

AFTER THE RODEO

By JP Kemmick

I ask my kid brother's ghost what it's like being dead and he stretches the rope out as far as it will go, toward the hidden sliver of moon, then gives in and comes drifting back toward the ranch. I don't honestly care about the question—or the answer—but it feels like only asking about the past cements his death too much, takes away the implausible truth of his being here. So I ask him about now. I do this every night, and every night he makes a big show of trying to escape, of trying to free himself of the rope and go wherever it is ghosts go. Like he'd rather be done with us all than answer the question. Most of the time he's quiet, although he's done some mumbling, none of which I could really make out. Like his tongue is all swoll up. But tonight he lets go

of a little something.

“It hurts,” he says. He’s got a weak, scratchy voice, nothing like the strong tenor he had in life. He was a funny little shit, could talk the ears off a heifer. He wasn’t so much a horse whisperer as a horse conversationalist. He was good with animals, good with people. Good.

“Like a horse kicked you in the head or what?” I say.

Jimmy doesn’t answer, just sways up there in the sky, bobbing in the cold breeze. He’s wearing the same pair of Wranglers as the day he died, the back pocket ripped out from a barbed wire snag the summer before. His favorite boots too, a bit big for him, but hand-me-downs from Dad’s rodeo days that Jimmy had to be convinced not to sleep in. I crunch some snow under one of my boots and drum my fingers on the fencepost. The clouds move off the moon and Jimmy tilts his chin to look at it. He’s always reaching for the moon, like maybe that’s where he’s supposed to go. Maybe the moon is made up of ghosts, all white and chalky like it is.

“Why’d you come back?” I say. It’s a deviation from my standard line, but I don’t want to miss the chance if he’s feeling talkative. What I really mean to ask is, “*Where is it you want to be?*” But I can’t ask, because I don’t know what I’d do with an answer that wasn’t, “*Here with you.*” Then I imagine Mom coming out to

see him and him being gone and her losing the last little thing makes life worth living. Either way, he doesn't answer the question. Just keeps nodding at the moon, like he and it have some kind of agreement.

“Well I've got that scoured calf to look after,” I say and I start walking back home. When I get to the top of the hill between the house and this back stretch, I take one last look at Jimmy floating up there. He gives off the faintest glow, a little light left in him still. He's turned toward the moon, like always. If he weren't a cowboy, he'd have made a great astronaut. He was dreamy like that, thinking big thoughts about faraway places.

The calf doesn't seem to be getting much better. There's a fresh pile of yellowy shit in its bedding. When I pinch its neck skin it stays tented for a long while, all its fluids gone to fatty tissue. It doesn't put up a fuss when I grab its head and stick the feeding tube down its throat. The first calf of the year got twisted in his mom's belly and by the time we pulled it out it had suffocated inside of her. This little guy is only number four. We're owed a break. You have rough years I guess, but still.

The house is dark and quiet, and I ease the screen door shut, trying to find that sweet spot where the spring squeaks just long enough it doesn't really make a sound. Mom knowing that I

know about Jimmy would just complicate things and things are already complicated plenty. But there's a part of me wants to tell her I know, or to just ride up next to her out there in the field some night, have a three-way conversation with Jimmy. Or *at* Jimmy, I guess.

Jimmy got his funny bone from Mom, who could turn a trip to the cattle auction into the funniest damn thing you ever heard, but she's clammed up since the accident. Our family's been ranching in the area for generations, so everyone in and out of town knows us in one fashion or another, which means we got to share our grief with the whole damn world. So I don't blame Mom for wanting to retreat some, to have at least one thing still to herself.

You know how sometimes you catch just the snippet of a song, like you're walking into a restaurant when the song's just finishing, and you can't for the life of you figure out what it was and it haunts you the rest of the day? Mom's voice is like that for me now. I'll be jouncing down the road in the truck or out feeding the herd, and I swear I'll hear her voice making a joke about some poor farmer's daughter or telling me to watch out for an especially ornery steer, but before I can really latch onto the song I'll lose it and I can't catch the melody again, can't remember what she sounded like before her voice got set in its saddest tones. I wonder

if Jimmy gets to hear her happy again. I wonder what song she's singing to him out there at night.

Once I get the door closed, one of the cats comes rubbing up against my legs and meows at the door, knowing the mice will be bedded down in the warm hay for the night. So I have to repeat the whole damn operation to let it out.

When I finally get the door shut for the night, I hang my jacket on the coat rack and step out of my boots. Then I creep upstairs, where I crawl into bed, bury my face in the pillow, and cry for a while.

In the middle of the night, Dad goes to check on the calf. When he comes back past my door, I say, "How's it doing?"

"Dying," he says. "They're all fucking dying."

There wasn't no reason for it. I guess before Jimmy died, I always imagined there'd be a reason. You ranch and rodeo long enough, you'll get to know death in one form or another. Everybody knows somebody who's died. Kicked by a steer, fell off a horse, tractor rolled over 'em. Plenty of ways to meet your maker, especially if you're dumb, drunk or disrespectful to your animals.

But Jimmy was bright and full of life right up until the moment he wasn't. We hit an ice patch on the highway coming

back from the feed store and Mom hit a telephone pole dead on. Jimmy wasn't wearing his seatbelt—God only knows why—and he went out the window and died there, bleeding from his face in the snow, Mom holding him and me sprinting toward town. Jimmy wanted the popcorn they give out at the store. Only reason he even came.

It was a few weeks after the accident that Jimmy decided to pay the ranch one last visit and Mom got a rope around his leg and tied him to the back fence. I was lying in the truck bed that night in jeans and a t-shirt, watching snowflakes fall on my crossed arms, studying each flake in the porch light as they landed on my arm hair or made their way all the way down to the skin. I ran my fingers through the grooves of the truck bed until I'd mounded up a snow pile big enough to bury my hands in, which I did until they tingled, then went numb. Maybe I'd get sick, I figured, catch a cold, have an excuse for staying in bed all day.

When I heard someone come out of the house, I assumed it was Dad, going to check on the herd. Mom hadn't left her bedroom all week and I didn't think she'd be starting at midnight with a storm blowing in. When the truck started up, I stayed low, because I was being stupid and knew it and I didn't need Dad asking me to explain it.

But the truck took a right where it should have taken a left

and soon we were bouncing along the old road around the hills. I was painfully cold by that point, woozy with it, and I tried moving my limbs around a little without giving myself away, making sloppy snow angels in the truck bed.

When we came to a stop, I poked my head up and could just make out Mom's figure moving slowly toward some small glowing thing bouncing around the night sky like an excitable newborn star hunting for just the right spot. In her hand was a coiled rope. She'd done some calf roping in her day, but it'd been a while since she'd entertained me and Jimmy as little kids, roping us in turn as we pretended to twist, pivot and kick like wild broncs. I watched, dizzy with cold, as she neared the glowing thing. It was whipping up and down with the same bucking gyrations as a bronc rider, violent, sharp waves, like the wind blowing through had gathered itself for a ride. Then I heard Mom say, clear as day, "Jimmy," at which point the figure paused. Even through the snowstorm I could tell it was him. He froze there a moment and Mom said, "I felt you. I knew I did."

Then Jimmy made a break for it, but Mom was quicker, got the rope around his foot and tied off to the fencepost before you could spit. She stood there a moment, biting her lip and squinting in sad determination, as if she was thinking, *This is what it's come to?*

So that's how come we've got my kid brother's ghost tied to a fencepost at the back of the property.

In art class the next day, this girl, Charlene, passes me a drawing of an angel. It doesn't look much like the candlestick and apple were supposed to be drawing. The angel's got big eyes and the tattered robe and halo, but he's also got a coiled rope in his hands and cowboy boots poking out from under the robe which is when I realize it's supposed to be Jimmy. Before Jimmy died, Charlene and I were maybe starting to cozy up to each other, but after the accident I couldn't find much energy for it, even though she was real sweet to me. It was probably *'cause* she was real sweet, actually. About the only thing I needed help doing was forgetting it all, if only for a minute here and there, but nobody's been much help with that.

I give Charlene a smile, this sort of sad smile I've pretty much perfected, and she smiles back, her pretty blue eyes wet, which sort of pisses me off for some reason. Charlene looks back down at her smudged candlestick and my best friend Will leans over and says, "Is she fucking serious with that?"

"She means it to be nice," I whisper, and slip the angel into my backpack. What I don't say is that of all the bullshit condolences, it's the most accurate depiction anyone's mustered

up yet.

Will's dad owns the hardware store, so he doesn't really know shit about ranching, but he knows a little about rodeoing. My family runs about six hundred head of cattle on thirty-five thousand acres, so I've got him beat on the cowboy front, but he plays the part alright for a city slicker. Plus, his dad's got a little side hustle arena built up in their backyard, where some of us go to get off season rodeo practice in.

Dad was a pro rodeo cowboy before he met Mom and settled down on the ranch. A real one, which mainly meant he was a road warrior, driving a teal Chevy with bald tires and no radio all over the western half of the country, trying to rack up points, make enough money to make it to the next rodeo. He's told me, more than once, that it wasn't much of a life. Doesn't mean I wouldn't give my right nut for a try at the big money. We haven't exactly discussed it, but I can hear the circuit calling my name, like it must have done for Dad.

Last year, at the state championships, I got thrown two seconds in and messed up my shoulder. But this year'll be different. I used to think I had some birthright to the sport, like the ranching and Dad's blood in my veins were enough, but all that got me was a mouthful of dirt and a bum shoulder during

branding season. I'm coming back stronger and smarter this go around, holding on and eyeing nationals. Aiming to make Jimmy proud.

Now, standing outside the arena, I watch Will in the chute, trying to sweet talk his bull, who answers by flaring his nostrils and butting his head up against the gate. We don't have much in the way of competition until April, but Will's determined to prove he's got what it takes for the state finals in Rock Springs in June, so he's been getting me out after school, giving him pointers. It's about the only thing anybody's done to get me distracted. And I appreciate it.

The gate opens and out comes the bull and there goes Will to the dirt about a second and a half later.

"I think you need to stay on longer," I holler.

"Thanks, asshole," he says as he jumps the fence and lands next to me. "Not my day, I guess."

"Day's got nothing to do with it." Will spits in the dirt and looks out at the bull as our friends Decker and Brian get it herded back toward the pens. "You gotta get your free hand up. You keep it all low, like you wanna grab on. You get it up high, you'll find your balance, cause you ain't gonna find the animal."

"Yeah, alright," he says. "You riding?"

"I got one ride in me, then I gotta get home and help my

dad.”

Jimmy had a plan all mapped out where we traveled around to rodeos as a team, him in his clown makeup keeping me entertained and safe and me bringing in the money riding ornery broncs. Sounded pretty perfect to me. Rodeo clowns always get a lot of traction with the littlest kids, before the kids get their first rope and start trying to lasso everything in sight, but Jimmy never quit loving the clowns, even when he joined me in high school this year. The thing people don’t understand about rodeo clowns, is they gotta be funny and they also gotta save a cowboy from getting stomped to death. It’s a tricky combination, and it isn’t for pansies. People who thought it was weird for Jimmy to be so caught up on clowns didn’t understand it was the perfect job for him; he wasn’t nothing if he wasn’t the funniest cowboy I ever knew.

When it’s my turn, Decker gets the cinch strap around my horse, a real wild beauty named Jasper.

“Ride that pony,” Decker says, slapping the horse’s flank.

The thing about bronc riding is you get your brain rattled so good it shakes damn near everything out, at least for a few seconds. Doesn’t matter if it’s the last joke your dead brother told you or what you had for lunch, it all gets bounced right out.

A minute later Decker opens the chute and Jasper bolts

out, jumping and kicking. My memories go spilling all over, littering the dirt all around me while I try to show Will my free hand up in the air. I manage four seconds before I'm picking myself up off the dirt, grabbing up all those memories, and jogging to the fence.

“I think you need to stay on longer,” Will hollers to me.

“Longer than your ass managed,” I say.

I meet Dad out with the herd near dark. He's tall and wiry and walks a little funny, like any cowboy. He always grows out a mustache in the winter, but this year he's gone full beard and it makes him look older and maybe a little wiser. He takes one look at my dirty pants and says, “Don't let your mom see you in those jeans.”

Mom doesn't like me rodeoing. She's never liked it, but since Jimmy dying, she's gotten less partial to the idea of me putting myself in harm's way. Not like I blame her, but I don't think Jimmy'd want me quitting on his account. Just the opposite is more like it.

Me and Dad ride the herd and for once it seems they're alright. It's getting cold though, and the air's got that dry, crystal feeling like a storm might roll in. We've had a dry spell for the past week, just a little crusted snow hanging on in the shade, but it

can't last much longer. It snows and heifers start dropping calves, shit'll get real, real quick.

"I got four seconds on that Jasper," I tell Dad as we ride in. Dad was smart about keeping me riding bulls 'til I was good and ready for a bronc. You see some of these macho dads putting their fourteen-year-olds on broncs and you can bet they'll get thrown and messed up. Dad knew when I was ready. He's as much to blame as anyone for getting me restless, putting rodeo dreams in my head.

"Not bad," he says. The shuffling and mooing of the herd fades as we head toward home until the only sound is the clapping of our horses' hooves along the frozen ground. But as we near the stables, Dad turns and says, "Might be something to your mother's worry though."

We dismount from our horses and lead them in for their dinner.

"You rodeoed hard and you're just fine."

"Lucky is what I am. I saw men die in that arena, Chase. Saw bulls try and pancake a man's skull." Dad undoes the girth and gets the saddle off his horse. "Your mom was right about me settling down and getting to real work. Fact is, she's usually more right than wrong."

"Fact is, she's barely said a word to me in weeks."

“You gotta learn to read silence, son.” He hangs his saddle up and puts his hand on his horse’s head. “That was Jimmy’s gift. For all his motor-mouthing, the boy could read the quiet.”

“Yeah, well, I guess it was easier talking to Mom when she talked.”

“Hey!” Dad snaps. “Remind me when the last time was you lost your son.” I open my mouth to tell him I lost a brother, but he says, “Go clean yourself up for supper.”

Mom’s at the sink doing dishes, staring in the direction of the hills, behind which Jimmy’s ghost bobs around on that rope. I’ve got a suspicion she’s been dirtying dishes just to wash them again, all so she can keep staring out that window. I can see her reflection in it and she’s blank-eyed, her cheeks sagging toward her frowning mouth.

“Chase,” she says. I wait for her to say something more, but she doesn’t, just an acknowledgement, I guess. Making sure I’m still on this side of the divide.

“Mom,” I say, but it doesn’t feel right solo, so I follow it up with, “Hi, Mom.”

Before Jimmy’s death, she was a proper ranching momma, helping with branding and herding and calving and somehow still

getting us fed and keeping the house in one piece. But the only thing keeping the house together now is the shared sorrow, like an awful glue you feel might come undone any second, bringing the roof down around your ears and leaving everybody out in the cold.

Up in my bedroom, I climb out the window and onto the roof to look out at the world from Jimmy's vantage. I feel a little closer to him this way, though I guess distance is subjective when one of you is already halfway to forever. The clouds have drifted off and the cold stars are out. At the funeral, I overheard one of Mom's friend's speculate that stars are souls still burning bright and looking out over us all, but I guess Jimmy's star is still waiting on him.

In the distance, town is sparkling and the occasional car rumbles down the highway, but mostly it's dark and quiet. A barn cat goes prowling below, on the hunt, and I head back inside.

We still eat dinner together, though we don't do much talking. Mom was always big on us all sitting down so she could ask about our days. I'd always give a straightforward answer, starting when I left the house, ending at dinner, leaving out little things I didn't care to share, but when it came Jimmy's turn, he'd spin some ridiculous yarn, stretching out one little encounter for a good

twenty minutes until he had us all cracked up. It worked for Jimmy, because he wouldn't have to say anything about the day he didn't want to, and it worked for us, because it gave the dinners some life.

There are times now I still find myself turning to Jimmy's spot looking for him to break the silence. A few weeks ago, I caught mom putting out four plates, but she caught herself before she set the fourth one down, which was probably good, cause I don't know if she'd have been able to pick it back up.

Dad stabs at a green bean then takes a big gulp of water to wash it down. He's never cared for green beans, but he eats what Mom puts on the table, as an example to us boys. Or to just me, now. The table's got a bum leg and I can feel it move a little at each fork jab. Mom spears a piece of roast beef, then sets the fork down as if she's had a second thought.

I'm weighing the repercussions of taking my plate up to my room when Dad pipes up with a story.

"Chase, I ever tell you about the food fight between your uncle Gene and me?"

I shake my head. Hard to imagine Dad in a food fight. He hates wasting just about anything. Eats an apple to the seeds.

"It was a few weeks after my mom died," he starts, "when it was just Gene and me. Your grandpa wasn't much in the

picture, so we were fending for ourselves. Then one night this old English teacher of ours, Miss Watcomb—weird old bat, big gal with cat-eye glasses—shows up unannounced at our front door with a casserole in her hands.”

Dad takes a moment for another bite of green beans. I look over at Mom and she’s staring at the center of the table, at the salt and pepper shakers I made in ceramics last year. They look like misshapen trolls, and the holes on top’ll empty the entire contents if you’re not careful. Dad takes another bite and continues chewing while he talks.

“So we sit at the dinner table and she unveils this casserole and right away you can tell it’s just the nastiest damn thing. Layer of grease you could see the light fixture reflected in. She doles out a heaping spoonful to each of us and we’re looking from our plates to each other and back again, wondering what the hell we’re gonna do. Then she starts talking about our stuff—like our furniture and other household stuff—that she thinks she could help us find a buyer for. Which is when Gene suddenly launches a spoonful of the goop right at her.”

“Chase,” Mom says. It’s jarring to hear her say my name at dinner. Jarring for her to say anything at dinner. “You and your brother ever tried any nonsense like that, I’d have spanked your behinds ‘til they looked like little cherry tomatoes. That’s the

difference between having a mother and not, is with no mom around you got no one to lay into you with all their love and no one to bandage you back up when the world does it on its own.”

She says all this without ever once looking away from the center of the table.

“See, your brother isn’t with us anymore because I was too easy on him, and so the world had to make up for me, had to give him something rougher, but he was too soft for it and he died and I couldn’t do a thing about it.”

Mom gets up then, her plate still half full, and walks out of the room.

“Cheryl,” Dad calls after her, but he doesn’t get up, just stares at this yellow spot on the ceiling from when Jimmy overflowed the tub as a little kid. We can hear Mom by the front door, putting on her jacket and boots, then the door opening and closing, the tail end of some cold air creeping into the kitchen.

“Anyhoo,” Dad says, “we got into a big ‘ole food fight, Gene and me. Never heard from Miss Watcomb again.” He stands up and starts clearing the table. “We thought that was pretty fun,” he says, but he doesn’t smile.

Dad doesn’t know where Mom goes, just that a few weeks ago she started heading out every night into the cold, and that when she

returns she seems like she's got just enough life back in her to carry her through another day.

I sit in my bedroom and wait for her to come back, for the door to shut downstairs and her to make her way down the hall toward bed before I ease my window up and hop on down to the ground to go see Jimmy for myself. I don't think it does for me what it does for Mom, but I can't help myself, can't help wanting to make sure he's still there, even though I'm starting to get of the mindset it might be better to let him free. I got the same feeling a couple years ago when the circus came through town and I got a close look at one of those poor elephants, miserable and forced to perform for us.

I wonder why Jimmy chose this particular patch of the ranch to revisit. It were me, I'd have picked my bedroom, or the barn, or even the herd, somewhere that had some meaning to me. Maybe he just wanted a last gulp of prairie air, or a last dusting of dirt on his boots. Just enough to get him where he was going.

I work my way up the hill and come over the rise and suddenly there's Mom, not more than thirty feet away, walking right toward me, scanning the ground with a flashlight. It must have been Dad I heard coming up the stairs. He's walking softer than he used to.

I freeze, thinking Mom must see me. My mind starts

racing for an explanation about what I'm doing out here, but then I realize she's in her own headspace, that she hasn't spotted me. So I hang a ninety degree turn and walk real gingerly out of her path. I crouch low behind some scraggly sagebrush and squat there as she gets nearer. Then, when she's maybe fifteen feet away, I realize she's singing to herself. It only takes a second to pick up Patsy Cline's "Walkin' After Midnight." Mom is a Patsy aficionado, and so by default is her family. It's wild and beautiful and heartbreaking to hear Mom singing. Her voice is sweet and low and haunting.

"I go out walkin'," she sings, "after midnight, out in the moonlight, just hoping you may be somewhere a walking, after midnight, searching for me."

It's not much, just a little Patsy from a woman who rarely went a day without a little Patsy, but she could be tap dancing and yodeling while roping a steer, the affect would be the same. She's happy. For a moment, *I'm* happy. Then I remember that she'll be all sung out by the time she gets home, that Jimmy's ghost probably got near all the singing she had to offer. Suddenly I'm resentful of my kid brother's ghost, which gets me all kinds of confused.

Then Mom's gone, singing her way down the hill and back toward the house.

When I reach Jimmy, he's got his eyes closed and a flop of hair over his face. He was as bright as a shooting star the night Mom caught him, but now he looks paler, like maybe the last of the light is leaving him. What does it mean if your ghost dies?

When I was younger and Dad was out with the herd and Mom was too exhausted to think, I'd tuck Jimmy in and make up a story about some crazy old cowboy trying to ride a bull to the moon, or a bronc who kicked a hole in the sky, then when Jimmy fell asleep, I'd change it up and only tell him the honest truth. About how I wanted to be a cowboy but maybe not a rancher, or how a girl at school was smiling at me, or how I heard Mom and Dad arguing about getting tubes tied. Stuff I didn't have anyone to talk to about.

I lean on the fence and feel the brittle old wood creak under me. "You get Mom singing you lucky bastard. I'm lucky if I get a few words out of her and she's out here serenading you." But real quick I feel real dumb scolding Jimmy for something he's got no control over and would probably be happy to give up if he did.

"You've got us in one helluva routine," I whisper. "You know that?" I stick my boot toe into some crusty snow and burrow it in. "Every night we eat dinner without saying a damn

word, then Mom comes out, then I come out. How long you thinking we should keep that up? Just sort of hanging on, before we let you get on to whatever it is you've got going and we do the same.”

A couple solitary snowflakes drift in and float to the ground, but it's hard to tell if they're a part of something bigger or just a few lost flakes wandered away from the herd, causing trouble.

“You know I don't like routine?” I ask Jimmy. “That's why I like rodeoing. Every bronc, every time is a different ride. Don't even necessarily matter if it's the same horse. I respect the hell out of Dad, but it don't mean I wanna be stuck ranching the rest of my life. Herding cattle, feeding cattle, calving, cutting hay, herding cattle, feeding cattle.”

It feels good, being honest with Jimmy. That's what Mom must do out here, when she's not singing: just talk at him, keep him up to date on the world, remind him about some of the funny shit he said and did as an alive person. That's why she comes back with a little something more than she left with, because if Jimmy knows about what's happening in this world, he must still be a part of it. She doesn't have much to say to us because we already know about the world; Dad and I aren't at risk of losing it, of slipping away. Every night at dinner, she's just

saving herself for Jimmy.

“You want me to quit rodeoing?” I say. “Too risky?”

He actually opens his eyes and looks at me all heavy-lidded. Then he crinkles his forehead and turns away and I feel dumb and selfish for having asked. What did I think he'd say? That I had to keep our deal up, make it all the way and make him proud? He's dead. What the hell does he care?

Walking back toward the house, a few more snowflakes breeze lazily past, then a few more. A jackrabbit darts off in front of me, zig-zagging like it's dodging the falling snow.

As I walk past the barn, Dad comes out, shaking his head and patting the feeding tube against his hand.

“She alive?” I ask.

“By the grace of God and not much else. What are you doing up and about? You should get to bed.” But then he holds his hand out to the flakes and says, “But don't get too comfy.”

The storm holds off, just a dusting of snow, and Dad and I drive around the herd as the sun works its way up, forking hay out and busting the layer of ice on the troughs.

When I step back into the house, I hear the tea kettle whistling. In the kitchen, Mom's standing at the window in her bathrobe, staring again.

“Kettle’s whistling, Mom,” I say, as I take it off the burner.

“You think the dead talk to each other?” she says.

“Pardon?”

“Or are they lonely out there? No one to share with.”

I want to say that we’re lonely, here in this house, but I know she’s talking about Jimmy, tied up and drifting between worlds. I don’t know what she wants from me though. We’ve each got our secret Jimmy out there and neither of us is ready to share him yet.

“I think if ever there was a ghost to strike up a good conversation, it’d be Jimmy.”

She turns from the window, tears in her eyes, and gives me a hug. I can’t say she’s given me a hug since the funeral.

“That’s probably right,” she says, even though we’ve both got proof to the contrary.

On the way to math class later that day Will tells me his dad wants to start a rodeo memorial scholarship deal in Jimmy’s name, which is a pretty damn nice thing to want to do. I should just say thanks, but we had a dumb heifer that morning drop her calf and walk away and I’m dog tired. So, instead of thanking Will and having to talk about it more, I change the subject by lying, which is a stupid thing to do. The words come out so quick I don’t even

know what I'm saying til it's too late.

"Jimmy's spirit paid me a visit last night," I say.

"No shit?" Will says.

But then, as we walk into class, my stupid little lie feels real all the sudden, because it mostly is, and I get all sad. So I lie some more to make me feel better.

"Gave a full accounting of the afterlife," I say. "Says every day is a barbecue, with brisket just falling apart in your mouth. Unless all you want is cereal, then they've got all your favorite kinds. And if you want chocolate chunk ice cream with a caramel swirl and chicken enchiladas for breakfast, they can do that too."

It feels like how Jimmy would tell it, like it's funny but also sounds like a pretty great place. So I decide to ride out the Jimmy vibe, to dive in and go big.

"Elvis, Babe Ruth, George Washington, King Tut, Coach Newberg, everyone's there. Partying it up. Last week, Abe Lincoln and Garth Brooks had Jimmy on their shoulders, parading him around."

"Garth Brooks isn't dead," Will says, but I ignore him and keep going.

"They've got the best damn rodeo, cause no one's afraid of dying, and Jimmy is the de facto clown, the funniest, quickest damn clown they've ever had, and the broncs kick and buck so

hard”—I start sort of rocking my desk at this point, just like Jimmy used to do in his chair at dinner—”sometimes they just straight take flight and you can ride them up through the clouds all the way to the moon, where they start kicking up moon dust until the rider is covered”—now I’ve got one hand up in the air, the other clutching the underside of my desk— “which is where we get the idea of ghosts as these white things, and Jimmy follows ‘em right up there in his goofy-ass makeup and big pants until that bronc finally throws the rider into a crater and Jimmy swoops in to distract the horse and make all the astronauts laugh until they split their—.”

“Chase!” I look up and Mr. Waterson and half the class are staring at me, including Charlene and her wet eyes trying to offer whatever it is I might need. I release my hold on the desk and get all its four legs back on the ground.

Mr. Waterson turns his back to write something on the board and I whisper to Will, “I’m just bullshitting. I figure the afterlife just looks like Wyoming. Sagebrush, mud and cattle. Laramie Range on a clear day.”

Mom goes to Jimmy after dinner, like always, but when she comes home, I keep at my homework. I’m not sure exactly what the point is anymore. Like going to see a floating statue of somebody

every day, but instead of honoring that person, Jimmy's predicament is sort of a dishonor. Like what we're really after is memorializing him in his own suffering.

That night I have a dream of him, Will and me all riding the same giant bull together, my right hand on Jimmy's shoulder, his hand on Will's shoulder, all our free hands up in the air, stirring the night sky. Then I feel someone's hand on my shoulder and I wake up to find Dad bending over me telling me to get dressed.

I peer out my window to the barn and can see the snow coming down in a solid white blanket. I pull on my jeans and a shirt and follow the smell of coffee down to the kitchen, where Dad's brewed us a couple steaming thermoses.

"The weather report miss this?" I ask him as we walk out to the truck.

"I don't know," he says. "Maybe I did."

Not like Dad to miss an incoming storm, but things like this are how he's been mourning Jimmy. I been noticing them, how he'll leave off in the middle of a project thinking he's done with it: the gate to the corral open; the horses fed but not watered.

We drive to the herd in their winter pasture. All we really got to worry about is the calving heifers. The rest of 'em can wait it out, huddle together for some warmth and protection, wait for us to throw hay onto the new snow in the morning. The

headlights don't pierce more than ten feet, but Dad knows where he's going, could probably make it blindfolded.

"I ran into Bob Porter in town a couple days after the funeral," he says as he's turning. "Said he was real sorry about Jimmy and I thanked him for that, even though I was sick of hearing it. Then he pauses for a minute and says, sort of mumbling like his brain was trying to convince him not to say it, 'Never easy losing a hand on the ranch neither.'"

"Jesus Christ."

"I hit him, Chase. Gut punched him right there in the Walmart parking lot." He takes a sip of his coffee. "I reckon a man is allowed a sucker punch after a real bad deal and Bob Porter was mine."

"I bet he understood."

"I figured so too. But the thing is, he wasn't wrong."

I nod and look off toward the hills where Jimmy's surely freezing his ghost ass off. But maybe he likes the snow, how it covers up the world he must be hungry to be rid of. I don't know. Maybe he likes it here. I don't really know a goddamn thing about it.

We come to a gate and I fumble with the lock and get 'er open and closed behind the truck. A couple loner cows lumber toward us, but most of the herd is clumped up. It's gonna be a

bitch getting the calving heifers out of the mix.

Dad parks the truck with the headlights on the herd and we start trying to sort the heifers closest to dropping their calves, which is tricky on a good day; pre-dawn in a blizzard, it's damn near impossible. They don't much care to leave the herd and I can't blame 'em.

I spot a heifer with a sack close to bursting, come up on her from the side, and slowly send her to a small cluster Dad's got going. Another has some half-frozen discharge under her tail and I send her too. The wind is picking up and throwing stinging snowflakes into my eyes. The wind's what's dangerous, what makes it suddenly ten degrees colder. Go to wipe the snot from your nose and come away with ice crystals.

I'm just sorting out a heifer with a sagging pelvis when I see a spot of black half-buried in a snowdrift. I call out to Dad then hurry over and plunge my gloves in to feel the frozed-up hide of a calf, mama nowhere in sight, dropped her baby in a snowbank to die and rejoined the herd. I respect our cows and on good days love 'em, but times like this I'm reminded they're ignorant and selfish animals, self-preservationists first and foremost.

Dad kneels down next to me and we get the calf unburied. It's alive in the thin truck headlights, but it might not be in proper

light. The wind starts to blow harder, trying to bury the calf again, and I think back to how it played the same trick on Jimmy. I hate the fucking wind.

“Take it in the truck,” Dad says, “get it in a hot tub, then get back out here and help me corral these heifers.”

We get the calf loaded onto the seat next to me and I crank up the heat and hightail it back home. I slide a little as I pull up to the house and the calf almost falls off the seat. I throw the truck into park and haul that little cow up the stairs. I prop it on my knee and fling open the screen door, then reach for the front door and just barely catch the calf before it slips to the welcome mat. I struggle through the living room and upstairs to the bathroom, where I put in the stopper and turn the hot water on. The calf hasn't let out so much as a shiver and it's anybody's guess whether it's alive or whether I just threw a dead cow into our bathtub.

I put the toilet seat cover down and sit with my back against the tank, exhaustion setting in while I listen to the tub fill and get the feeling back in my fingers. I've left dirty water tracks on the tile floor and I think Mom'll be mad, then I realize I've also brought livestock into the house, so I figure my boot tracks'll be the least of the trouble.

I look out into the hall and notice a thin strip of light

leaking along the floor and I get up to investigate. The door to Mom and Dad's room at the end of the hallway is open and a lamp is on.

"You awake, Mom?" I say, but no one answers. So I walk to the door and nudge it open with my foot. Mom's not in bed.

"Mom?" I call out, but I'm talking to an empty house and I know it.

I hoof it down the stairs before I remember the calf, then I hoof it back up the stairs and get down on my knees and look at the thing, the water rising now, giving off a little steam. "Hey," I say, and the calf actually opens one miraculous, fluttering eye, then closes it again.

"Listen up," I say to the half dead calf. "You pull through now, ya hear? We'll get you some colostrum, a new mom, whatever it is you need. But you die, you don't get shit. So don't die."

Then I turn off the hot water and tumble down the stairs and outside. One of the four wheelers is missing, but I hop on the other one and head toward the hills.

The headlights on the four wheeler don't pierce more than a few feet into the blowing snow, but it's a straight shot, nothing but sagebrush and those low-lying hills between the house and Jimmy.

If you get a snowflake into your palm and give it a good study, you'll see it's full of jagged edges, that the thing is basically a heap of tiny knives stuck together, which is also what it feels like when the wind drives it into your face. I hunch over the handlebars and glance up on occasion to make sure the hills haven't suddenly reared up in front of me, but otherwise I barrel forward.

Jimmy always hated the snow, 'cause it made it hard to do the things he loved best: riding, roping and running his mouth. The only kid in the entire damn school who complained about a snow day.

When the hills appear in the headlights, I skirt around their left flank and refocus on the couple feet of light tunneling through the blizzard. The falling snow is so thick it's like I've driven into another world entirely, separate from the ranch, where I might just stay, or be stuck, forever. I suppose it's a taste of what Jimmy must feel.

Then there she is, Mom in a bright red jacket, her wool mitts raised to the storm, a four-wheeler collecting snow not far off. She glances over her shoulder when my headlights first hit her, but then she turns her attention back toward the night sky. I can't see Jimmy, but as I get closer, I can see the taut rope trailing upward.

“Mom!” I yell. I see her lips moving, but I can’t hear what she’s saying. I hop off the four wheeler and slog through the deepening snow toward her. Then I see the glint of a big kitchen knife in her hand. In the darkness and the whipping snow, the blade looks too bright, out of place. Then Mom attacks the rope, making big sawing motions at the thick cord.

I stop short and let her go at it. This is something she needs to do. I peer up into the sky, trying to make out some faint glow, a hint of Jimmy weathering the storm, but all I get are snowflakes burning my eyes, so I look back at Mom, who’s almost through the rope now, her mittens covered in frayed bits.

“I haven’t been right, Chase,” she says. “I been talking to Jimmy’s ghost out here.” I’m not sure whether I should act surprised or not, but Mom doesn’t seem to care. I wonder if maybe she knew that I knew, or if Jimmy gave me away somehow. “But I need to be letting go.”

“It’s alright, Mom,” I say. “We’re all hurting.”

I step close behind her and hug her around the shoulders.

“But you didn’t kill him, Chase.”

“Neither did you.”

The rope’s only a thread now, but she pauses. The hum of the four wheeler barely registers against the storm. If there’s anything anywhere in the world but swirling snow, I don’t know it.

“I’ve been wanting Jimmy,” she whispers. I can barely hear her, the wind is so fierce. “But I can’t have him,” she says. “He’s not mine anymore.”

She raises the knife for one last swipe, but then just holds it up there like she’s waiting for the storm to gather its strength and do it for her. Then her hand opens like a sprung trap and she drops the knife into the snow, where it quickly disappears in a drift piling up against the fencepost. She looks down at the hole it’s carved in the snow, then she turns her gaze toward the rope trailing off into the flurry.

I kneel next to her and dig out the knife. If Jimmy is our joint secret now, it seems it might take both of us to set him free. I pride myself on being useful, but I’ve never felt needed like this. Mom takes a half step back, then looks at me intently, her eyes open wide despite the snow, her lips tight over her chattering teeth. Then she glances down at the last bit of rope still holding on and I reach across her with the knife. It only takes a touch of the blade to what’s left of the rope to finish it off. But rather than rubber band out into the dark night, the rope hangs there a minute, before starting to slowly descend toward the ground, where it coils in the snow like a snake done with the charming.

And then there’s Jimmy, the rope still dangling from his left boot. He looks more like a snow angel than a boy, like the

only reason we can even see him is the dusting of snow on his invisible self. His glow is so faint it's more an idea. I wonder if we're mostly just imagining him at this point, creating him from the snow and some faraway moonlight.

He stops not far from us and gives us a good long while to look him over. The wind is something wicked, but he doesn't seem to mind, holds as steady as if his boots were planted in calm summer soil.

Then the snow sort of overcomes him, or maybe becomes him is a better way of saying it. For a moment, Jimmy exists as nothing but snow, then he's gone. Mom crumples to the ground, half disappearing into a deep drift, and I put a hand on her back.

"What was I gonna do?" she says.

I want to tell her that all this isn't on her, to remind her I made the final cut, but I'm feeling something somewhere deep and quiet and I don't say anything.

I half expect Jimmy's ghost to reappear, to offer up some kind of guidance, but he's probably learned his lesson by now, is probably well on his way to wherever it was he was always looking. I hope it's a helluva trip, and I hope to see him there in good time.

When I pull up in front of the barn, Dad is just staggering back from the field, where I left him without a truck in the middle of a

blizzard. He turns when he hears me coming and shouts, “What in the hell, Chase?” But then he sees Mom wrapped around me, her head burrowed deep into my back.

I cut the motor and she slumps off the seat and Dad hustles over to support her.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” I say.

Mom throws both her arms around Dad’s neck and starts to sob and he holds her, dumbfounded in the snow. I feel like I’ve delivered something besides my mother, like I dropped off a handful of possible futures and now I’ve gotta stick around to see which of them plays out. We’ll have to round up those calving heifers still, but first I slip off to the house to check in on the bathtub calf, thinking maybe Jimmy’s leaving has left a little more room for the living.

He’d do that. He’d make sure of that, if he could.



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