

The Republic of Texas

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In a stand of Emory oaks three miles from headquarters, my cousin Barry and I lifted a black galvanized trough out of his pickup and set the trough on its legs. An auburn mustache grew down the sides of Barry's mouth. He wore a Taurus 9 mm at his hip and a de-sleeved black T-shirt that made him look like a cross between a cowboy and a professional wrestler. We tore open feed sacks and filled the trough with deer corn that smelled of apples. The eight hunters who'd been working over the mule deer for a decade on Barry's West Texas ranch did not scout on foot and circle downwind to take their quarry with bows. They were truck hunters, and the annual slaughter was as much about the freedom to get drunk away from their wives as about antlers. Deer season, for Barry, meant sating the bucks until they didn't care about any hunters rumbling up the road.

After we set out and filled six feeders in Merrill Canyon, Barry parked his pickup. He walked off forty paces from his front left tire and drove a metal fence post into the dirt, then slid an empty rectangular feedbag down over it, and drew two circles in black marker, one inside the other. I'd learned to give Barry time to tell me what he was doing,

and I said nothing as he reached below his seat for an HK assault rifle. He snapped in a clip and propped the black rifle on the hood of his truck.

I'd come to live on the ranch three months back, after overthrowing my inner businessman and leaving Goldman Sachs. The evening I pulled up to the ranch with a car full of books and dreams of the writing life, Barry met me outside his adobe house and said, "You aren't still a member of that, uh, Sierra Club, like you were as a kid, are you?"

He put his eye to the scope, inhaled, and squeezed the trigger. The shot cracked against the mountains like a boast that there was nothing in existence that could not be torn down. Barry walked to the target and checked his shot: two inches high, one inch left. He turned toward me, said, "Scope in a rifle from forty yards, and it's the same as scoping it in from two hundred. Bullet rises and then dips and crosses the same plane at both points." He moved his hand in a wave to show the trajectory. Barry had long spoken of stocking a cave on the ranch with canned food. In his arsenal was a Springfield SAR-48 .308 with a bi-pod he'd once used to ambush a pack of coyotes.

He adjusted the scope, inhaled, fired.

He said, "Man who built the hunter's cabin on Helbing called me a few days ago."

Helbing owned the next ranch, which Barry leased for grazing. We were standing on it.

"Man said he's coming back this year to hunt. Even though it's been twelve years and building that cabin only gave him rights to hunt for ten. The guy said, 'There ain't nothing you can do to stop me, Barry. I'm coming on the ranch and I'm gonna hunt.' Last year the S.O.B. chased a mountain lion onto our side of the fence and shot her. I said to him [on the phone], 'You ain't welcome, and if you drive through us to get to Helbing's gate, you'll have trouble.'"

There was no other way to Helbing's gate.

"So I told the sheriff and the sheriff said, 'Barry, we can assume when the man comes he'll be armed. What he said

constitutes a threat. You have three daughters. If that man steps on your land, you can assume your life's in danger. You got a right to protect yourself and your family."

Barry squeezed off another shot.

I said, "Barry, do you think a judge would consider it self-defense if you shot him with an assault rifle from two hundred yards?"

Barry spit tobacco juice at a prickly pear and stared at my face. "You think we couldn't get away with it? You think we couldn't bury him?" He waved a hand over the mountains. "They could comb this ranch with a dozen dogs and never find a body. Never."

Barry's father, Cleaves, was the brother of my grandfather. They were searching for a ranch to own together in the Davis Mountains, 1963, when my grandfather died. Cleaves went ahead and bought the ranch they'd wanted, land that in its grandeur doomed his children to a decade of war. Cleaves' first wife passed away after giving him three kids, and his second wife, Lavelle, gave him Barry. Lavelle was a rusted hammer of a woman who hoarded telephone poles and heavy machinery, who taped business cards to the frame of an original Charles M. Russell, and who over forty years of marriage beat back her stepchildren from Cleaves' and her assets—until her battle against them, which was also Barry's battle, reached the courts.

In hopes of gaining a legal advantage in the fight for the ranch, Barry recorded phone calls made to and from his house. On one of the tapes, which I found years after my first stint on the ranch, was a call from his older half-brother, Jerry.

"Jerry Mike McDannald is my name. Do you want trouble with me?"

Barry said, "No sir, I don't."

"Well, you're gonna get some."

"Okay."

"Now, I—I'm gonna tell you, you're not going to like it."

"Uh huh. Okay. So what you planning?"

"I beg your pardon?" Jerry said.

"So what you planning on doing about it?"

"I'm not planning on anything. Don't you think you're gonna catch me on any tape."

"Mmm hmm. No, I mean, you saying, you, uh, you're gonna come get me and you're gonna give me trouble."

Ice cubes tinkled in Jerry's glass; cocktails were most days' weather.

"I'm not telling you anything. I'm not saying anything. . . . If you're a McDannald, try to act like a McDannald. I'll say that."

"That's what I'm doing."

Jerry paused. "You're doing a piss poor job of it, honey. And—and I am headed that direction."

"Oh, you are?"

Jerry chuckled. "All I'm saying is you should let up a little bit. Why do you want to cause so many problems as you're causing?"

"I'm standing up for my rights and if you don't like that, fuck you."

"I think you know I'm headed your direction."

"You can stand up for your rights and I'm going to stand up for my rights. Anything comes in between, we're going to let the court handle that.¹ Or if you want a piece of me, you know where to find me. Now, I mean, I would appreciate it if you didn't hire anybody or send somebody else because you're too chicken shit to do it. But I'm not afraid of you. I'm not threatening you. I'm not going to come looking for you. But don't you threaten me, asshole."

I did not know when I wrote Lavelle from my cubicle in New York and asked if there was space for me on the ranch, that Jerry, needing a fresh start and trying to dry

1. At issue was whether the ranch was separate or communal property, and whether Lavelle had the right to claim half of the ranch's 8,000 acres and bequeath that half solely to Barry, excluding Cleaves' three older children.

out, had made the same request. On another tape of recorded phone calls, Lavelle had said, "I'm afraid if Jerry went out to the ranch he'd start drinking and set the place on fire." She refused her stepson but welcomed me, a grand nephew, without hesitation, because I was not a threat to control. "David, there's a fifty-year-old railroad trailer without a bathroom," she said. "You can live in that." I was not aware then that Barry's older half-siblings were not so much as allowed to visit the ranch. Cleaves, by then bed-ridden, had been struck down by illness.

Barry and I were sitting on the porch of the trailer one night, not long after I moved to the ranch. He'd swung between not talking to me at all and telling me things he shouldn't have.

"She was talking in a voice I'd never heard," Barry said of an ex-girlfriend I knew. "A scary voice, I mean, like the voice of someone I didn't know. I said to her, 'Who are you? I don't know who you are.'

"She said. 'I'm Lucy. Lucy-fer.'"

Barry handed me one of the beers he'd brought to the trailer. The moon was up, casting light on the cistern towering over the ruins of the main ranch house, which had burned in a lightning storm. The top half of the two-tiered cistern, a circular rock tank, had fed water into the house in the days before modern plumbing. The base of the stout cistern was a square rock room.

"A man showed up here when I was a kid," Barry said, "all white and bent over. Said he used to know the family who lived in the ranch house when *he* was a boy." Beer sloshed down Barry's throat. "Two children were living here then, a teenage boy and his kid sister. The parents went off to work cattle one day and left that boy in charge of the girl. Now, a fox goes flying past, and the boy grabs his .22 and runs around the barn. Man said no one really knew for sure, but they figured that little girl sat on the porch, by herself, for hours probably. Round dark, thinking she could

get a view from the top of that cistern to where her brother or parents were, she climbed the ladder. She was just a child, five or six, and she climbed all the way to the top of the cistern. Then fell in the water and drown."

Moonlight reflected in Barry's eyes.

"Next day, vultures let that family know where their daughter was.

"I had a hard time sleeping after that old man came around," Barry said. "I wasn't but a kid, myself, and my room shared a wall with the base of that cistern before the house burned. Of course the girl's brother was all tore up. You can't blame him. He waited until after the funeral and strung up a rope in the rock room below the cistern. He hung himself."

"Can't remember when it was," Barry said, "how long after the old man's visit, but I woke in the middle of the night and I saw that boy. He was standing at the edge of my bed."

Every land needs its mythic bear, some one-eyed wolf, a trap-wise elusive beast to deepen the shadows in the canyons. As a boy, when I visited the ranch with my father and brothers, myth found its expression in a solitary, escaped stranger haunting the backcountry, a horned ram from a distant continent: the *mouflon*. Dad would wake us before dawn to hike and hunt, and to celebrate, in a way, those things in which Mom did not want to partake. Every suspicious yucca brought the binoculars up. We scanned the ridgelines, followed herds of deer, scared up javelina as grizzled as old pelts. The empty miles of grassland held secrets beyond boyhood. The ranch put into me a thirst for all those things cities doomed. Without ever spotting the *mouflon*, we headed home to Houston, a place too young for myth.

I was fresh from an apartment on the Upper East Side when I moved into the dented, unlockable, unheatable,

rodent-infested silver trailer that looked like a toaster dropped from a plane. The gnawing in the walls that first night was straight from Lovecraft. While searching for a blade with which to hack down mesquite grown in front of the outhouse door, I discovered that a mouflon, with curled horns and furry testicles dangling nearly to the dirt, had wandered in from the backcountry and taken up residence in the barn. His companions were a pair of Swiss milking goats who, when I first saw them, were mining the bark off cottonwoods at the well. The mouflon strutted over, kicked the bellies of the goats, and thrust his nose in their pee. Then raised his head and retracted his gums—to test whether they were in estrus.

The Swiss milking goats were neutered males.

I'd dreamed of earning the right to live on the ranch by feeding the horses, helping at roundup, fixing high-country fence. I walked the dirt road through headquarters to the adobe house where Barry lived with his three young girls. I said, "Barry, I want to help out around here."

"Hush," he yelled at five Rhodesian Ridgebacks howling in the yard.

Barry scratched his bare, hairy shoulders and pointed to a green Ranchero sunk in the dirt. "You got trash there in the back from last year's hunters. Start by burning it."

The nine-month-old trash of the deer hunters was as nasty as the guts of a feral hog. I lugged dripping bags to the burn barrels and stoked the nascent flames with a rod. A sweet cloud bloomed from egg cartons, milk jugs, and chicken bones, and I pirouetted around the fire in the shifting winds, coughing, holding my shirt over my nose, until salvation came in a thunderhead that rolled off the face of Mount Livermore.

Each morning that week, I returned to the barrels to charge the smoldering fire with trash. The eight truck hunters in one long weekend had generated their own

weight in refuse. As I sidestepped the column of greenish smoke, contemplating the nature in recent jobs of chronic versus acute toxicity, Barry appeared in the doorway of his house. "When you're done burning that trash," he called out, "burn the locoweed over in that shed by the pens." Then he went back inside.

Locoweed was addictive, potentially lethal to cattle. The hands, Cruz and Cruz Jr., who lived in a small brown house near the barn, had grubbed the weeds, stuffed them into paper feed sacks, and piled the sacks in the shed to sequester the seeds from the soil. Incinerating plastic and Styrofoam was venomous. But burning fifty pounds of locoweed in a metal drum was like sucking on a joint as big around as the moon. And my lungs revolted. I retreated to the trailer, the Swiss milking goats hobbling beside me, gumming my hands, because I'd made the mistake of feeding them apple cores.

In the 1940s, Cleaves pulled Jerry out of school for the long cattle drives on the McDannald ranches in old Mexico, and they pushed cows at night by the light of the moon—before foot-and-mouth disease closed the border to livestock. At The University of Oklahoma, in a rented single-engine plane, Jerry smuggled whiskey in against the hard-alcohol ban, keeping himself and the fraternity houses stocked. He was cowboy and a charmer, and he rode the family legacy until he and it were in tatters. And he built himself the wrong job by opening a bar in Cliff, New Mexico, called The Cow Palace; life raged through too many parties. "I had something in common with horses," Jerry said of the ranching life. "It was like going out with your best friend. You know what he's going to do and he knows what you're thinking." In a story of the cowboy unsaddled, worthy of *Cities of the Plain*, Jerry's last job was the *USA Today* paper route in Yellowstone National Park. But his first three adult years sober were his last three years, and

he glowed into his final days with the lore of worlds that no longer were—even if he and Barry went half a lifetime without speaking as brothers.

Save for the search for a mythic five-carat diamond no one ever found, the ruins of the ranch house were not touched in the decade after the fire. Rusted appliances, connected to copper gas lines, slouched where they'd died. Bricks from the chimneys lay in the grass. The tiled bathroom floor, exposed to the sun, was still peach. While standing on the porch of the trailer, I slipped often into the daydream of digging a giant hole and burying the rubble in the earth, of fighting back against the legacy my family had left in debris.

The mouflon and the milking goats were standing by the trailer one afternoon when three javelina wandered through. The Swiss males leapt over the waist-high wall into the ruins of the old house and made loud sneezing noises. The mouflon didn't move. He stared at me—his yellow eyes—as though our paths had crossed in a faraway world. He pawed the dirt, reared back, and charged, cracking his horns against a soapberry tree, his body pulsing with enough testosterone for all three of the goats. Then he turned his head to look at me and rammed the tree again. *Prepare yourself*, that well-hung mouflon said.

Built into the hill between the trailer and Barry's house was a century-old stock tank large enough to lure migrating ducks down from the sky. Cruz and Cruz Jr. had drained the tank and tarred cracks in the mortar. The shoveled-out algae had dried on the uphill side into a mound that led five feet up to the tank's rim. For domesticated goats deprived of defenses against cougars and coyotes, the panorama on the tank was irresistible, and the Swiss milking goats climbed up with the mouflon to pass their nights there. I had to chase them off if I wanted to walk the rim at sunset,

counting down the revolutions before dark and reminding myself that the life I had left did not allow for daily views of dusk.

Cruz shuffled to the door of the trailer shaking his head.

"David, one of the goats fell into the tank again," he said in Spanish, clacking his false teeth because Lavelle had sent him to Mexico to save money on dental work after a bull kicked a gate that knocked into his face; the bridge didn't fit.

Cruz and I climbed the mound of compacted algae to the rim of the tank and stood over a Swiss milking goat that was like a boy trapped in the deep end of an empty swimming pool.

The mouflon was no doubt responsible.

With one hand clutching his lower back and the other working a lasso, Cruz hobbled around the rock rim, casting errant loops, saying, "*Mi espalda, mi espalda!*" He'd been hired after the lightning strike to make four-thousand adobe bricks for a new ranch house that was never built, and Barry employed him even after the ranch was split in the lawsuit and the bulk of the cattle sold.² Cruz wasn't much of a rancher, and he was even less of a roper. We had to climb down into the tank and chase the neutered male in circles, his tan beard swinging as he dashed, tripped, and shitted. We rushed him, roped his horns, and towed him up the inside wall of the tank. A few years later, when everyone was sick, dead, or distracted, Cruz, employed on the ranch for twenty years, began to steal the family's cattle. On the evidence of thousands of dollars of checks cashed from a livestock auction house in Roswell, the Texas Rangers carted Cruz off to jail.

In my stubbornness to earn the right to live on the ranch and to get a break from the three-hundred-page novel I would eventually slash to eleven pages, and then re-write

2. Barry's siblings were not able to prove in court that Cleaves had bought the ranch with funds from the sale of one of his father's ranches in Colorado. The ranch was declared communal property, half Lavelle's. Barry inherited 5,000 acres, Jerry and his sisters just 1,000 acres each.

completely, I walked the ranch road and asked Barry for more chores. He looked up at Mount Livermore, scratched his hairy shoulders, and went for a broom. "If you want something to do, sweep up all that goat shit in the bottom of the tank. The goats have been falling in it for a year. I'm going to build a hot tub on the side of the tank, and we don't need a bunch of turds floating around when people are swimming."

I was in the ruins of the burned-out house when I looked behind me. The mouflon pawed the cement three times and charged. Instinct took hold, the cougar defense. I flared my jacket, howled and screeched in a voice so loud and strange that the mouflon braked, skidded over the concrete in front of me like a cartoon ram, and ran away without looking back.

Three months on, for \$30, Cruz sold him for a barbecue.

Late April, I drove through the ranch gate and found the highway barricaded by three officers with shotguns. I stopped and stuck my head out of my car window and said, "Can you tell me what's happening?"

"Turn on your television."

"I live right here," I said, pointing to ground north of the road. "Don't you think I should know what's going on?"

"Turn on your television."

I drove back to the adobe house.

"Trouble again in Texas," said the anchorman on Barry's TV, invoking memories of the massacre at Waco.

Peer pressure, in places as isolated as Jeff Davis County, was so minimal that people had the space to nurture their weirdness. Make prickly pear wine, eat calf testicles off the branding pot, store ammunition in the rocks—who was around to judge? The Republic of Texas, a ragtag conglomeration of anti-government militias, had been tolerated in the Big Bend since the 1990s, perhaps because

they weren't so far to the right of average, politically. Richard McLaren, ambassador and great mind of the Republic, had been mostly a legal nuisance, filing liens and lawsuits, claiming that the treaty binding Texas to the Union was invalid and traveling to local banks hoping to confiscate "Republic funds." But then a member of the Republic was stopped for speeding on Highway 166 and arrested for having a car full of guns. The man, West Texans said, was planning to seize the Fort Davis courthouse. When McLaren and company learned over the radio of their foot soldier's capture, they stormed a nearby trailer and took an old couple hostage, wounding the man as they shot through the door.

Eight miles as the crow flew from my ununlockable trailer, an army formed around the Republic—of U.S. Marshalls, SWAT team, FBI, and Texas Parks and Wildlife trackers capable of pursuing escapees into the mountains. Fearful of booby traps and gasoline bombs, the government did not invade the Republic's headquarters. The standoff endured for days, with the highway barricaded and our ranch phone dead.

I was under the cottonwoods by the well one afternoon, the Swiss milking goats unmolested as they dined on tree bark, when an unmarked sedan raced up to the barn and braked. Two men hopped out, waving guns at the mesquite as though their enemies were right there in the brush. A third man spotted me as I ducked behind a tree.

"Texas Rangers!" he said and set his rifle on the ground. He came forward with his hands up and his affiliation spelled out across his flak jacket. "We're telling everyone in the vicinity that two members of the Republic of Texas are on the loose. They are armed and dangerous, and we advise you to take the necessary precautions."

"And what are those?" I said.

"Get a gun, load it, and keep it next to you."

I emptied the trailer and packed my car.

Then waited for Barry to return from Valentine where his girls went to school. When he drove up, finally, I said, "Barry, I'm leaving for Houston. For good. It's been almost a year. I think it's about time I go."

He looked perplexed. "But I've got two assault rifles. I'll give you one. If you keep the lights off in the trailer, you can see out better than anyone looking in. If someone pops up in the window, blast him."

His girls, immune to such talk or too young, did not react.

"No one's going to keep me from sleeping in my bed," Barry said. "I'll take the girls back to Valentine. Then I'm coming home. For anyone to get to me, they'll have to get through my dogs. To get through my dogs, they'll have to kill my dogs. To kill my dogs, they'll have to make a whole hell of a lot of noise. I'll hear it and then I'll kill them."³

Driving away from the ranch was harder than I'd imagined, in part because I hadn't climbed into the mountains to ritualize the goodbye. I left not imagining that I would one day circle back to live alone on the ranch for years, after Barry died and made me executor of his estate and trustee for his girls. Within that responsibility was the gift of a sense of belonging. The smell of the ranch alone linked me back to childhood quests. In a giant hole, I buried the rubble of the burned-out house. I had the dented trailer hauled away. And I walked every vein through those mountains, not knowing this would cause the fence lines to contract. The mystery within me, though, could not fill that shrunken backcountry. Once Barry and Jerry were gone, the shadows in the canyons were never as deep.

3. Barry never blasted any member of the Republic of Texas. A state agent with a deer rifle shot one from a helicopter below Mount Livermore. The other was later arrested in Canada. The hunter who built the cabin on Helbing made no attempt to return.