

A Toast

by Jacob Reeher

4.

Round midnight quiet enough for to hear my watch tick. Three hundred make five minutes. Twelve times over make an hour. The moonlight tune my eyes, the room go blue like nighttime the movies. Five hooks the door, seven empties the dresser, four big two little cracks the ceiling, eight cigarettes the pack my nightstand. I sit up and smoke one minus a minute for to conk out. The lighter torches my night vision and smoke spins my head, but come three hundred more ticks I'm wide awake again. When I can't sleep, I hate it. My kid self lay up all night, times, stared bedroom corners' pitch black shadows, saw things weren't there. Raked a man's yard and bought a nightlight. Then for the reflection couldn't see out the window. Felt watched. So opened it, but were plenty shadows outside too, the grass, the woods further. So raked another yard and bought a flashlight, pointed it shadows whole nights, till neighbors complained and my parents took the light away. Dark stopped scaring me, but from habit I never sleep easy. Last six or seven years liquor help. Why I can't sleep tonight. Ain't drank since day before yesterday. Plenty nights I fall asleep still hung over. But dead sober, like tonight, hardly any use to crawl between sheets. Ain't on no wagon. Drunk myself broke. Happens regular, every couple months. Night at the bar swings into the next, the next, picks up steam. All a sudden pay day's next week and ain't got dough enough for a pint malt liquor. So I can't sleep, and I hate it. My watch ticks still. Open my window for the bugs to drown it out. Air's warm and wet from rain hours passed. For the moon the yard's lit clear, so the woods' shadows is darker. Dark stopped scaring me, but still I watch it careful. All a sudden, quiet as nothing, goddamn horse bound out the woods into the moonlight. Trot the middle the yard and look back the shadows it come from, like expect something after it. Skit around my birch tree and whinny, settle, take to the grass. Pale blue as a ghost and saddled, but no rider. Slip out my window. Got a door, but won't take eyes off this horse. I whistle and he look up. Watch me, sniff my outstretched hand, then back to munch grass glistening cool for dew. Saddle ain't bad. Leather's clean, worked western-style with curvy bramble patterns like on a bandit's bandanna. Horn's curved tusk-like. Brass buttons everywhere. No expert, me, but I bet this saddle for to ride joyful, not for to rustle. The stirrups hang low. The rider ain't there, he tall. "Where's your man, Caballo?" I say. Give me a hoot, to name animals their Spanish words. Caballo ain't answer. I pat him the ass and he flick his tail like for to shoo a fly but ain't stop munching my lawn. Over by them woods Caballo come from, I look the dark. No sign nobody. Maybes are three. First is Caballo's man saddled him up, opened the gate and went to bed. Second, Caballo saddled himself and elab-

orated an escape. Man fell off and somewhere in the woods is hurt the third. First two being unlikely, I guess to round up a search party of me, myself, and I. Sleep ain't mine tonight anyways. Tie Caballo up my birch and go inside. Use the door this time. Put on jeans off the floor and boots and a flannel for the bugs. Find a flashlight the junk drawer and I'm as ready I'll ever be. Now besides I ain't no special tracker, to traipse in dark woods with a horse in tow be tougher than without. But I find this guy, and find him hurt, to get him safe be simpler with a horse than without. So I untie Caballo and lead him back way he come. Dark stopped scaring me long time ago.

3.

Thought I was getting away with something. Late-night watering hole, crowd, money every- where. Somebody threw two dollars' tip down next to me. Sat there five minutes. Bartender ain't looked at it even, seemed. So I slid it off the bar like a hand Texas Hold 'Em and with it bought beer nine. Worked so sweet, when nine was dry I waited for another blessing. Soon enough saw Lincoln eyeing me, and palmed him too. Abe bought me couple fingers rail. Ain't exactly remember happened next. Can guess some eagle eye across the room ratted. Maybe lost my wits in the sauce, chanced too long a stretch. Course luck just run out some- times. Anyway, was some shouting and I pin- balled fist to fist out the door. Came to crossing the bridge out of town. Only bridge around but I needed a minute or two for to orient. Lit a cigarette and watched the water below. For clouds, river was pure black, but high and fast enough to hear rush against the stone. "Don't do it," someone said. I turned round. Truck idled on the bridge. Lady inside, her hair under a cap, looked me from behind pair glasses. A collie sat the pas- senger seat, tongue hanging out its head. "Do what?" I said. "Jump," said the lady. I squinted, closed an eye. Her face wrinkled, like from smoking decades. Knew her from some- wheres. Rather knew she knew me from some- wheres, as she ain't looked concerned or scared. Eyed me like a mom, and if I jumped I'd get it. Made me want to lock eyes and fall over back- wards. "What's a matter?" I said. "Scared of the dark?" She sipped from a mason jar. Jerked her thumb to the truckbed. "Get in," she said. "I'll take you home." Tossed my cigarette the river and crawled over the sorry wall kept sidewalk from road. All a sudden was flat on the pavement, wind knocked out. Collie whimpered down from the window "I'm all right, Perro," I said. "Get up and get in," Lady said. "Car com- ing." I hauled up and rolled into the truckbed. Kneeled behind the cab with my arms on the roof. Lady pulled out of town, turned the way my house like she knew. I stared the dark beyond the headlights, prayed for to hit it like a brick wall.

5.

Find Caballo's trail no trouble for mud, but he ain't easy leading. Woods is dark, gets him skittish. Every root our way I got to teeth the flashlight and pull him, both hands. Fall my ass for the slickery mud. This rate, won't find Ca- ballo's man till he's dead thirsty, starved out in the dark. I stop, light a cigarette, pat Caballo the neck.

"Only ways I know get a horse to move" I tell him, "is carrot or stick. Well, ain't got no carrot. Sticks plenty around, but ain't about beat no horse's ass out in no dark woods ain't nobody know I'm in. Get my nuts busted or my face kicked in, wind up a shape like your man." Worse, I mumble on, worse shape for no- body to look for me. Might could be missed round lunch o'clock Monday. Quintin at the plant pop open his bag potato chips, ain't hear me beg for none, say who's seen Greer. Vick say who cares. Sam say thought work gone quicker today. Wednesday Swanson fire me and maggots take up the sockets my eyes and Mitch down the pub ain't yet thought to ring. Ain't no town favorite, me, nor mystery why. I skimp on tips, stink up bathrooms, borrow money I ain't pay back, work slow, drink fast, without even a pretty face to half make up for it. But life ain't never give me much besides shit. Shit family, shit grades, shit jobs for shit pay. So I ain't give much back. Used to hear could do anything I want, be anything I want, I set my mind to it. Set my mind to drink, be drunk, I guess. Caballo lead easier, I talk. He like my voice the dark. By now we retraced his hoof prints half mile, three quarter. Looking back hardly see my porch light through the trees. Ahead the woods spread couple mile. Shine my light straight the dark and squint, pull Caballo along. All another sudden, so I'm damned I ain't seen it sooner, a boot, old cowboy kind, upright the grass, like is stood in by a ghost ain't had but one leg. Wave my hand over the boot make sure weren't none, then pick it up, show Caballo. "Know this boot?" I say. Caballo snort. "Ought to rib you the heel," I say, "see it feel familiar." Caballo snort. I pat Caballo so he know I kid. Like the sad- dle, boot is good polished leather, ain't stood there long. Must come from Caballo's man. Pic- ture he fell, dragged a ways till his foot slipped out the boot, and the boot fell out the stirrup later on. Strange it landed upright, but strange things ain't so uncommon really. What's impor- tant, we're on the trail. I grab Caballo's reigns for to lead him on. Ain't know what to do with the boot, so set it back the ground, upright like was found. After a while look back, the dark already swallowed it.

2.

Knew I could beat the son bitch, so called double nothing and stuck my last quarters the table. While he racked and broke I got another shot and beer. Mitch brought them with my check. "Not closing out," I said "Damned if you ain't," Mitch said. Pointed Snodgrass. "Before he takes all your money." I knocked back the shot, took my beer, left the check the table. He ain't knowed I ain't walked in with dough enough to pay my tab. What the hustling was for. "I got Snot-grass right where I want him," I said. "You just ready me up a victory round." Back the table Snodgrass chalked like a big man, grabbed the cue by the ass and shoved it in the chalk his other hand. Made himself a fool, like he always done. Back in school he'd set over- unders on himself at thirty, forty points, then ride the bench whole games. And welch, course. Jersey'd still get him laid. He blew chalk off his tip, said was solids. Table spread favored me. Tapped nine the side pocket, sailed down the rail to nudge thir- teen the corner. Then, without sighting, ham- mered a shot across the table, sank twelve the opposite corner. Missed the next shot, but

weren't worried. Was drunk enough for to play on feel, instinct. Game was mine. Snodgrass ain't had no shot, tried for to bank, scratched. Set me up for to knock down ten and fourteen. Left just the eleven, the eight. I finished my beer and called a smoke break. "You serious?" Snodgrass said. I rattled my pack I walked away, said, "As death." Outside rain wet the streets jet black. From a bench a lady, cap on her hair, stared down the storm and scratched a collie. I sat down next her and lit up. Collie came up for to sniff me. I scratched his ears, shook his head a bit. "Hello, Perro," I said. "Speak Spanish?" Lady said. She took my lighter and torched another smoke. "Naw," I said. "There some Mexicans work down the plant, but they speak English good enough." I shoved Perro out my crotch and he flopped down next his lady's feet. She hanged down her hand for to bat his tail. "The meat plant," she said. "Knew I knew you from somewhere." I looked her face, wrinkled from smoking decades. All a sudden I remembered it behind glasses, big and round, looking at me from out a crowd of fresh pale faces. "You was on that field trip," I said. "You teach." "I'm a teacher's aide," she said. "You kill cows." "I am a cow killer," I said. "Known far and wide, every barn and pasture. Feared by calves, bulls, heifers world over." "I can smell it on you," she said. "The death." I leaned at her and sniffed good. "On you," I said, "I smell dipshit kids." "Don't like kids?" she said. "I ain't feel nothing about no kids," I said. "Except they ain't should be around me. That one blacked out?" Lady ain't said nothing first. Lifted her leg was crossed over the other, stuck her boot out for the rain to fall on. Wet spot the leather goes dark, clean. "She never saw nothing die," she said. "Better she ever was, guess," I said. But I ain't really wanted to discuss it, so I stubbed out my cigarette. Was near smoked any- way. Said I had a game of pool to clinch, but be happy to buy her a drink she wanted to join me for to celebrate victory. Inside Snodgrass chalked again like it helped him. And damned if I didn't drop the eleven and the eight shooting from the hip, count my win- nings in shots and beer. How I wish, anyway. Could be Snodgrass welched like usual. Could be I lost, welched myself, skipped my tab again. All I remember's I shot at eleven, then woke up the morning home, still drunk and with not a dollar.

6.

Goes darker and darker. My flashlight's dying. Were out the woods the moon be enough to see. Under the trees I need my torch. Dark ain't scare me no more ain't mean it can't kill me. Trip on a rock, Caballo step my head. Dead gone dead. Course ain't never been dead, but I bet against a light the end a tunnel. Soon flashlight's useless yellow and dim. Can't follow Caballo's trail no further. I squat, back against a tree, poke inside my pack for a smoke. Empty. Curse the luck got me waiting for dawn miles from home with not a cigarette. Ca- ballo snort like get up, let's go. "No point, Caballo," I say. "Can't see." A stomp, another snort, like he ain't give a shit. He whinny, start to walk who know where.

Figure the dark got him skittish, so I tie him up and grope the area for twigs and sticks. Bout everything wet, but with my empty pack for to kin- dle I get a fire lit. Caballo ain't calm down none. So I feed the fire to roar. Bigger it gets, the easier I find sticks, and can be damp some. Soon the woods dancing in firelight far I see. And Caballo still stomp and whinny, pull the rope. Damned if I know his problem, I look off where he try to get. Edge the firelight's a shadow ain't seen before. Man shaped, but look taller till I see the feet ain't touch the ground. When my kid self saw things weren't there, sometimes tried for to stare them away. Other times tried for to blink gone what weren't there. To stare, to blink ain't worked never. Was always the light. So when first I stare down this shadow and next blink myself dizzy, no use, I pile sticks the fire till it burn higher than me. Like to burn down the forest for to see this thing ain't there.

1.

Hung up my bolt hammer, unzipped my coverall. Quintin strung up the cow by her haunches, Vick slit her throat. Blood poured like it does, over the white concrete floor and down the drain. Quintin and Vick unzipped coveralls, peeled off gloves. Bled out, cow swung down line on the crane. "Lunch o'clock," I said. "No shit," Vick said. "That what that bell means?" Never could say nothing but Vick or Quintin had some to say about it. Was almost stripped to street clothes when the door from the shop opened. Shuffled in Swanson himself, and a dozen zit-faced kids and a couple bag-eyed teachers behind. Me and Vick and Quintin stood like dummies. Hoped maybe they ain't seen us, moved on, and us free for lunch. No such luck. Swanson waved at us, held up a finger like for to tell a dog to stay. "This is the killing floor," he told the kids they settled. Explained I knock out cows for Quintin to hang and Vick to bleed. Kids stared him, eyes horror-swoll like they rather anyplace else be. Rathered they that, me. Ain't none them looked sixteen, their braces, pimples, some their baby fat, some their skinny legs. A ribbon the hair one girl, even, like dressed her up her mom. She ain't should been there. None these babies ain't should been. Were I bet still scared the dark, all them. Swanson quit his talk and turned us like take it from here. We stared back, played more dumb. "Okay," Swanson said. "Any questions?" Hands went up. Brunette asked we still eat meat. Jock type asked how many cows we kill a day. Boy in black asked how long worked here, asked we like our jobs. Never heard no dumber questions, me. The meat we got the store weren't the same these animals. We ain't counted the cows we kill, the years we spent to kill them. And ain't made no difference to like a job, not like a job. Job just thing you work. Work just thing passed time the night come. Them kids ain't knowed the day just time for to wait the dark come. They ain't knowed a thing about nothing, and they was better for it. I ain't remembered a long time life once been more than death, weren't so always. The questions dried up, we all of us stood moment silence. Like for to remember some- thing. Teacher coughed, looked Swanson. Swanson coughed, looked me and Vick and Quintin. Three us played bit more dumb, Swanson pointed the next cow. Vick sighed and zipped up his coverall, pulled his gloves back on. Quintin too. Ain't felt like to demonstrate. Ain't wanted to show no death to no kids. I coughed my own cough, looked for backup. One four-eyed teacher, woman a cap her head, face wrinkled like from

smoking decades, mouthed sorry. The rest them just looked me. So I zipped my coverall and grabbed my bolt hammer. Opened the gate for next cow to waddle in, climbed up the pen for to stand over her head. Lifted the bolt hammer and felt breath come out the room. Looked the girl a ribbon her hair. "She ain't feel nothing," I promised, and swung the bolt hammer for to nail her between the eyes. Every one her twelve-hundred pound dropped like that. Boys laughed and fought for to see better. Most the girls squealed. Ribbon girl turned green as grass. Quintin hooked the cow, strung her up. He done so, I climbed down and slipped Vick's knife out his hand. Weren't to let nobody else show them kids something was mine. "Mind the smell," I said, and cut her throat. Blood poured out like it does. Whole class, teachers too, pinched noses. Girl the ribbon her hair fainted. The lady the glasses and cap slapped her gentle for to wake her up, and the cow swung down line. Quintin and Vick peeled gear, but I ran off the killing floor still my work clothes, plus the knife my hand. Ain't could wipe my face the filthy coverall sleeve. Not now that girl a ribbon her hair know a thing about nothing, I wanted get good hard drunk.

7.

Under his stocking foot's a bottle whiskey, half-drunk. I picture it dropped time his neck broke. Held on to the end. I relate. Caballo nudges him, swings him back and forth, then munches grass under his feet. Back behind the fire snaps and twists. His pants is wet. Ain't know his face. No surprise. Ain't know many faces I ain't see at the plant, the bar. Since been nowhere, only seen faces come my way. And this man, his face ain't come my way, sure. White man, white hair, dressed a suit like for to give his daughter away. Tie catching the breeze. Ring on his finger. Was kind enough for to cap the bottle before he kicked Caballo out under him. I pick it up, swig. Ain't nothing like it, liquor, except sex. It's good, it's great, it's bad, it's good, ain't had it a while, it ain't matter. Feel it my arms first, warm down my veins. Swig again, let my knees buckle. Look up to the dead man. Ask him the differ- ence between him, me. He ain't answer. Ain't expect him to. Ques- tion still stands. I ain't had much, never. Ain't expect to have much never. Lived thirty years this earth, hardly memories enough for to count my fingers and toes. Few fights, some won, some lost. Few lays, some good, some bad. Few arrests, some bullshit, some fair enough. Thirty, forty years more to live and I ain't got barely hope for another good lay, much less a friend, good work. Somebody love me. But damned if ever I thought much about a stunt like this man pull. Cross my mind, times, sure, but always go its way. Swig again to him, bra- vest man I ain't never knowed. On my back now. The leaves above brushed by wind, tickled by firelight. Eyes closed, even, still ain't total dark. Caballo munches still. Hear the grass rip, feel it almost. Swig the last, toss the bottle. Fall asleep.

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