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Killing Dun

It was early fall when a pickup wound its way up the hill to my cabin, the grinding of tires on gravel giving me time to straighten the mess isolation allowed my clothes to fall into. The ranch, called Clevel, sat thirty-eight miles from Marfa, and the chance for impromptu banter was limited mainly to the windmill man, who had as much use for words as he did for modernity. The truck heading toward my door was Danny's. He was foreman of a neighboring ranch and lived in a cabin even more remote than mine, and he'd told me once that he had no one in the world to talk to but me.

The thin legs of Danny's blue jeans seemed to set him on stilts. He broke my gaze as we shook then pocketed our hands. "Now you know, David, in scripture, God gave us the responsibility to care for animals, you know, and I'm not judging you, but I've seen that old horse, and he's fallen into such an awful state. I've been up at night trying to think of what to tell you. Okay? And Dr. B. has taken pictures." Dr. B. was a creationist and the owner of the ranch on which Danny lived. "And, well, we think it's time that I bring the tractor in, and we dig a hole together, and you call out the vet to put that old horse down."

Dun, named for his color, was the horse of my late cousin Barry, who'd named me trustee of the ranch and of his three young daughters who lived in Oklahoma with their mother. It was true that Dun looked poor, with his xylophone ribs and bowed cartoon backbone. But, contrary to what Danny went on to say, his hooves were not ingrown, proof he still walked enough to keep them worn. *My* belief was that any creature capable of surviving the West Texas desert deserved to go on living as long as his or her toughness allowed. The problem was Dun's habit of standing just inside our antique sheep fence where two small highways joined to form a T, one of a half-dozen rural intersections in all of Jeff Davis County. With thousands of acres to roam, my cousin's emaciated horse stood precisely where he maximized the number of tourists he saw.

"Cruelty to animals!" people called to complain to the sheriff.

"Take them McDannalds to jail!" they said, seeing our name beside the ranch gate.

The sheriff, understanding what it meant for a horse to be out to pasture and

returned, in a way, to the wild, advised us to stick Dun into some highway-hidden corner of the ranch. I tried. But the inner fences were shot, and the scant money in the ranch accounts needed to go to Barry's daughters, not new fence line. And Dun, seemingly curious about the larger world, migrated back to his spot beside the road.

Danny was staring into the distance, toward the old schoolhouse missing half a roof in the westernmost pasture of the ranch. He said, "Dr. B. and his wife, well, David, now they think you should do the right thing. Okay?"

Dr. B. would have run me off his land had I suggested he change the way he managed his affairs.

"Let me think on it," I said. With the hint of legal trouble in the air, and my role as trustee to protect Barry's daughters from such things, I decided to bring Dun into the barn.

The front pasture was a riddle of sacaton, scrub, and occluded views, a landscape disfigured by overgrazing. Armed with a harness and a bag of feed, I headed out on foot a mile from the house and found Dun's prints and dung in the dust. But he wasn't standing beside the road. I called out and whistled from the hill near the metal trough where I could see by his tracks that he'd been coming to drink. In that pasture were memories from childhood, of my father driving my brothers and me out from Houston to hunt, and of the first quail I shot, warm with regret in the pocket of my coat.

For four days I searched for that old horse. I found him only because he rose into view by climbing a hill. The creature Danny wanted me to feel pity for covered his terrain like a deer.

I checked the horizon for the daylight left and approached him, my experience with horses as sparse as Dun's recent interaction with people. On his muzzle was a stripe no less bright and white than if he'd just come into the world.

"Hey, old man."

We'd been seeing each other for years—when I hiked carrying apples and carrots on the chance of finding him clopping through the backcountry, gifts he never accepted, I, the city boy, now running the ranch for the rural side of the family, and, he, the horse that had known the weight of Barry's body and the vibration of his laugh. My nostalgia for old symbols did not mean Dun had any use for companionship; when I reached out to touch him, he swung his head away.

A feed bag, shaken, was an argument stronger than he was ready for. He

nickered, and I dug into the oats and held them out, and he ate my palm clean, then eyed the ground for fallen food.

"Come on, old man, we're going into the barn." I raised the harness, and he hop-stepped, becoming a much younger horse. "I know you've been out here on your own, and I know you don't want any business with this rig; it's been a long time. Take another handful of oats and think about it." When he dodged the harness again, I set the open feed bag on the ground. As he ate, I ran the rope around his neck without taking it near his eyes and clipped the loop closed.

The barn was a mile off, darkness near, and the horse seemed to move slower than the speed at which we aged. But the lead was merely a gesture; he was happy to have a destination, and I happy to share one. I kicked rocks out of the cattle trail I led him down to make his walking easy. And I wondered, watching the slow rhythm of his limbs, how it felt to have nothing to carry.

When we reached the waterless course of Merrill Creek, Dun yanked against the lead, and I understood why he hadn't wandered back to the barn in the past few years: the arroyo he needed to ford had become perilous to his old hooves. "You can make it, Dun. I promise. We'll take the shortest way. C'mon." He wobbled but made it over the rocks, and, when the barn came into view as we climbed the hill near the cabin, he tossed his head and hurried his pace to walk beside me. The long dirt road around was easier on the legs, but he had no interest in that. He pushed straight through two gullies to the barn.

Moving back in for Dun was, I imagine, like reclaiming lost time.

I set him up in the pens with feed, salt, and mineral blocks, the receipts from which were evidence against neglect. I dewormed Dun (with help) as a promise not to put him down, but to fatten him up. The barn gate would stay open so he could come in for meals and wander where he wanted to graze. I hadn't told Danny that I saw no way of honoring the past by asking it to end.

After years of solitude, it was a blessing to have Dun watch the cabin door for the minute I woke and walked outside. He nickered at the sight of me that first morning, and all the rest, as I headed downhill toward the barn. But he never ceased to move away from my attempts to touch him until I poured feed into the loose porcelain sink that was his trough. When his mouth was full, he wouldn't have noticed being operated on.

Dun gummed up the last of the morning's oats and seemed to fall asleep. His hip bones jutted over his spine like the braces of a fallen tent. His gut gurgled.

Then his eyes opened, and he walked out of the barn, as heedless to my presence as the man who might have settled the place.

My great-uncle Cleaves had bought the ranch in the seventies, thereby damning his four children—Barry the youngest and born to a different mother—to a fight over who would own it. The land was worth more than they could ever earn, and with the inheritance unclear, the siblings went at each other like warring tribes. Dun was the living bond back to the days before conflict, when the ranch was unburdened by fire, by the lawsuit that divided it, by the neglect that drinking worsened, before the show horses Dun had run with became inbred.

While he grazed around the barn in the afternoon, I worked on a novel about a boy who lived by principles more extreme than I was capable of, a life of trapping and curing leather and of following what in us was animal, so to know better the part that was human.

By late October the grasshoppers were dying, arms clenched, around blades of grass. And I knew, from the curve of Dun's ribs, that he wouldn't regain any muscle. Vertebrae perched atop his back like a crenellated wall. His dung was full of undigested oats. The days seemed to pass through him unmarked.

In late November the horse watched me haul old cedar fence posts up to the house on my shoulders for the stove. He watched men I hired from nearby towns help with cowboying, pipe work, and welding. He watched me head off to walk every acre and ridgeline of the ranch. I got to know the ranch so well that, without meaning to, I lessened its mystery and shrunk its borders, forcing my curiosity down on smaller and smaller squares, until I was pulling up and identifying grasses before they went to brown, and I began to feel an intimacy with the nineteenth-century men who moved off their family farms, no doubt in part to find mates. Even Barry chose to spend his last years, in his forties, in a crumbling house near Houston. I didn't understand why he hadn't come home to the ranch to renew his life—until I learned that resentment, even of mountains, could come from too much time spent with the self. Perhaps Dun, a time or two, had felt something similar.

Dun's mother, an award-winning bulldogging horse, had been called Blondy. At the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, around 1972, Barry's brother Jerry, as the story goes, had a friend distract the front desk clerk at the Holiday Inn near the Astrodome and took Dun's mother up in the elevator, down the hall, and into his hotel room, where he filled the bathtub so she could drink. Then he put on a clean shirt and went back to the bar.

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I wrote in weak glasses to save my eyes from straining through my full prescription while viewing the computer screen. This kept everything but the words in a haze. I heard Dun neigh one afternoon in January, but I couldn't see him and hadn't realized when he called out that it had been to me. He'd fed that morning in the ceremony we'd established over the last four months, save for a stint at Christmas when I set him up with hay. It was after I put in contact lenses to hike in the hour before dark that I stepped onto the porch and saw him lying in the gravel road by the barn.

I sprinted downhill, calling out. He whinnied and lifted his head as I crossed the ground between us. I went to my knees but didn't take him around the neck, respecting the limit to the closeness that put him at ease. He was on his side and had been kicking at the dirt in confusion over what might get him upright. "Oh, old man, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I didn't know you fell." His hair was matted and wet. I scooped away dung pinched between his rump and tail and hurried to the barn for feed. He ate from the loose porcelain sink I carried back to him, holding his head up on his own.

"Let's go, Dun. This isn't how it ends." I drove my heels into the dirt, pressing my lower back against his right shoulder, forcing him to sit up and pull in his front legs. Then I stood, bent my knees, leveled a shoulder against his neck, and tried to squat him upright. "You aren't ready to lie down for good, Dun. C'mon." Even a skeletal horse was a load no man could lift, but with a hundred or two hundred pounds of help he began to rise, the scaffold forming beneath him. He paused and neighed as though in excitement or from knowing it was doomed.

His legs gave out, and he went down hard.

I jumped free to keep from being pinned.

Dun thrashed sideways, scraping arcs in the dirt with his hooves.

I dashed around the barn for a homemade engine hoist, an A-frame of welded auburn pipes that resembled a gallows. I positioned it over Dun, hung pulleys, and fashioned a three-point harness from the cinch straps of old saddles. Then I worked the harness under and around his rear legs, fastened the loose ends to a rope, strung the rope through the pulleys, and pulled. Dun's back end began to rise as though he were sitting in a swing. "Get those front legs up, boy."

But he couldn't. The line of his bony back canted down from the harness to where his muzzle lay in the dirt.

I tied off the rope, leaving his rear aloft, and tried to lift him at the neck onto his feet. But I couldn't give him the strength to stand.

The cold meant there were no flies bothering him about the eyes. I watered my horse from an oat can and brushed out his matted coat with a plastic curry comb and tried again to press him up, but by then he'd lost the power to lift his head. I sat against his right shoulder, supporting some of his weight, my head flush with the back of his, to keep his face off the road. In our silent companionship was a peace too often called awkward when it came to people, and the wordlessness of a legacy at its end.

A front blew through bitter and full of dust, and the temperature plummeted. I covered the horse with a blanket, and we sat together, Dun and I, for six hours in the cloud-muted moonlight. Every so often his legs would thrash in a feeble attempt to stand; he had no comprehension of *lame*. If he'd fallen in pasture, I wondered, would it have been worse? With coyotes lurking? Did Dun like having me there because he knew my smell or because most any animal in that state would have wanted something else warm near? Or would he have been happier dying as he'd lived, as we wanted to believe we lived, never fully broken, eyes aimed at open pasture or an empty trail?

"It's okay, old man. I'm here. It's okay," I said as much to myself as to Dun. I began to count between his breaths, hoping for suffering to give out with his pulse, hoping the weakness that had stolen the strength from his neck would reach his heart. I counted as I had counted with a cousin on a morphine drip. The breaths grew further apart. Four. Five. Six. Inhale. Six. Seven. Inhale. Near 1:00 a.m., with the temperature in the twenties and the wind numbing my face, I built a barricade out of sheet metal, covered Dun with the blanket, kissed him, and went up to the house, hoping the cold would take its turn.

Melvin, a friend and former landman who worked on the ranch behind us, who, after his wife passed would build a shrine to John Wayne, was in his pickup at the barn when I ran down at dawn. The wind had blown the barricade over, and Dun was in view.

"He's alive," Melvin said, staring at the horse twenty yards off.

"I need your help today."

Melvin didn't speak.

"I really need your help."

"I got to be gettin' on," he said and drove up the ranch road with a coldness strange for the countryside.

Dun was stronger than when I'd left him.

But two last attempts at standing made clear he would never leave that patch of

ground on his own. I rested my hand on his withers and thought of Danny and of calling in the vet from Fort Davis. I didn't know whether injections were humane. But I imagined my great-uncle Cleaves cursing me for spending money he'd left to his grandchildren on a horse when the deed could be done for a dime. And I imagined him judging what of my suburban upbringing I'd overcome and whether I'd grown to deserve my dominion over his land.

I sprinted to the house, my thoughts removed by a degree from the day. It was the kind of task that brought greater arcs into focus, such as how swarms of livestock had stomped the grassland downstream, how the waters had died like journeyers collapsing in sand. It was a task in which I found a dark and secret relish, greed for the understanding of what might lie within it, marking the change that had occurred in me since my first months as trustee when I'd delegated to a cousin the responsibility for ending another animal's life, a male llama—too erratic to be let loose—who'd jumped on the granddaughter of the old ranch hand and who had a habit of spitting on me at exactly the wrong time. My aversion to guns, physical and intellectual, had been such that I considered the squeezing of triggers to be the realm of others.

I called Hunter, a college student at Sul Ross who looked after the cattle when I was gone and whose family owned enough land in West Texas to keep generations of them away from other lives. I asked him to bring the neighbor's tractor if he could, and a pistol. And I studied diagrams for the quickest way, with a bullet, to end the life of a horse.

Early afternoon, beside the barn, Hunter and I stood over Dun.

"I'll do it, David," he said. "Let me do it." Hunter had a youthful, creaseless face the sun was sure to leave its mark on fast unless he found work indoors.

"You shouldn't have to," I said.

"My dad kept a horse alive who couldn't stand."

"You told me."

"Fed him a long time."

"We're not doing that."

"I really don't mind being the one with the gun," Hunter said. "I mean, you were his friend and all."

"That's the very reason I should do it."

I knelt and stroked Dun over the eyes, which were as clear as those of a foal. "I'm happy we got these months together, old man. I hope it was as much a gift for you."

He was still staring at me when I covered his eyes with the blanket, leaving the

spot open between his ears. I raised the .32, made sure I had the line right, squeezed off a breath, and fired, twice more in case he had anything left. I swallowed hard and didn't hide from Hunter how it hurt, because he understood what the lives of horses meant.

Hunter positioned the tractor behind Dun, and we slid him into the steel bucket on his back. The hydraulics took care of lifting him. We drove together, the tractor shaking and Dun's legs dangling out of both sides of the bucket in a way I imagined he would have liked—as he'd liked standing beside the road—dancing one last time and laughing that he was the last horse left, and the only horse or human in our family buried on the ranch, beside the century-old schoolhouse missing half a roof.