums” and “uhs,” I was already on my way to the front of the group by the time my dad had started to say “*Son...*” Besides, I wasn’t going to retroactively justify that early-childhood cowboy act by holding back on the trail. I took a deep breath and tapped my heels against Bo’s ribs.

Beyond any desire to show off to his friends, Dad’s main motivation was that he wanted to see how Bo did riding point, since some equine could tend to get nervous at the front of a group, becoming more prone to scares and more difficult to keep on course. Also, and perhaps of more concern to my speed-loving father, some equine become considerably slower-walking when they are not following the tail of a hot-footed comrade. As Bo and I assumed the lead and navigated another steep but even shorter descent, he demonstrated neither of these tendencies, seeming just as calm and speedy as he had the few minutes prior. A nice mule and a new landscape to explore—looked like this ride was going to turn out pretty swell after all. Then something snapped.

There we all were one second, hoofing it through the verdant river bottoms on this double-debut, when all of a sudden I found myself being transported at a wind-whistling speed while Bo’s legs churned and whirled beneath me. It turned out that, when installing the D-ring, Shirley had fixed it with a single brass rivet through the felt pad beneath the leather skirting of my saddle, instead of to something—*anything*—even remotely structural. All it took were two short downhills to rip that ring right out, with the twisted,

jagged rivet still in place. Being a loop, the crupper did not simply fall off Bo's tail, but rather elected to rotate 180 degrees so that the strap, with its ring-and-rivet loose end, was flapping around and smacking Bo right in the haunches. This situation would have caused many a mule to take alarm, and Bo was no exception. He took off at a gallop, and the faster he ran, the faster that strap smacked him. Perhaps he was flashing back to his race days, where a whip licking at his heels insisted he push harder with every lunge. Whatever his mental state, he was pouring on all the coals he could muster, and, in turn, my own mental state was quickly deteriorating, especially because I was too busy ducking low-hanging branches to have any idea what had caused the runaway.

I hadn't totally lost my cool, though, and, between ducks, I did exactly what I had been told to do in that situation: sit back and pull evenly on both reins, while saying "Whooooaaaa."<sup>30</sup> No sooner had I done this, though, when one of Shirley's reins snapped right down where it clipped to the bit. I suddenly found myself with only one rein and little possibility of stopping a mule who somehow seemed to still be accelerating. My cries of "whoa!" quickly turned to "Help! HELLLLPPP!!!" as we thundered through the trees. I did the only remaining thing that I could think to do and hauled in on the unbroken rein, hoping that Bo just might stop if I pulled his head around toward me. However, Bo was a consummate professional at running, and he was not

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<sup>30</sup> I may have been closer to yelling "WHOOOOOAAAA!!!", but I was still in somewhere in the ballpark.

about to let something like not being able to see where he was going deter him from his headlong rush. My cries of “HEEEELLLLLLLLLPPPP!!!” took on ever shriller notes.

Meanwhile, Thomas Jones had set off as fast as his mule could go when he saw the fix I’d gotten into—but, though he urged her on, what hope did they have of catching the two-time winner of the National Championship Chuckwagon Races? I was dimly aware of feeling gratitude for Thomas’s efforts, but was rather more preoccupied with thoughts of my own mortality. The hammer strokes of my heartbeat in my ears fought with the thundering of Bo’s hooves on the thin, sandy topsoil, and every pore on my body flushed with the prickly claws of panic. Branches swept past my ducking head with a sharp-edged *whoosh* like beating wings, and my guts clenched around their payload of still-digesting biscuits and gravy. Biscuits and gravy! At least my last meal was truly transcendental, I thought, surprised by how suddenly the numb coldness of resignation sank into my bones as I squirmed out of the way of yet another branch. In the corner of my vision, I could see Bo’s left eye rolling around in its socket as his open mouth worked the bit he was still committed to disregarding. Oh, to be out of the trees! To have two good reins! To be able to speak the language of mules!

Then, the next instant, Bo was shuffling to a halt. The offending crupper had finally slid off his tail. Thomas came thundering up behind us, but the taut creases slid off his face when he saw I was unhurt, aside from a few thin, red scratches from the pliable

twig-ends of branches. In his low, quiet voice, he said “Nice riding,” before hopping off to check out the broken pieces of my tack.

Nice riding? Hmmm, I thought, as I hopped off onto the welcome solidity of the ground. If Thomas Jones says so, well golly—I guess it was. Bo stood there, calm and still as the trees around us, and Thomas showed me the crupper with its jagged metal end. “It’s not his fault,” he said, and, looking at the broken rein hanging in my hands, I had to agree. After Thomas had fixed the busted rein with a quick bit of knot work, someone convinced me to get back on Bo and finish out the ride, and we kept exploring those river bottoms for another hour or two. I guess I must have really liked that mule, because, even after that introduction, we still bought him, and he was still my favorite for his soft, nut-brown eyes, fine-boned head, and quiet, calm personality—just so long as he didn’t have a rivet smacking his rump.<sup>31</sup> As I sat at Thomas and Fran’s that evening and picked two round black lumps off my back, I reckoned I could say that I’d had a real mule country experience, river bottoms, runaways, ticks, and all. Besides, at least I’d gotten a compliment for my troubles.

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<sup>31</sup> although he was *technically* my dad’s; he always claimed all the good ones

### True Love Takes Many Four-Footed Forms

Although my family was officially roosting in Baxter Springs, our muley pursuit meant we did most of our roving across the Arkansas and Missouri borders. The attentive reader may recall a certain flaxen-maned beauty who had won at least one heart when a Petersen had last darkened the door of the Ozarks, and such a reader will probably be unsurprised that Ozark destination number one was none other than Yeargain Mules, source of that dishy Molly mule, Babe. The morning after my River Bottoms one-boy rodeo—and after another ode-worthy biscuits and gravy session—Mom, Dad, Jack, and I set off for Tommie's place.

Tommie Yeargain lived on a large spread that had been in his family for years, just outside of Jane, MO. I couldn't be sure because of the density of the forest, branches overlapping branches, trunks practically wrapped around one another, but I thought to myself that Jane might have been the smallest town I'd ever laid eyes on. Indeed, in the fistful of seconds it took us to zip right past, I couldn't come up with more than a few things that I could even say I'd seen. A church, a service station, and a large building that looked like it had started its days as a barn, but was now a restaurant and community hall. Were there even any houses?

Just to the side of the highway in the desert to the east of my hometown sat a community that seemed to be always on the brink of deciding whether or not it was going

to be a town. The place was called Whitewater and featured an on-again-off-again service station, an on-again-off-again motel, and a collection of houses with cars out front in various states of ongoing repair: pickup trucks with sawed-off roofs, t-top sports coupes with three wheels, minivans with missing windshields. My parents' consensus seemed to be that, due to the mostly-shuttered nature of the two businesses, Whitewater wasn't quite a town. As we whizzed past Jane, I thought to myself that it was only about a closed shop away from a Whitewater-like demotion.

Such denominational concerns did not occupy my mind for long, though, because our SUV was soon kicking up dust on the dirt road to the headquarters of Yeargain Mules. The place was hard to miss: three barns stood in a loose cluster, each one dwarfing the house that Tommie and Judy were sitting in front of as we pulled up. The largest of these barns had lost almost all of its paint, and holes in the roof let the sun filter in more readily than through the canopy of the bug-buzzing forests. Beyond the cluster of buildings, the property spread across a gentle swell that sloped down toward a creek at the trees' edge, where a herd of cattle milled about the fence line. Our arrival was met with a duo of sharp barks, and I had to crane my neck at the window to see their source. Two small dogs, black and white, with brown spots on their cheeks and above their eyes, docked tails, and big, triangular ears like bats' had jumped up from where they had been lounging at the feet of Tommie's lawn chair. Though their ears and markings told me that

they must be the same breed, their bodies were nothing alike—one had short legs, a neck that was hardly long enough to justify the name, and a chest like a miniature barrel that was so deep it nearly touched the tops of the blades of grass; the other was nearly twice as tall, with a slender body like a whippet's, and a neck that was actually a neck. I clomped through my mind's index of dog breeds, trying to match the two tough customers before me to any breeds that I knew. Fox Terriers? No, too small. And not Jack Russells because of the scarceness of brown in their markings. Mutts? But they looked too alike, despite their Abbot-and-Costello body-shape mismatch, to be mutts. I didn't have to wait long, though—Judy told us, her voice thick with pride, that the two dogs were Rat Terriers, Rowdy and Packrat by name. They looked at me ever so slightly askance, I thought, especially leggy Packrat—though perhaps that was only due to the psychic dysmorphia he may have felt as a result of being named after one of the very creatures he was born to kill. But doggy side-eye notwithstanding, those markings and bat ears had me hooked, along with the wonderful newness of their small size: huggable, portable, yet tough enough to tackle the meanest rat.

I knelt in the grass and slowly won Rowdy over by running my fingers through the stiff, slick, short hairs on his back, his body loosening after a few seconds, his back beginning to sway in time to my touch after a few more. Packrat still stood just out of reach, flicking his eyes between Rowdy and me, but I was willing to accept one-out-of-

two for the moment. The sensation of being hooked by this new type of dog blossomed into full-throttle excitement when Judy turned toward me and said, “Now, I bet *you* would like to see the puppy barn?”

The *puppy* barn? A whole barn *full of puppies*? Clusters of small, wriggling bodies; tiny sharp teeth, wagging tails, and whimpers; the feeling of little warm licks on my hands and face; and the heat of those bodies against my chest as I held them... My jaw dropped. “Oh?” I managed to mumble.

“Wow, what do you think, honey? You’d better go with Judy,” my mom said, helping me out of the knot of my excitement with a little verbal prod.

“Oh, wow, yeah—that sounds...that sounds great!” I said, getting to my feet.

A grin creased Judy’s face. “That’s what I figured. Come on!” she said, as she turned away with a wave of her arm.

Dad stayed behind to talk mules with Tommie, either sharing or pretending to share the older man’s disinterest, but Mom and Jack followed alongside me. After crossing a few hundred feet of grass (that, unlike all the grass I’d ever seen before, didn’t need sprinklers to stay green, which was one of the great geographic novelties of this particular family trip), we walked through a half-open set of large double doors into a space made day-bright by a buzzing grid of fluorescent lights. The concrete floor was a surprise to me, having only seen the dirt floor of my family’s barn and those at Rainbow

Ranch, Reflection Farm, and Alamar, but Judy pre-empted my question. “This was built as a dairy barn,” she told us. “Tommie’s family used to have a couple dozen head of milk cows in here.” She gestured to some steel pipes running from ceiling height on one outside wall and then dropping from the ceiling near the center of the space. “After they milked the cows, they would pump it through these pipes and out to a collecting tank. Haven’t had any cow in here for a few years now, so those pipes ain’t much use, but the concrete floor does make it easier to clean out the puppy mess.”

Though I was far from having lost sight of the object of my visit to the building, Judy’s narration of the unfamiliar features of this new kind of barn had briefly consumed my attention, in the same way that eating away the crust of a slice of cinnamon toast might consume my attention. The words “puppy mess” snapped me back. The big, open space that had once been filled with dairy cow pens was now taken up—though only about one-third of the way—by a collection of waist-high modular grids made of vinyl-coated metal. And inside those grids were piles made of wiggling furry black-and-white bodies tumbling over one another. Small, sharp cries of excitement flew into the air as the puppies caught wind of their visitors.

My fingers flexed with the tension of my effort to resist sprinting up to the puppy pens and scaring them with an outsize display of my own excitement. Each step felt as measured as the click of beads on a necklace as Mom, Jack, and I approached the pens. I

knelt just the other side of one litter and stretched my arm into their huddle. A warm body slid under my palm, with its soft, thin layer of puppy fat and sleek, short hair. Licks flicked across my hand and wrist as the other puppies bumped around. A thrill slid into my chest while I watched the tiny paws with their unworn pink and black nails, the blinking of eyes still blue with the nearness of birth, the wiggling of short tails that seemed to always lead to wiggling of the whole rear end. Then a jab like pins and needles in the butt of my palm as one of them tried their fresh teeth out on me. But, after they had a second to fade, even these exploratory nips were simply part of the wonder of puppies, proof of their newness and uniqueness. Standing up, I turned and looked between Judy and my mom. "Can we pick them up?"

Judy smiled. "Well, sure you can, so long as you're gentle with them," she answered in her husky, cigarette-smoked voice. I whirled back around and, leaning over the pen, scooped a puppy up. It roly-polied around, licking my arms and whimpering in a mixture of excitement and concern over being separated from its siblings, who mobbed the near edge of the pen in a tumbling, yipping mass. After a moment, I put that puppy down and picked up another, trying to make sure I spread the love fairly (while having the side benefit of getting to hold as many puppies as possible, of course). I moved to different pens and different litters, trying not to let my imagination go cantering off with me—considering my dad's proclivity for Olde English Mastiffs and German Shepherds,

and the delight he took in referring to any sub-30-pound dog as a “Yap-’n’-shitter,” I knew that the likelihood of one of those puppies entering my life on a long-term basis was about as high as the likelihood had been of receiving a “Yes” when, aged 19 months, I had asked my parents if they were going to be leaving my newborn brother at the hospital when we went in for his first post-natal checkup.<sup>32</sup> Even so, I couldn’t help but start to choose favorites: this one, with the brown spot above only one eye, who had licked my hand more than the others; this one, with the almost hourglass-shaped black saddle on its back who looked me in the eyes and made small noises like it hoped I might understand what it was saying; or this one, the runt of one litter, who had speckled front feet and and curled against my chest like it was meant to fit right there. What would it be like to have one of them sitting in the seat between Jack and me as we drove back across the plains, its small paws poking across my legs as it curled up for a nap in my lap?

But then my dad was at the door of the puppy barn, Tommie standing just behind him. “Come on, family—now. These little guys are pretty cute, but we’re here to see the *mules!*” Tommie let out a quick, high-pitched chortle, shaking his head as he glanced into Judy’s hobby zone. Like I knew it would have to eventually, the road trip daydream had rolled to a halt. I sighed to myself and placed a quick kiss on the head of the puppy I was holding before setting it back inside its pen. As Mom, Jack, Judy, and I filed out of the

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<sup>32</sup> “We’re going to leave him here, right?” were my exact words as we pulled into the hospital parking lot. I have yet to live it down. Alas for the lot of younger siblings and mean toddlers.

puppy barn, Judy gave me a wink and said, “Now, I bet we can fit in another puppy visit before y’all head out today.” I smiled back. I certainly hoped she was right.

Though they could hardly hope to compete with puppies, and especially with Rat Terrier puppies, the mules were interesting enough, after all. Like the puppies, they continued the trend of living in a space that was originally designed for another animal, in this case, turkeys. The former turkey barn was a rambling structure with more than one daylight-streaming hole in the pitched roof far above our heads. Bo, whom my parents had already all but committed to purchasing, stood in the mixed light of stray afternoon sunbeams and exposed fluorescent tubes, his large ears fixed on our approach, and I wondered if he remembered our adventure of the previous day. He gave no indication one way or the other, but seemed happy to have his neck scratched.

Despite the moment of terror I had experienced atop his back, I was glad to see him. The small, white mark in the middle of his forehead (known, perhaps rather inaccurately, as a “star”) was a nearly perfect circle, and served to highlight a head that, with its balanced proportions, perfect bite, full jawline, and restrained brow ridges, was uncommonly handsome for any equine, and maybe especially a mule. His body followed through on the promise of his head, with bones that were straight and sturdy-looking without the tractor-engine inelegance of Red’s limbs. He was muscular without looking muscle-bound, his racing past showing through in his leanness. He wasn’t pigeon-toed

or saggy-hocked or swaybacked or bird-chested. In fact, it was often easiest to describe Bo's looks in terms of what he was not, which is another way to say that he had perfect confirmation, the sort of ineffable just-rightness<sup>33</sup> that could (and did) make even a dedicated horse person stop and say, "Now *that* is a good-looking mule." In short, a mount that would make his rider feel cool. And while the old saw goes that "a good horse [or mule, or donkey] is never a bad color," Trigger and Silver weren't cast for their personalities. Some equestrians might demur, but I think it's safe to say that just about everyone would choose to be photographed on the showy steed. It's like the answer to the question, "Hey, for our date tonight, would you prefer I pick you up in the showroom-clean 1961 Corvette, or Uncle Andy's 1989 Citation? You know, the one he uses for his mobile cat-grooming service."

Of course, Bo's studliness<sup>34</sup> would be moot if he were some rank beast, but that was not the case. With the exception of those couple minutes of crupper-induced panic, he was easy-going, responsive to commands, and fast-walking without the snorting, farting, speed mania of Babe or (less flatulently) Red. Bo's quietness inspired confidence—I didn't have to be on my toes, anticipating his next moves in an effort to keep him on track or attempting to pre-empt him from getting spooked by some rustling or funny-

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<sup>33</sup> which might also be called "*je'n sais quoi*," but probably not in the Ozarks, nor in Western CO.

<sup>34</sup> ...inasmuch as any gelded and already-sterile-anyway-due-to-being-a-hybrid animal can possess studliness, that is.

looking shadow. Instead, he more or less did exactly what he was expected to do, which was rather in keeping with his physical appearance: he looked like a mule “*should*” look, and he rode like a mule “*should*” ride.

While these traits were great, what most struck me about Bo may have been how willing he was to receive attention. Red would just as soon run to the far corner of the pasture as get pet, and Babe (despite all Dad’s adulation) was nearly as frigid, though less dramatic in her avoidance. By contrast, Bo leaned into my fingers as I scratched his neck and didn’t pull away when I ran my other palm across his forehead. The thought of a sociable mule was equally exciting to my parents. Because Bo was graced with such a dose of just-rightness, the final test ride that my dad took around the grassy acres of Yeargain Mules was more of a formality than anything, but at least it gave me a chance to revisit the puppy barn.

A couple of hours later, a deal had been struck for Bo, and it was time to head back to Kansas. Though Jack and I were visibly pining for a Rat Terrier, having needed to be all but dragged away from the puppy barn, and with our wide-cast eyes following the movements of the grown-up Rat Terriers in the yard, I had more or less resigned myself to a puppyless fate when Judy declared, “Now, if y’all want, you can take one of the puppies home for the boys.”

Jack’s jaw dropped. My eyes flew wide open. Our voices burst into the air.

“Oh!”

“Wow!”

“A puppy!”

“The other dogs would love it!”

“We’ll take care of it! We’ll do all the chores for it! You won’t have to do a thing!”

“Oh, *please?!?*” Breathless, Jack and I stared gaped at our mom and dad, any further pleading choked off for the moment by the immensity of our excitement.

“Well, that’s awfully kind of you, Judy,” Dad began, “but no, thank you. You boys already have dogs at home. Now say good-bye and get in the car.”

I dropped my gaze to the ground and kicked at a clump of grass. For someone who could be so volatile, my dad was maddeningly predictable at times. Jack and I did what we were told, the seat between us seeming even emptier than it had on the drive over. I watched the trio of barns fade from sight as we drove back down Judy and Tommie’s long driveway, my eyes lingering longest on the puppy barn. And though I was leaving the Ozarks with nothing to show for my visit, there was no doubt in my mind that what I felt was nothing less than the first flutterings of true love.

I had found my very own Babe.

Maybe not today, I thought, maybe not even next year, but, if Dad and Mom could

cash in on their farm-and-mule dreams, well then...I reckoned there was a Rat Terrier in my future.

Manure, Manure, Everywhere, and None of it to Drink

My hands closed around the handle of the shovel and lifted it down from its hook on the wall. The galvanized steel head made a bright, ringing clang as it scraped against the red crushed granite and washed sand that covered the ground inside the new run-in shed. I still chuckled a little at the thought of that latter soil product—*washed* sand? How exactly does one wash sand? I had imagined a giant bathtub, a sieve, a tennis court-sized washboard, a small army of workers with hoses, but I still had no idea how the task was accomplished. I only knew that the sand came in the back of a dump truck from Whitewater Sand and Gravel (located, in typical Western Colorado fashion, *not* in on-again-off-again Whitewater) and got dumped in a huge pile between the barn and paddock, alongside another dump truck's-worth of that reddish crushed granite. From there, the stuff was moved around first by the blade of a tractor and then, for precise coverage of hard-to-tractor corners, by the shovels of Dad, Jack, and me (though, as in most farm-related enterprises, Jack's frequent "breaks" made him a bit of a silent partner).

However, despite my bemusement at the process behind its name, washed sand was worth every penny. From where the shovel blade edged into the ground, only a faint puff of dust welled up, no more than the fog of my breath that swirled and faded, swirled and faded in the winter afternoon air. Focusing on puffs of dust might seem like a small

thing, but only a couple of years previously, the thought of dust alone was nearly enough to make me choke. In those first months on the hobby farm, as I had raked the ground to loosen nails before rolling the magnet over them, or as I helped my dad sort through and remove old bits of pipe and fence post and rusty wire in the barn, dust would rise from the ground at every disturbance, a slow uncoiling like incense smoke. The puffs would spread as they rose, flowing into one another, twisting and looping until they had gathered and hung in the air like a pall of smoke. The sunlight weakened as it slanted in beneath the old run-in shed's roof or through the open double doors of the barn, the dust too fine and too numerous for the light to glint off any single mote. The dust settled in my eyes, sliding under the lids when I blinked, building until it scraped and made my eyes water, which only attracted more dust. It clung to the droplets of sweat on my face and neck, worked its way into my pores, leaving streaks where I swiped my fingers across itches. It climbed into my nose, marching prickly-clawed past the flare of my nostrils and sinking into my sinuses, which, like my eyes, burned and watered, only to grow dustier. My breath carried the cloud down my throat, where it puckered my flesh and sucked the wetness from the back of my tongue. An acrid taste crept into my mouth, like the burning of something that should not be burned. No matter how I swished water around in my mouth, I could taste the tang of dust for hours after the chores were done. Even when my dad began providing surplus medical masks for us to wear—masks that seemed to

succumb after only a handful of uses—there were still red eyes, streaky skin, the taste of motes that had snuck past the elastic band. My dad had scarcely recovered from his tonsil cancer surgery when the ground was rototilled, graded, and covered with the new soil.

So that tiny puff of dust, the inevitable product of desert wind, mule hair, and hay bales, was a cause for no little celebration. Even thinking of the way things had been made my nostrils cringe.

The celebration was short-lived, though, because the work at hand was hardly done. I could feel several pairs of eyes on my back almost as surely as the prodding of noses. Turning away from the way, shovel in hand, I came face-to-face with the wide-eyed gaze of several hopeful mules. Red, Babe, Bo, Max, and Pedro all stood just the other side of the fencing panels, ears twitching and homing in on me like satellite dishes. Pedro let out his tentative putt-putt, followed by more throaty requests from the other four. I glanced to my right at the small stack of hay against the southern wall. “Oh yeah?” I asked them. Their eyes stayed pinned to me. Max shifted his weight side-to-side in anticipation, causing his belly to sway. While none of them were heavy enough to occasion commentary from the vets, they were also far from starving. Even shapely Bo and lovely-ankled Babe were packing some extra insulation. The longing gazes they were giving me were the same ones they would be sending my way five minutes after finishing their breakfast. It was a calculated risk, a minor act of heartbreak, but I grabbed the

shovel and walked back into the paddock, leaving them sputtering and with no choice but to wait another couple of hours for their scheduled evening meal.

Babe and Red began swishing their tails and pinning their ears at one another to release the tension of anticipation, and Babe thundered out of the run-in shelter a few seconds later, with a buck and a fart. Then Red and Bo started shaking their heads and chewing on the base of each other's necks in a sort of inscrutable game that John mules sometimes play—perhaps, I mused, some diluted expression of the impulse that caused wild stallions to rear and tear their teeth into one another, front hooves windmilling and lashing out. Or maybe they were just doing their best no-hands attempt at a thumb war or rock-paper-scissors. Meanwhile, Max had his head down and was, for probably the 14th time that hour, moving from stall to stall and snuffling around the rubber mats that sat beneath the feeding troughs in an effort to find any fallen snippets of hay. Pedro stayed put, snuggled up against the southern wall of the run-in, looking like he might try to nap his way to dinner—a strategy after my own heart.

I walked back across the winter-stiff peaks of sand to the eastern end of the paddock. All that muley hunger, the churning of yards of collective guts, meant that little piles of manure hit the ground many times a day. In just a couple of days, the paddock could grow a sort of carpet in the favorite hangout spots—under the run-in shed, along the shallow irrigation ditch that angled across the sand, and along the eastern fenceline,

where the herd liked to gather and gaze off into the pastures beyond. The mules were usually not restricted from accessing the pasture, so this latter spot of concentration seemed to be less the result pining for that unattainable space that lay just out of reach, and more the result of some impulse toward liminal pooping. Perhaps mules, too, have a sense of aesthetics, wanting to keep the bulk of their living space clear. Perhaps fashion and design is not only human, but something shared across species. Or perhaps what humans think of as aesthetics is simply an expression of our instincts, our shared animality, just another way in which the narrative of human exceptionalism is a lie, a trickery to justify the imposition of our ascendancy...

Hmmm, I thought, as I drew nearer to that fenceline, I hope I'm using "ascendancy" correctly. *Descendent*, down, *ascendent*, up—it seemed like it checked out, but I made a mental note to look in my dictionary when I got back inside. And to run it by my mom—she would definitely be able to help me. Had the fenceline been several more paces away, maybe I would have had time to wonder if my determination to use words like "ascendancy" as an 11-year-old—i.e. the most complicated words I could come up with—was part of why one of my teachers had recently told me that I needed to "lighten up,"<sup>35</sup> but, as it was, I had reached both the far edge of the paddock and its attendant manure. My mind snapped back to the task at hand.

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<sup>35</sup> though perhaps she was also referring to my commitment to neither smiling nor frowning, which I had decided was a surefire way to help minimize the wrinkles of eventual old age.

The blue polyethylene manure cart sat there on its bicycle wheels, about one-third full of mostly-frozen manure. My favorite manure fork, with its smooth, splinter-free wooden handle that was not yet damaged by the elements, lay in the cart. The plastic head of the fork was a rich red, nearly that Italian sports car red. Quite a good-looking manure fork, I thought, the pale color of the varnished oak making a pleasing contrast to the vibrant scoop-end. Good-looking except for one thing: that gap where a tine should have been, a flaw that jumped out at me like the space left by a punched-out tooth. Even though it was still largely functional, the fork would never be able to hold as much manure in a single scoop as before, and that gap would let little pieces trail out if I weren't careful about scooping at just the right angle. Beyond this diminished functionality, the simple fact of the manure fork's brokenness left me feeling slightly deflated. Now only one fork on the acreage was unbroken, and it was, by some twist of fate, one of the oldest, with cracks through the varnish of its handle that let little splinters poke out and a sun-faded scoop-end that was a dull forest green. Hardly an inspiring accessory for the manure maestro.

My feeling of deflation was augmented by a dose of frustration, since I was the very person who had caused this damage. All my efforts to hide the flashy red manure fork from my dad, all those times I had scoffed in my head at his string of tine-breaking, those jabs at rocks and icy poop that were accompanied by the *crack* of shearing plastic

and a bellowed “*Goddammit!*”, only to sully my favorite manure fork with my own hands...was this the meaning of that word, *hubris*, in my encyclopedia of Greek mythology?

Chagrined, I gripped that broad-bladed shovel in both hands, the tool that I should have grabbed in the first place, once I saw the ice crystals that covered this particular little mound of manure, instead of letting laziness convince me that I could save a trip back to the run-in shed and fight through the ice with my manure fork alone. Squaring my hips and drawing my arms back (though feeling much less like trident-wielding Poseidon—or any mythological hero, for that matter, because who ever heard of gloriously hurling a coal shovel?), I launched the blade at the base of the manure. With a ringing *ping* and a jolt through my arms, the shovel bounced off the poop, doing little more than flinging a few icy chips into the air. I sighed. No wonder my poor manure fork had succumbed. After a few more shovel launches, and some grunts for good measure, the whole mound finally released its embrace with the ground. I rocked the shovel back and forth until I got the icy lump balanced on the blade. Then, bending my knees and puffing air out through my mostly closed lips, I managed to heft the whole mess and drop it into the cart alongside the wounded fork. It landed with a thud and a clatter of ice on plastic that made the cart shudder. Unlike the sun-cured morsels of spring, summer, or fall, winter’s frozen manure clings to almost all of its original moisture, turning its

removal into something like a full-body work-out. Not only is it poop (though, to be fair, quite inoffensive poop, looking mostly like wads of withered grass), not only will it break your most beloved tools, but it will also give you a backache if you're not careful. Having defeated that fiercest mound, I grabbed the cart handle and moved a few feet down the line to the next patch.

As I worked between shovel and manure fork, I heard the clattering crescendo of a tractor engine leaping to life. Through the front doors of the barn, a bright green tractor emerged to glint in the sunlight. In yellow paint along the engine bay ran the words "John Deere," with the silhouette of a stag leaping off the final "e." The driver's seat was occupied by a figure in tan, insulated cotton duck overalls and coat. Blaze orange hearing protection muffs covered his ears and a bright blue French foreign legion-style hat sat atop his head, smushed down by the padded band of the earmuffs. Beneath the brim of his hat, his eyes were shaded by yellow-lensed sunglasses, approximately as fashionable as laboratory safety goggles. My dad. Cranking the wheel in his gloved hands, he idled the tractor in a semi-circle and rolled down the lane that ran between the barn and the run-in shed. The tractor idled down and stopped as I worked loose another frozen chunk, and I heard the clanging of chains and then the creak of the arena gate swinging open. He had hooked up the harrow, an implement that was more or less like a blanket of chains and metal teeth, and was getting ready to drag it around the washed sand of the arena in

order to break up the cold-stiffened sand and make sure the footing was ideal for riding.

The arena formed most of the southern boundary of the paddock, and was an oval space about 150 feet east-to-west and 60 feet north-to-south, made up of panels made of rusted, welded steel pipe. Many weekends, my family's horse-and-mule trainer, riding teacher, and friend, Wendy, would drive over and give us a group riding lesson. My mom was always part of the lesson, and I was almost always expected to be, as well. Given his longer experience of riding (and his greater confidence), as well as his tendency to fill his weekends with either surgical assisting or tractor work, my dad took part less often, but still seemed to enjoy the experience, especially because it offered him a chance to show Babe off to a bona fide equine professional.

Jack was a different story. In lessons, he would slouch forward as he rode, a tendency that became more pronounced the faster his animal went. After lesson upon lesson of correcting his posture at least a baker's dozen's-worth of times, Wendy eventually declared that she was going to put one of her newborn's dirty diapers on his saddle horn to keep him from leaning forward. In successive lessons, as he began to slouch, Wendy would cry "Dirty diaper! Dirty diaper!" from the side of the arena, but the poor guy just didn't seem persuaded. Being the magnanimous older sibling that I was, I felt superior for what I imagined to be the rugged elegance of my straight-backed, broad-shouldered riding posture, while also holding out hope that Wendy would one day bring a

real dirty diaper to decorate Jack's saddle. With his commitment to slouching, I was pretty sure he'd land his nose right in it. Of course, had I seen a video of my own riding in those early days, I would have noticed that the bragging rights of my accurately imagined straight back were somewhat diminished by the chicken-like flapping of my elbows.

But maybe Jack's posture was a ploy, a clever bid to get back to the video game console, because, eventually, having "demonstrated substantive and consistent disinterest" (Warren A. Petersen), he was recused from lessons. This feat gave me pause. He had overwhelmed the will of our parents. I contemplated whether I could do the same, but for what end? I really didn't like video games (especially because Jack was so much better at them than I), and I really didn't dislike the lessons, but all those Saturdays of getting up nearly as early as I had to on school-day mornings...not exactly my version of a great time. Ah, but then, my dad, who considered sleeping until 7 am to be luxurious, was always harping on about how *real* farmers and *real* mule people—"and yes, son, *real* cowboys"—got up early everyday to demonstrate their commitment to their land and animals. What kind of a farm kid would I be if I copped out of that? I had already been guilty of masquerade as a hat-boots-and-bandana-clad little kid, and wasn't skipping out on riding lessons just a journey further down the same road, this time without the excuse of being four years old and clueless? If couldn't even hack it on a *hobby* farm, I thought,

well, then, I would *really* be a hopeless pretender.

So I made my way to the arena those mornings, saddled up, rode figure-eights and shoulder-ins, turns on the forehand and turns on the haunches, serpentines and leg yields, while Jack slept in and gloatingly leveled up.

Maybe it was this same impulse toward authenticity that kept me picking up manure, or picking up rocks, or pounding fenceposts, or setting the water on the gaited pipe, or mucking around in the mud of the furrows to get the water to flow right. And maybe it was this same impulse that kept me from complaining when, in an effort to get rid of a few more little piles of manure before emptying the now-full manure cart, I tried to fling a forkful over the fence into the pasture, only to have a blast of icy wind bring the frozen lumps flying right back to clobber my face like tiny fists. After all, I thought, pulling off my glove and using it to brush the little bits of recycled grass from my around my nose and coat collar, what is more authentic than a dose of manure to the face? True realness comes not just from the glamor of good riding posture and a pair of shiny leather boots, but also from the fullness of experience,<sup>36</sup> those moments of busted tines and rogue gusts.

I dragged the heaping-full cart back across the paddock, leaning forward and digging my booted toes into the sand. The wind-and-hoof-induced ridges that had made the empty cart jitter and rattle on the way out were now obstacles through which the

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<sup>36</sup> which includes learning how to throw manure downwind

wheels had to slice, like a knife through fridge-cold peanut butter. My shoulders burned with the strain as the cart wallowed along. I wondered, and not for the first time, how much a full cart of manure weighed. Surely more than I did, I figured, and a faint flush of pride spread through me. Manure patrol might have no glamor, and only slivers of glory (the sight of a newly pristine paddock), but at least it was a way to get toughened up. As he harrowed his way around the arena, I hoped that my dad had a chance to glimpse me hauling the heavier-than-a-large-11-year-old load of manure. Because knotted into that longing for authenticity was a desire to please my dad, to show him that he could count on me to know what work was, and how to do it.

Besides, with every time he saw me forging ahead, laden but persistent, I thought I might be able to offset the many moments when he had yelled from the sidelines for me to not be afraid of the ball during soccer games. As long as the ball was rolling across the grass or sailing at waist height or lower (those blissful days before a certain sort of just-below-waist-high direct hit was unremarkable), I was happy to attack it, or at least do my best to get in the way of its progress, the latter of which I was particularly adept at doing. I maybe not have been the fastest dribbler, but my physical obstruction to the other side's progress was worthy of a political nomination.

Get that ball anywhere in the vicinity of my face, though, and my resolve vanished faster than the after-game Sunny D. Maybe this tendency was due, in part, to

what anathema the use of hands is in soccer. My coaches (which figuratively, but also, some years, literally, included my dad) would holler reprimands any time someone engaged their hands during practice and scrimmages, and nothing seemed to draw a blast of the ref's whistle more quickly during a game. I had even had "HANDS!" called on me when a wildly kicked ball shot through the air and clipped my left hand hand as I ran—which I tried, without luck, to repeal—so I was certain that a shot smacking my hands as I tried to protect my face would receive no mercy.

Perhaps you are a generous person, and you are thinking, "Oh, poor little rule-bound flincher; but I bet he was okay when he filled the goalie role, where he could use his hands freely." And then I would have to reply, "Well, golly, thanks for the vote of confidence! But no, I am sorry to inform you that your faith is unfounded." Because, even when I was playing the one role where hand-based ball interference was sanctioned, and even essential, I still managed to give in to my fear and do my best to keep my face out of harm's way by taking my whole body along with it. Perhaps the persistence of this habit was related, in part, to how rarely I played goalie—the call only came *ora mortis nobis*, as a generalization—but the results were no less underwhelming, whatever their cause. There I would stand, heart pounding in my ears, tongue dry from panting and nervousness, watching the ball make its way nearer and nearer to the flaking white paint of the goal box. My guts always clenched in that flicker of time when I watched my

opponent's foot draw back before walloping the ball in my direction. If it were zipping across the grass, I would spring with foot, hand, and body to block the ball, but, if it were lofted even slightly faceward, forget it. I might as well have tried to suppress a sneeze. Sometimes my body was large enough to accidentally deflect the ball, despite my flinching.<sup>37</sup> Other times, this reaction gave the ball unfettered access to the net behind me, occasioning groans from my team-mates and a "Goddammit, Dirk!" from my dad's midfield post amongst the other parents. "It's just some leather and air! It can't possibly hurt you," he would snap afterward, shaking his head and not looking at me, his voice ragged with disgust. "Don't be such a wuss."

Having taken more than one stinging soccer ball smack to the face during the hustles of practice, I couldn't agree with his former assertion, nor really understand how being a goalie was supposed to be fun, but I knew I didn't want him to think I was a wuss forever. If I couldn't suppress my autonomic ball avoidance, I hoped I could at least earn my mettle through doing the farm chores as unflinchingly as I could.

I left the paddock, fending off a couple of curious mules as I hauled the cart through the open gate, and made my way toward the manure pile that lay south of the barn. The crunch of the wheels rolling through the thick gravel of the lane seemed amplified by the sides of the barn and run-in shed, masking my grunts as I covered the

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<sup>37</sup> I always hoped these happy accidents looked intentional, though I knew deep down that passing a hands-in-front-of-my-face, closed-eyed cower as a suave goalie move was a hard sell at best.

last 60 or so feet to my target. When I was about 10 feet from the pile—a nearly head-high mass of cartload upon cartload of manure that was periodically collected and spread on the fields as supplemental fertilizer—I wheeled the cart around so that I was pushing it, took a few steps back for good measure, and then launched myself and the load toward the pile. “Launch” in this case was a bit more of a state of mind than an immediate action, as the initial wallowing of the cart was not unlike that of an albatross struggling to leave the ground, but, after a few feet, I had managed to accelerate nearly to a jog. A few more feet, and the cart went thudding into the dung heap. Taking advantage of that gruntingly-earned momentum, I flipped the handle skyward and tried to land the manure as high on the pile as I could. At about two-thirds of the way up, it was not my highest placement, I thought, as I wiggled the cart back down on its front rim to finish emptying it, but not too shabby for such an icy load. Perhaps a drive to avenge my wounded manure fork added a few more coals to the fire.

The riotous noise of the tractor engine that had been drawing up behind me dropped to an idle as my dad hopped off to close the arena gate and unhook the harrow. His face was lost beneath the brim of his hat and behind the lenses of his sunglasses, so I couldn't read his expression, but I hoped he'd seen me show that manure who was boss. He gave me a wave as I started back toward the run-in shed, and I decided to take that gesture as confirmation. I waved in response, but he was already facing away, climbing

into the driver's seat. The empty cart now felt featherlight, and skittered unsinking across the surface of the gravel as I returned it to its place beside the haystack. With the bright blue vessel safely stowed out of the way of the sun's rays, I contemplated what to do with my manure fork. Hiding it was pointless now, after the tine break, but I also wasn't sure that I could just stick it on the hooks alongside all the other manure forks. Wouldn't it seem conspicuous by its sudden presence? That red color was also my mom's favorite, so I imagined that the fork's apparition would not be lost on her, and I also wondered what my dad would think if he put two and two together and figured out I had been hiding a fork from him. After doing a quick roll call of the forks Dad had wounded, though, I decided that I could probably just hang mine up amongst its peers without too much worry. Anyway, a broken tine here or there was just a sign of hard work, I reckoned. But just in case, I still found myself tucking it behind behind a couple other forks.

By this time, my dad had returned his John Deere to its place in the barn, and I headed that way to check in with him. Many tractors spend all their days outside, growing patinas from the sun and rain, weathering organically until they begin to resemble just another part of the landscape that work. Bob's tractor was a prime example. When it wasn't rolling through the orchard, it was parked along the property line just beyond our barn, its blue paint faded nearly to white on the the top of the engine bay and rear fenders, with streaks of surface rust dripping down its sides and blooming inside the

dished wheels in the places where rocks had chipped the paint away.

This, however, was not the life Dad's John Deere led. I have no idea what our big red barn was originally built to contain, but under my family's tenure, it had found its calling as the home of the tractor. The John Deere stood in the middle of the washed sand-covered expanse, illuminated by two banks of fluorescent lights that hung from the beams and floorboards of the loft a few feet above the tractor's roll bar and sunshade. Arrayed around the machine in a semi-circle like an attendant court were various implements, supported on wooden pallets or thick wooden fenceposts: the mustard-yellow auger, with its huge corkscrew blade that made short work of fencepost holes; the green-and-yellow John Deere deck mower, with which Dad trimmed the pasture and the weed-prone lanes around the property; the sprayer, with its huge yellow plastic tank and red steel swinging nozzle arms, which Dad used to pump weed-killing chemicals over the weed-prone fields and lanes; the spade-bladed red-and-blue three-row creaser that re-cut the furrows each spring; the green, antique John Deere manure spreader, which could be drawn by either dray animals or a tractor; the thick wedge of the green John Deere ditcher that carved irrigation ditches out of the stubborn calcareous soil; and the yellow-orange grading blade, which spread the loads of gravel, crushed granite, and washed sand, and helped level the paddock and arena. Cans of engine oil, lubricating oil, grease, hydraulic fluid, anti-grit cleaner, and touch-up paint sat on a shelf along the eastern wall, next to a

stack of neatly folded rags. Dad had one of these rag in his hand when I walked in, and was cleaning and lubricating the three-point hitch on the rear of his tractor. The John Deere's pride of place in the center of the barn, combined with my dad's fine-grained commitment to keeping it pristine (one of his many pairs of reading glasses was kept in the barn to aid in this process, and the power washer would make its way down from the garage every couple of months to chase the dirt off that shiny green paint), had earned the barn the nickname from my mom of "the tractor shrine." Looking at the layout of the space and watching the way my dad hunched over that hitch with the same care as if it were a patient on a surgery table, I couldn't argue with her assessment.

"Hi, son," he said, as I walked over. "I'm just about finished up here."

"Cool," I replied. "I finished picking up all the manure."

"Yeah, you were doing a good job out there." A little glow of pride rose inside me.

"Pretty icy, though, huh?" he continued. "I saw you had to use the shovel in a few places." The little glow sank back down.

"Oh, yeah, yeah...icy. Yeah, definitely icy. Hey, um, is there anything else you'd like to do right now?" I asked, my voice brightening in what I hoped was a show of eagerness, not deflection.

"Why don't you go throw some hay? It's a little early, but we're already here, so why not. Remember—about a flake and a half per animal."

“Sure, yeah, I’ll do it right now,” I said, already on my way out of the barn. I wasn’t quite ready to unveil my tine-breaking saga.

As I stepped back into the run-in shed, I was met by another volley of sputters from the assembled herd. These sputters turned into full-fledged whinnibrays when the mules saw me walk straight to the hay and lug a bale off the stack and into the plywood cart that sat alongside. After snagging the old box-cutter from the ledge behind the bales and sawing through the two strands of orange twine with its rusty blade, I separated the hay into flakes and began to toss them into the metal feeders that hung in each feeding stall, the stems prickling my wrists in the gap between my gloves and coat cuff. With each toss, the mules vied for position with swishing tails, pinned ears, and choked-off little squeals that sounded like air escaping from a balloon. A moment after the last feeder was filled, they had sorted out their order and began munching away, with the last feeding spot inevitably being taken by Pedro. My dad appeared in the doorway as I rolled the hay cart back toward the stack.

“Well, what do you say, son—shall we call it a day?”

“Alright by me,” I said, and the two of us walked up the driveway toward the house.

Mom and Jack were waiting for us inside, he with a tale of unlocking a secret level, and she with some crisp stacks of clean laundry.

“Hey hey,” Mom said, smiling at us. “How was it out there?”

“Oh, not too shabby, but I think Dirkus and I are ready for some dinner,” Dad answered.

“Yeah, that sounds pretty good to me,” I added, my stomach rumbling to life at the mention of food.

“And to me too!” Jack called out from his family room post.

“Well, where are you thinking?” Mom asked.

“How does Los Reyes sound?” Dad offered.

“It’s a plan.”

A few minutes later, Dad and I had changed out of our work clothes, and all four of us had piled into the car. As we rolled out the driveway, I glanced back at the lengthening shadows of the outbuildings where the mules and tractor were set up for another happy night. Flexing the stiffness of manure patrol out of my fingers, I felt the satisfaction of completing a job creep into me. It may not have been exactly what I would have chosen for myself, and I may have still missed that old atticked in-town life from time to time, but I also realized that, like it or not, I could no longer imagine life without those whinnibrays, tractors, manure piles, and fenceposts. A pair of bat-like ears popped up behind the seat, followed by a pair of big brown eyes beneath little brown eyebrows and an apple-domed black-and-white head. Scout, a cherry-picked present from Judy that

even Warren A. Petersen couldn't refuse. I grinned as I scratched behind his ears, and his tongue flicked out along my wrist, searching for the salt that hid in the creases of my skin. I had to admit that Rat Terriers did sweeten the whole mule-world deal, too. I glanced around the car at the silhouettes of my family that stood out against the dusk. I guess I was a mule person after all.