

## A LONELY COAST

YOU EVER SEE A HOUSE BURNING UP IN THE NIGHT, WAY to hell and gone out there on the plains? Nothing but blackness and your headlights cutting a little wedge into it, could be the middle of the ocean for all you can see. And in that big dark a crown of flame the size of your thumbnail trembles. You'll drive for an hour seeing it until it burns out or you do, until you pull off the road to close your eyes or look up at sky punched with bullet holes. And you might think about the people in the burning house, see them trying for the stairs, but mostly you don't give a damn. They are too far away, like everything else.

The year I lived in that junk trailer in the Crazy Woman Creek drainage I thought Josanna Skiles was like that, the house on fire in the night that you could only watch. The reason for it seemed to be the strung-out, buzzed country and the little running grass fires of the heart, the kind that usually die out on their own but in some people soar into uncontrollable conflagration.

I was having my own troubles then, a problem with Riley, my old boy, something that couldn't get fixed. There was a feeling of coming heat and whirlwind. I didn't have a grip on much.

The house trailer I rented was old. It was more of a camper you'd tow behind a car, so small you couldn't cuss the cat without getting fur in your mouth. When the wind blew I'd hear parts coming off it and banging along the ground. I rented it from Oakal Roy. He said he'd been in the big time back in the 1950s, been a stunt man out in Hollywood. He was drinking himself down. A rack-sided dog hung around—I guess it was his—and once I drove in late at night and saw it crouched and gnawing at a long, bloody cow bone. He needed to shoot that dog.

I had a junior college certificate in craft supply merchandising—silk flowers, macramé, jewelry findings, beads, quills, fabric paints, that stuff. Like a magpie I was attracted to small bright objects. But I'd married Riley the day after graduation and never worked at the beads and buttons. Never would, because there weren't any craft shops in a radius of 300 miles and I wasn't going to leave Wyoming. You don't leave until you have to. So two nights a week I waitressed at the Wig-Wag Lodge, weekends tended bar at the Gold Buckle, and the other nights I sat in the trailer doing crossword puzzles and trying to sleep, waking always at the same hour the alarm went off at the ranch, the time when Riley would be rolling out and reaching for his shirt, and in the window the hard little dot of Venus rising and below it the thin morning.

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Josanna Skiles cooked at the Wig-Wag. She'd had the job for seven or eight months. Most people quit after a few weeks. You had to learn how to make sushi and some kind of sticky rice. The owner was Jimmy Shimazo. Fifty years ago in World War II he was a kid in the internment camp at Heart Mountain, and he said that when his family went back to California with its cars and money and the bright coast, he missed Wyoming, its hardness imprinted on him. He came back years later with enough money to buy the Wig-Wag, maybe suffering some perverse need for animosity which he did find here. None of the others came back and who can blame them? All his guests were Japanese tourists who wandered through the lodge looking at the old saddles and cow skulls, in the gift shop buying little six-guns and plastic chaps for their kids, braided horsehair key rings made at the state pen. Jimmy was a tough one to work for, short-fused, but careful to pick women to yell at after the maintenance man, an ex-ranch hand from Spotted Horse, beat the piss out of him with a fence post and left him half dead next to the dumpster. Josanna never had a run-in with him until the end, but she was good at cooking that Jap food and out here everybody knows to leave the cook alone.

She had two women friends, Palma Gratt and Ruth Wolfe, both of them burning at a slower rate than Josanna, but in their own desperate ways also disintegrating into drifts of ash. Friday night was what they called girls' night out, margaritas and buffalo wings at the Gold Buckle while they read through the personal ads in the paper. Then they went to the Stockman for ribs. Sometimes Palma brought her kid along. The kid would sit in the corner and tear up paper napkins. After the praline cake and coffee they saw the movie at the Silver Wing, and they might come back to the Buckle or not. But Saturday night was their big night when they got into tight jeans and what Josanna called dead nigger shirts, met at the Rawhide or Bud's or Double Shot or Gold Buckle and acted wild.

They thought they were living then, drank, smoked, shouted to friends, and they didn't so much dance as straddle a man's thigh and lean in. Palma once stripped off her blouse to bare tits, Josanna swung at some drunk who'd said the wrong thing and she got slugged back, cussing pure blue through a split lip, kicking at the cowboy held tight by five or six of his delighted friends who urged her on. Nothing was too bold, nothing not worth the risk, they'd be sieving the men at the bar and cutting out the best three head, doing whatever drugs were going in the parking lot, maybe climb on some guy's lap in the cab of his truck. If Josanna was still around at two in the a.m. she looked like what she was, a woman coming into middle age, lipstick gnawed off, plain face and thickening flesh, yawning, departing into the fresh night alone and sorry. When Elk came along she had somebody to go home with, and I thought that was the point.

Every month or so she went up to the Skiles ranch south of Sundance with a long-shot view of Black Buttes. She had a boy there, sixteen, seventeen years old, in and out of the detention home. Her folks had come through rocky times. She told me that their herd had carried the gene for dwarfism since her grandparents' day, back in the forties. They'd been trying to clean the snorters out for two generations, little by little. They should have sold every one of them for beef, started over, but somehow couldn't do it. The gene had showed up while her grandmother was running the ranch, the grandfather off to World War II with the Powder River Cavalry, the famous 115th. The government took their horses away and gave them trucks, sent those good horsemen to desks and motor pools. He came back home to stumpy-leg calves and did his best. In 1960 he drowned in the Belle Fourche River, not easy to do, but, Josanna said, her people had always taken the gritty way.

She brought me a jar of honey from their hives. Every ranch keeps bees. Me and Riley, we had twenty hives and I told her one time I missed the honey.

"Here," she said. "Not much but it's something. I go up there," she said. "That damn kind a life. Clayton wants a get out—he's talkin about goin down to Texas but I don't know. They need him. They'd take it wrong, I suppose, give me the blame if he went. Hell, he's pretty much growed up, let him do what he wants. He's headed for trouble anyway. Pain-in-the-ass kid."

Riley and me never had any kids, I don't know why. Neither one of us would go to a doctor and find out. We didn't talk about it. I thought it was probably something to do with the abortion I'd had before I knew him. They say it can mess you up. He didn't know about that and I suppose he had his own ideas.

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Riley couldn't see blame in what he'd done. He said, "Look, I seen my chance and I taken it," reverting to Sweetwater home talk, where he comes from, and that was his last word on the subject.

Who knew better than me that he had a love spot on his body? She might have touched it. If she did he couldn't help it. Riley is just slat and bone, he has a thin, mean face, one of those mouths like a paper cut and he doesn't say much. But you touch that love spot, you get him turned on, you lie down with him, his mouth would get real swollen, I'd just come apart with those thick, wet kisses and how big he got. Out of his clothes, horse and dog and oil and dirt, out of his clothes his true scent lay on his skin, something dry like the pith of a cottonwood twig when you break it at the joint disclosing the roan star at the center. Anyway, there's something wrong with everybody and it's up to you to know what you can handle.

In nine years married we had only one vacation, to Oregon where my brother lived. We went out on a rocky point and watched the rollers come in. It was foggy and cold, there wasn't anybody there but us watching the rollers. It was dusk and the watery curls held light as though it was inside them. Up the lonely coast a stuttering blink warned ships away. I said to Riley that was what we needed in Wyoming—lighthouses. He said no, what we needed was a wall around the state and turrets with machine guns in them.

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Once Josanna gave me a ride in her brother's truck—he was down for a few days to pick up pump parts and some pipe—and it was sure enough a down-home truck, pair of chaps hanging over the seat back, chain, beat-up hat on the floor, a filthy Carhartt jacket, seven or eight torn-up gloves, dog hairs and dust, empty beer cans, .30-.06 in the rear window rack and on the seat between us in a snarl of wire, rope, and old mail unopened, a .44 Ruger Blackhawk half out of the holster. Let me tell you that truck made me homesick. I said something about her brother had enough firepower, didn't he, and she laughed and said the Blackhawk was hers, she kept it in the glove compartment of her own truck but it was in the shop again that day with the ongoing compression problem they couldn't seem to fix; it was on the seat because she didn't want to forget it when her brother went back.

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Long hair, frizzled and hanging down, was the fashion, and in the tangled cascades women's faces seemed narrow and vulnerable. Palma's hair was neon orange. Her brows were plucked and arched, the eyes set wide, the skin below dark and hurt-looking. Her daughter lived with her, a mournful kid ten or eleven years old with a sad mug and straight brown hair, the way Palma's would be if she didn't fix it up. The kid was always tearing at something.

The other one, Ruth, had the shadow of a mustache, and in summer heavy stubble showed under her arms. She paid forty-five dollars twice a month to have her legs waxed. She had a huge laugh, like a man's.

Josanna was muscular like most country women, tried to hide it under fuss-ruffle clothes with keyhole necklines. Her hair was strawberry roan, coarse and thick and full of electricity. She had a somewhat rank odor, a family odor because the brother had it too, musky and a little sour, and that truck of his smelled the same way. With Josanna it was faint and you might mistake it for strange Jap spices, but the aroma that came off the brother was strong enough to flatten a horse. He was an old bachelor. They called him Woody because, said Josanna, he'd come strutting out into the kitchen raw naked when he was four or five years old showing a baby hard-on and their old man had laughed until he choked and called him Woody and the name persisted forevermore and brought him local fame. You just couldn't help but look once you heard that, and he'd smile.

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All three women had been married, rough marriages full of fighting and black eyes and sobbing imprecations, all of them knew the trouble that came with drinking men and hair-trigger tempers. Wyos are touchers, hot-blooded and quick, and physically yearning. Maybe it's because they spend so much time handling livestock, but people here are always handshaking, patting, smoothing, caressing, enfolding. This instinct extends to anger, the lightning backhand slap, the hip-shot to throw you off balance, the elbow, a jerk and wrench, the swat, and then the serious stuff that's meant to kill and sometimes does. The story about Josanna was that when she broke up with her ex-husband she shot at him, creased his shoulder before he jumped her and took the gun away. You couldn't push her around. It gave her a dangerous allure that attracted some men, the latest, Elk Nelson, whom she'd found in the newspaper. When they set up together he collected all the cartridges in the house and hid them at his mother's place in Wyodak, as if Josanna couldn't buy more. But that old bold Josanna got buried somewhere when Elk came around.

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"Listen, if it's got four wheels or a dick you're goin a have trouble with it, guaranteed," said Palma at one of their Friday-night good times. They were reading the newspaper lonely hearts ads out loud. If you don't live here you can't think how lonesome it gets. We need those ads. That doesn't mean we can't laugh at them.

"How about this one: 'Six-three, two hundred pounds, thirty-seven, blue eyes, plays drums and loves Christian music.' Can't you just hear it, 'The Old Rugged Cross' on bongos?"

"Here's a better one: 'Cuddly cowboy, six-four, one hundred and eighty, N/S, not God's gift to women, likes holding hands, firefighting, practicing on my tuba.' I guess that could mean noisy, skinny, ugly, plays with matches. Must be cuddly as a pile a sticks."

"What a you think 'not God's gift to women' means?"

"Pecker the size of a peanut."

Josanna'd already put an inky circle around Good-looking, athletic build Teddy Bear, brown-eyed, black mustache, likes dancing, good times, outdoors, walking under the stars. Lives life to its fullest. It turned out to be Elk Nelson and he was one step this side of restless drifter, had worked oil rigs, construction, coal mines, loaded trucks. He was handsome, mouthy, flashed a quick smile. I thought he was a bad old boy from his scuffed boots to his greasy ponytail. The first thing he did was put his .30-.30 in the cab rack of Josanna's truck and she didn't say a word. He had pale brown eyes the color of graham crackers, one of those big mustaches like a pair of blackbird wings. Hard to say how old he was; older than Josanna, forty-five, forty-six maybe. His arms were all wildlife, blurry tattoos of spiders, snarling wolves, scorpions, rattlesnakes. To me he looked like he'd tried every dirty thing three times. Josanna was helpless crazy for him from the first time they got together and crazy jealous. And didn't he like that? It seemed to be the way he measured how she felt about him and he put it to the test. When you are bone tired of being alone, when all you want is someone to pull you close and say it's all right, all right now, and you get one like Elk Nelson you've got to see you've licked the bottom out of the dish.

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I tended bar on the weekends at the Gold Buckle and watched the fire take hold of her. She would smile at what he said, listen and lean, light his damn cigarette, examine his hands for cuts—he had a couple of weeks’ work fencing at the 5 Bar. She’d touch his face, smooth a wrinkle in his shirt and he’d say, quit off pawin me. They sat for hours at the Buckle seesawing over whether or not he’d made a pass at some woman, until he got fed up enough to walk out. He seemed to be goading her, seeing how far he could shove before she hit the wall. I wondered when she’d get the message that she wasn’t worth shit to him.

August was hot and drouthy, a hell of grasshoppers and dried-up creeks. They said this part of the state was a disaster area. I heard that said before any grasshoppers came. The Saturday night was close, air as thick as in a closet with the winter coats. It was rodeo night and that brings them in. The bar filled up early, starting with ranch hands around three in the afternoon still in their sweaty shirts, red faces mottled with heat and dirt, crowding out most of the wrinkle-hour boys, the old-timers who started their drinking in the morning. Palma was there a little after five, alone, fresh and high-colored, wearing a cinnamon red satin blouse that shined with every move she made. Her arms were loaded with silver bracelets, one metal ring on another clinking and shifting. By five-thirty the bar was packed and hot, bodies touching, some fools trying to dance—country girls playing their only card, grinding against the boys—people squeezed eight to a booth meant for four, six deep at the bar, men hat to hat. There were three of us working, me and Zeeks and Justin, and as fast as we went we couldn’t keep up. They were pouring the drinks down. Everybody was shouting. Outside the sky was green-black and trucks driving down the street had their headlights on, dimmed by constant lightning flashes. The electricity went off for about fifteen seconds, the bar black as a cave, the jukebox dying worrr, and a huge, amorous, drunken and delighted moan coming up from the crowd that changed to cussing when the light flickered back on.

Elk Nelson came in, black shirt and silver belly hat. He leaned over the bar, hooked his finger in the waistband of my jeans and yanked me to him.

“Josanna in yet?”

I pulled back, shook my head.

“Good. Let’s get in the corner then and hump.”

I got him a beer.

Ash Weeter stood next to Elk. Weeter was a local rancher who wouldn’t let his wife set foot in a bar, I don’t know why. The jokers said he was probably worried she’d get killed in a poolroom fight. He was talking about a horse sale coming up in Thermopolis. Well, he didn’t own a ranch, he managed one for some rich people in Pennsylvania, and I heard it that half the cows he ran on their grass were his. What they didn’t know didn’t hurt them.

“Have another beer, Ash,” Elk said in a good-buddy voice.

“Nah, I’m goin home, take a shit and go to bed.” No expression on that big shiny face. He didn’t like Elk.

Palma’s voice cut through a lull, Elk looked up, saw her at the end of the bar, beckoning.

“See you,” said Ash Weeter to no one, pulling his hat down and ducking out.

Elk held his cigarette high above his head as he got through the crowd. I cracked a fresh Coors, brought it down to him, heard him say something about Casper.

That was the thing, they'd start out at the Buckle then drive down to Casper, five or six of them, a hundred and thirty miles, sit in some other bar probably not much different than the Buckle, drink until they were wrecked, then hit a motel. Elk told it on Josanna that she got so warped out one time she pissed the motel bed and he'd had to drag her into the shower and turn it on cold, throw the sheets in on top of her. Living life to its fullest. He'd tell that like it was the best story in the world and every time he did it she'd put her head down, wait it out with a tight little smile. I thought of my last night back on the ranch with Riley, the silence oppressive and smothering, the clock ticking like blows of an axe, the maddening trickle of water into the stained bathtub from the leaky faucet. He wouldn't fix it, just wouldn't. Couldn't fix the other thing and made no effort in that direction. I suppose he thought I'd just hang and rattle.

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Palma leaned against Elk, slid back and forth slowly as if she was scratching her back on his shirt buttons. "Don't know. Wait for Josanna and see what she wants a do."

"Josanna will want a go down to Casper. That's it, she will because that's what I want a do." He said something else I didn't hear.

Palma shrugged, shifted out into the dancers with him. He was a foot taller than she, his cigarette crackling in her hair when he pulled her close. She whipped her hair back, slammed her pelvis into him and he almost swallowed the butt.

There was a terrific blast of light and thunder and the lights went off again and there was the head-hollowing smell of ozone. A sheet of rain struck the street followed by the deafening roar of hailstones. The lights surged on but weak and yellow. It was impossible to hear anything over the battering hail.

A kind of joyous hysteria moved into the room, everything flying before the wind, vehicles outside getting dented to hell, the crowd sweaty and the smells of aftershave, manure, clothes dried on the line, your money's worth of perfume, smoke, booze; the music subdued by the shout and babble though the bass hammer could be felt through the soles of the feet, shooting up the channels of legs to the body fork, center of everything. It is that kind of Saturday night that torches your life for a few hours, makes it seem something is happening.

There were times when I thought the Buckle was the best place in the world, but it could shift on you and then the whole dump seemed a mess of twist-face losers, the women with eyebrows like crowbars, the men covered with bristly red hair, knuckles the size of new potatoes, showing the gene pool was small and the rivulets that once fed it had dried up. I think sometimes it hit Josanna that way too because one night she sat quiet and slumped at the bar watching the door, watching for Elk, and he didn't come in. He'd been there, though, picked up some tourist girl in white shorts, couldn't have been more than twenty. It wouldn't do any good to tell her.

"This's a miserable place," she said. "My god it's miserable."

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The door opened and four or five of the arena men came in, big mustaches, slickers and hats running water, boots muddy, squeezing through the dancers, in for a few quick ones before the rodeo. The atmosphere was hot and wet. Everybody was dressed up. I could see Elk Nelson down the bar, leaning against Palma, one arm over her satin shoulder, big fingers grazing her right breast, fingernail scratching the erect nipple.

They were still playing their game when the door jerked open again, the wind popping it against the wall, and Josanna came through, shaking her head, streaming wet, the artful hair plastered flat. Her peach-colored shirt clung to her, transparent in places, like burned skin where it bunched and the color doubled. Her eyes were red, her mouth thin and sneering.

“Give me a whiskey, celebrate a real goddamn lousy day.”

Justin poured it high, slid the glass carefully to her.

“Got a wee bit wet,” he said.

“Look at this.” She held out her left hand, pulled up the sopping sleeve. Her arm and hand were dotted with red bruises. “Hail,” she said. “I spun my truck in front a Cappy’s and nicked a parking meter, busted the hood latch. Run two blocks here. But that’s not hardly the problem. I got fired, Jimmy Shimazo fired me. Out a the clear blue sky. Don’t anybody get in my way tonight.”

“You bet,” said Justin, pressing against me with his thigh. He seemed to want to get something going, but he was going to be disappointed. I don’t know, maybe I’d think the score was even. But it wouldn’t be.

“So I’m goin a have a drink, soon’s the rain stops I’m goin a get me some gone, try Casper is any better. Fuck em all, tell em all a kiss my sweet rosy.” She knocked back the whiskey, slammed the glass down on the bar hard enough to break it.

“See what I mean?” she said. “Everything I touch falls apart.” Elk Nelson came up behind her, slipped his big red hands under her arms, cupped her breasts and squeezed. I wondered if she’d seen him feeling up Palma. I thought she had. I thought he wanted her to see him handling her willing friend.

“Yeah,” he said. “What a you want a do? Casper, right? Go get something a eat, I hope. I’m hungry enough I could eat a rancher’s unwiped ass.”

“You want some buffalo wings?” I said. “Practically the same thing.” We called across the street to Cowboy Teddy for them and inside an hour somebody brought them over. Half the time they were raw. Elk shook his head. He was fondling Josanna, one hand inside her wet shirt, but looking at the crowd behind him in the bar mirror. Palma was still at the end of the bar, watching him. Ruth came up, slapped Josanna on the butt, said she’d heard what Shimazo did, the little prick. Josanna put her arm around Ruth’s waist. Elk eased back, looked at Palma in the mirror, cracked that big yellow smile. There was a lot going on.

“Ruth, babe, I’m tired a this bullshit place. How about go down a Casper and just hang around for a while. I’m just goin a say fuck him, fuck Jimmy Shimazo. I said, hey, look, at least give me a reason. I put too much wasabi on the goddamn fish balls? Shit. He just fired me, I don’t even know why.”

Elk put in his dime’s worth. “Hell, it’s only a shittin job. Get another one.” Like jobs were easy. There weren’t any jobs.

“The latch on my truck hood is busted. I can’t get it to stay shut. If we’re goin a Casper it’s got a be fixed.” Josanna’s truck had a crew cab, plenty of room for all of them. They always went in her truck and she paid for the gas, too.

“Reef it down with a little balin wire.”

At the cash register Justin murmured to me what he’d heard at the back booths—Jimmy Shimazo had fired Josanna because he caught her in the meat cooler snorting a line. He was death on that. For now he was doing the cooking himself. He was talking about getting a real Jap cook in from California.

“That’s all we need around here,” said Justin. They say now the Japs own the whole southwest part of the state, refineries, big smokestacks.

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Something happened then, and in the noise I didn’t see them go, Josanna, Elk, Palma, Ruth and somebody she’d picked up—Barry, romping on his hands with whiskey. Maybe they left before the fireball. There is a big plate glass window at the Buckle onto the street, and outside a wooden ledge wide enough to set beer bottles on. Mr. Thompson, the bar owner, displayed his collection of spurs, coils of rope, worn boots, a couple of saddles, some old woolly chaps so full of moths they looked like a snowstorm in reverse in spring, other junk inside the window. The window was like a stage. Now a terrific, sputtering ball of fire bloomed on the ledge throwing glare on the dusty cowboy gear. It was still raining. You could hear the fireball roaring and a coat of soot in the shape of a cone and peck-speckled with rain was building up on the glass. Justin and a dozen people went out to see what it was. He tried knocking it off the ledge but it was stuck on with its own burning. He ran back in.

“Give me the water pitcher.”

People at the front were all laughing, somebody called, piss on it, Justin. He poured three pitchers of water on the thing before it quit, a blackened lump of something, placed and set afire by persons unknown. There was a sound like a shot and the glass cracked from top to bottom. Justin said later it was a shot, not the heat. It was the heat. I know a shot when I hear one.

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There’s a feeling you get driving down to Casper at night from the north, and not only there, other places where you come through hours of darkness unrelieved by any lights except the crawling wink of some faraway ranch truck. You come down a grade and all at once the shining town lies below you, slung out like all western towns, and with the curved bulk of mountain behind it. The lights trail away to the east in a brief and stubby cluster of yellow that butts hard up against the dark. And if you’ve ever been to the lonely coast you’ve seen how the shore rock drops off into the black water and how the light on the point is final. Beyond are the old rollers coming on for millions of years. It is like that here at night but instead of the rollers it’s wind. But the water was here once. You think about the sea that covered this place hundreds of millions of years ago, the slow evaporation, mud turned to stone. There’s nothing calm in those thoughts. It isn’t finished, it can still tear apart. Nothing is finished. You take your chances.

Maybe that’s how they saw it, gliding down toward the lights, drinking beer and passing a joint, Elk methed out and driving and nobody saying much, just going to Casper. That’s what Palma says. Ruth says different. Ruth says Josanna and Elk had a bad fight all the way down and Palma was in the middle of it. Barry says they were all screwed out of their skulls, he was only drunk.



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We had a time with the calving, Riley and me, that spring. A neighbor rancher's big Saler bulls had got into our pastures and bred some of our heifers. We didn't know it until the calving started although Riley remarked once or twice that some of the heifers had ballooned up really big and we figured twins. We knew when the first one came. The heifer was a good one, too, long-bodied, meaty, trim and with a tremendous amount of muscle, but not double muscled, sleek and feminine, what we wanted in our mother cows, almost torn in half by the biggest calf either one of us had ever seen. It was a monster, a third of the size of its mother.

"That bastard Coldpepper. Look at that calf. It comes from them fuckin giant bulls, the size a tanks. They must a got in last April and you bet he knew it, never said a word. I guess we are goin a find out how many."

The weather was miserable too, spring storms, every kind of precip. We got through the first ten days sleepless, wet and cold, especially Petey Flurry who'd worked for us for nine years, out ahorseback in the freezing rain driving the heifers into the calving yard. Wouldn't you know, he got pneumonia when we needed him the most and they carted him off to the hospital. His wife sent the fifteen-year-old daughter over to help and she was a pretty good hand, ranch raised, around animals all her life, strong but narrow little hands that could work into a straining heifer and grasp the new hooves. We were all dead tired.

Around mid-afternoon I'd left them in the calving barn with a bad heifer, gone up to the house to grab an hour of sleep, but I was too tired, way beyond sleep, wired, and after ten minutes I got up and put the coffeepot on, got some cookie dough from the freezer and in a little while there was steaming coffee and hot almond sandies. I put three cups in a cardboard box, the cookies in an insulated sack, and went back out to the calving barn.

I came in with that box of coffee and cookies, pushed the door open gently. He'd just finished, had just pulled out of her, back up on his feet. She was still lying on a hay bale, skinny kid's legs bent open. I looked at him, the girl sat up. The light wasn't good in there and he was trying to get it back in his pants in a hurry but I saw the blood on him. The heat of the coffee came through the cardboard box and I set it on the old bureau that held the calf pullers and rope and salve and suture material. I stood there while they pulled at their clothes. The girl was sniveling. Sure enough, she was on the road to becoming a sleazy little bitch, but she was only fifteen and it was the first time and her daddy worked for the man who'd done it to her.

He said to her, "Come on, I'm gettin you home," and she said, "No," and they went outside. Didn't say anything to me. He was gone until the next afternoon, came back and said his few words, I said mine and the next day I left. The goddamn heifer had died with a dead calf still inside her.

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Most things you never know what happened or why. Even Palma and Ruth and Barry who were there couldn't say just how it came apart. From what they remembered and what the papers told it seems like they were on that street full of cars and trucks and Elk tried to get around a trailer loaded with calves. There wasn't a vehicle on the highway until they turned onto Poplar, and then there was the backed-up traffic from the light that's east of the exit ramp, traffic all around them and with it a world of trouble. While he was passing the trailer a blue pickup passed him, swerving into the oncoming traffic lane and forcing cars off the road. The blue pickup cut sharp in front of the trailer-load of

calves. That trailer guy stepped on the brake and Elk hit the trailer pretty hard, hard enough, said Palma, to give her a nosebleed. Josanna was yelling about her truck and the baling wire on the hood latch loosened and the hood was lifting up and down a few inches like an alligator with a taste in its mouth. But Elk was raging, he didn't stop, pulled around the calf trailer and went after the blue pickup which had turned onto 20-26 and belted off west. Josanna shouted at Elk who was so mad, Ruth said, blood was almost squirting out of his eyes. Right behind Elk came the calf trailer flicking his lights and leaning on the horn.

Elk caught the blue truck about eight miles out and ran him into the ditch, pulled in front and blocked him. Far back the lights of the calf hauler came on fast and steady. Elk jumped out and charged at the blue pickup. The driver was coked and smoked. His passenger, a thin girl in a pale dress, was out and yelling, throwing stones at Josanna's truck. Elk and the driver fought, slipping on the highway, grunting, and Barry and Ruth and Palma stumbled around trying to get them apart. Then the calf hauler, Ornelas, screamed in from Mars.

Ornelas worked for Natrona Power Monday through Friday, had a second job nightrimes repairing saddles, and on his weekends tried to work the small ranch he'd inherited from his mother. When Elk clipped him he hadn't slept for two nights, had just finished his eighth beer and opened the ninth. It's legal to drink and drive in this state. You are supposed to use some judgment.

The cops said later that Ornelas was the catalyst because when he got out of his truck he was aiming a rifle in the general direction of Elk and the pickup driver, Fount Slinkard, and the first shot put a hole in Slinkard's rear window. Slinkard screamed at his passenger to get him the .22 in his rack but she was crouching by the front tire with her hands clasping her head. Barry shouted, watch out cowboy, ran across the highway. There was no traffic. Slinkard or Slinkard's passenger had the .22 but dropped it. Ornelas fired again and in the noise and fright of the moment no one grasped causes or effects. Someone picked up Slinkard's .22. Barry was drunk and in the ditch on the other side of the road and couldn't see a thing but said he counted at least seven shots. One of the women was screaming. Someone pounded on a horn. The calves were bellowing and surging at the sides of the trailer, one of them hit and the smell of blood in there.

By the time the cops came Ornelas was shot through the throat and though he did not die he wasn't much good for yodeling. Elk was already dead. Josanna was dead, the Blackhawk on the ground beneath her.

You know what I think? Like Riley might say, I think Josanna seen her chance and taken it. Friend, it's easier than you think to yield up to the dark impulse.