

Cowmen of Renown

by

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COWMEN OF RENOWN

BY HANNAH KAUFFMAN-SKLOFF

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Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: a waste of desert sand;
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Wind shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

--William Butler Yeats, *The Second Coming*

The Belle Fourche Fair began on a Friday. A dusty agricultural competition that took over Belle Fourche for the first weekend in April every year, it marked its arrival with a sudden sharpening of the sweet and filthy barnyard aroma that ordinarily pervaded the town. In all the years that Mack Rown had inhaled the indelicate combination of shit and dander, it smelled, this year, for the first time, not like unwelcome outsiders in the saloon, or nowhere to park on Center Street, but like victory. Paula Rown and the girls, Anne and Faye, perused the contending produce under a striped tent while Mack hobnobbed with the show's cattle judges, brought in from neighboring counties as far as Custer. Anne and Faye always enjoyed the spectacle of oversized vegetables – Anne for the semblance of magic in nature, Faye for the rugged farmers' sons tending to their families' displays. Their giggles and gasps drowned out the sighs of Paula who, every year, swore she would enter a vegetable competition the next time around - as she certainly had an impressive garden, all the neighbors thought so - and yet, every year, lost in a labyrinth of sameness, she forgot.

She strolled a distance behind her daughters, admiring the armor of the artichokes, the ostentation of the bell peppers, the volume of the cauliflower, the glamour of the eggplants. She felt the sun hit her face in measured intervals, blocked on and off by the red stripes of the tarp. It made her feel drowsy and far away. Dazed

in contemplation of a giant's harvest in banded sunlight, she nearly bowled over her daughters who stood considering a tomato the size of Faye's fifteen-year-old head. Paula felt a pang of regret and self-pity in her gut, strong enough to make her wince, but not so strong that she wasn't sure she'd not feel this exact pang the following year.

When the bull competition was called over the loudspeaker, Paula and the girls found seats in the bleachers facing the empty corral among ruddy-faced farmers' wives and their squealing children. The announcer called out a name and a number, to which the crowd responded with a smattering of polite applause. A lanky man in a neckerchief trotted his white freckled bull into the ring. They were met in the center by a portly judge with a waxed yellowing mustache and a coffee stain on the orb beneath his jacket where his belly button ought to have been. He held a clipboard and paced around the animal while the bull's owner chewed his lip and tracked the judge with an anxious eye. After what Anne would remember as some of the most tedious five minutes of her life, the judge nodded, and the gawky man walked him in a deliberate circle, said "Thanky" and jogged off towing his bull behind him.

Six bulls, six nods, and half an hour of fidgeting on sweaty seats later, the announcer called "Number 1018, Mack Rown" to the corral. The Rown women perked up some and clapped appropriately. Mack emerged first from the bull tent with a lead line in his hands and, scanning the bleachers for a moment, directed a raised eyebrow towards the modest audience, as if to say *watch this*. He tugged on the rope and out of the tent strode a beast so magnificent that the onlookers held their breath. When the bull walked, tremendous muscles shifted under the jet coat, almost

blue. The dust kicked up under his glazed hooves created a cloud upon which he seemed to float. His head was frightening and beautiful, and looked monstrous for his body, as he was still young. Paula's heart set to beating terrifically at the sight of him. Her cheeks flushed with a feeling she recognized from her teenage years, a heat like both shame and fancy; her palms moistened. After a day under relentless sun Paula hadn't sweated until this moment. Anne noticed. She also noticed Paula's knuckles blanch gripping the bleachers as Mack and the bull arrived next to the judge, his mouth agape.

It took the judge a moment to uproot his small feet. The spectators watched the bull intently, examining him with the absorption of the judge himself: the perfect curvature of his spine leading to an enormously muscled rump, the wide rib cage beneath rippling black shoulders, the powerful chest protruding from sturdy, straight legs. But what astounded the crowd and the judge more than anything else was the pair of colossal black testes that hung between his taut thighs. The bull shifted his weight sending his balls knocking against his leg, and the crowd gasped together.

Mack stood absolutely still, unfazed, staring off at some indefinite point in the distance with a self-satisfied smile on his face. No one could touch him. Perfect symmetry. Perfect gait. Paula had been completely uninterested in Mack's ranching matters and had not bothered to look at the animal since he was a young calf when Mack first brought him home. Not to mention that if Mack caught anyone checking out his bull, he'd start babbling to no end, behavior that Paula avoided like the red ant hills in her garden. But now, Paula felt a new flame of a familiar fire start to burn within her – she was struck with the desire to touch him, to know if his muscles were

hot under his skin, if he felt as spring-loaded as he looked. After the walk and final inspection, the judge gave Mack the nod, a nod of approval more than a nod of dismissal this time. Mack trotted off with his bull to meet the preemptive pats on the back, and as they disappeared behind the tent flaps, Paula wiped her hands on her skirt, breathless.

It was no surprise to anyone that first prize went to Number 1018, Mack Rown. He pumped his fat fist in the air and approached the judge, who whispered some quick, serious words to him before shaking his hand. A woman with big breasts bouncing in a low cut dress approached the bull with a garland, placing it over his horns before she stroked his face with her long, red nails. Paula was gripped with a jealousy so impetuous that she shot to her feet. The people around her, including her daughters, stared at her with cocked heads. Mortified by her rashness, she grabbed her girls by the wrists and began climbing down the bleachers toward the corral. She raised her voice to say, "Let's go congratulate your father".

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By the time Mack Rown had a family of his own, Belle Fourche had grown into a proper town of ranching and agriculture. A single row of amenities, Center Street, marked the midpoint of town from which plots of land expanded, a parched flower unfurling. A quiet bank, a smirched inn, a tall church, a full bar. Center Street's chalky road stretched south, so that the Black Hills loomed hazy and indefinitely far on the horizon between the hardware store and the grocery. Always humming with a predictable bustle, residents came to Center Street to run their errands and get their dose of socializing, because in Belle Fourche, to gossip was to

participate. The railroad hacked through town like a dull blade, truncating Center Street violently. The train came panting through twice a day, once at eight in the morning and once at three in the afternoon, Belle Fourche's clanking, scrap metal town clock. On the other side of the tracks from the row were farmlands, dry grass stretched over miles of prairie like a patchwork of khaki velvet, cut into awkward trapezoids by barbed wire and faded white fencing. Dusty paths ran throughout Belle Fourche like capillaries in a smoker's heart, thin and dry. The houses were wooden and wheezy; they swayed and moaned with the trees on windy days. Most had paint-peeled porches wrapped around them where families would sip lemonade and sweat, drowsy from the tedium, in the summer. In fall, the dry alfalfa farms wafted sweet desiccation over the town.

Rown Ranch, though bigger, was not unlike the other ranch houses that peppered the Belle Fourche prairie: dirty, creaky, and impossibly old. The air was always heavy with the bleating and bellowing of livestock, and although Rown Ranch was still, it was rarely – if ever – silent. The house maintained the same decor throughout the generations, each relic loaded with the oppressive energy of stasis – wooden chairs and trunks littered the rooms, a worn leather couch scarred with cigarette burns and spilled whiskey, musty cowhide rugs that exhaled swirling dust every time they were stepped on, wire bed frames that squeaked without being touched, faded wall paper, once colored with pink roses now almost entirely imperceptible and yellowing at the corners, and an ash-ridden fireplace that impregnated the entire house with a smoky scent, even months after it had last been lit. All three Rown generations had eaten around the same unfinished oak table,

looked out onto the same fenced prairie. By surveying the room, a disjointed family poking at their food around an old table, flecks of dust glowing gold and unnoticed suspended in the air around them, it was impossible to tell that any time had passed since the days of Jackson Rown, the first Rown in Belle Fourche. Dust settled, flies settled. The house was crystallized in the unrelenting torpor of Belle Fourche and the Rown family.

Even the days themselves seemed untouched by the passage of time. The house would begin to stir and creak when the sun rose, slowly softening the floorboards, and Paula would be up at six fixing breakfast for Mack and the girls, filling the house with the rich and inimitable aroma of butter melting. Anne and Faye would milk the already lactating dairy cows and a few of the Rowns' personal cows before breakfast, something they had done since early childhood. When they started going to school, a converted barn two miles closer to town, Anne first, then Faye, began taking their breakfast outside in order to finish the chore. They would arrive stiff and exhausted to class every morning, with milk and oatmeal splattered on their dresses. Mack, meanwhile, would rouse slowly, cracking and moaning with each changed position. Paula prepared his breakfast last, knowing the fuss he would make about a cold meal. She'd wait until she heard his unmistakable hacking cough and thudding, graceless footsteps, like he was trying to dig his heels into the foundation of the house. This was how all of the Rown men had walked, lumbering and top heavy; they died with their heels as calloused as bedrock.

While the girls were at school, Mack would tend to the ranch and Paula would tend to her garden. Paula gardened with a mindless fervor that was unnerving to

watch: her body moved with precision, determination, and purpose, but her eyes were wooly with detachment, a being elsewhere, her face otherwise blank, save for the film of sweat that would form on her lip in the hotter months. In the mornings she and Mack seldom spoke, until Paula fixed lunch and Mack started on a rant about the first thing that came to mind: price of dairy, hole in the fence, backache, neighbors. She would be polite, as she always was, and passively indulge him without saying or doing anything. It was precisely this pause, this silence that egged him on, as he was the type of man who had to fill each momentary quiet with whatever words flew off his tongue the fastest. Paula always thought it was nonsense, the noise of her life, but it was easier that way, easier to leave Mack's path of bullshit unobstructed. After lunch, he would go back to the cattle and she would get into bed and just lie there, him forgetting she existed, her wishing she didn't, until dinner when the girls were home from school. For Mack, dinner was lunch with a bigger audience.

Paula often had the sensation of sleepwalking through her days, mind and body trudging through mud. She had a permanent crescent indentation on the pad of her pointer finger where she would dig her thumbnail to check if she was asleep or awake. After dinner, the girls and Paula would clean the dinner dishes as Mack drank himself into a stupor. And Paula would take herself to bed, letting down her long hair and running her brush through it until she smoothed every tangle.

. . .

Anne stood transfixed, paralyzed, a scream, a solid mass caught in her throat, choking her. Her brain felt like it would explode sooner than register what it was that she was looking upon. Was this – this *was* her mother's body, the dark hair, now a

wild tangle around her face. Her face. The beautiful, bow shaped mouth that once kissed her face and formed that smile of comfort and solidarity that thawed her on the coldest days, now contorted into an expression of hideous agony. Anne's stomach lurched. Those same slender legs that folded neatly beneath her in the garden were now twisted and splayed at unnatural angles around her, blood streaked and stiff. Her delicate chest and swollen belly had been torn open, her waxy skin chewed through from sternum to pelvis, curling up and out around the edges of the wound as if she had ruptured. Anne's eyes searched that scene of carnage, and as they focused on Paula's pathetically exposed heart, visible through the cracked ribcage and crusty sinews, Anne's own set to beating so violently against her chest, broken itself, that she thought, hoped, that she, too, would burst. Just below the ribs, Anne noticed Paula's womb was emptied; there was no fetus, only a gnarled, frayed umbilical chord and a trail of blood and placenta spilling toward the hills. Anne's legs gave out and she dropped to her knees. She watched a fly land on the cracked blood beneath her mother's nose, and the scream finally escaped her throat, wild and inhuman, a scream to wake the dead. But not her, this one beyond death.

Later, she searched her face in the mirror. Her dark locks were stringy and glued to her forehead with sweat; there was a small, blood-crust bald patch next to her ear where she had torn out a handful of hair earlier that day. Her face was sallow and tired, deep lines carved like scars around her features, and she remarked upon how old she looked, how much she resembled her mother in this moment, prematurely aged. She thought about the last time they had gardened together, just before Paula grew too big to bend over. *Gardening is simply a matter of navigating the cycle*

of sex, death, and rebirth, Paula had said. She played the line over and over again, putting the words back on her mother's tongue. It had been such a dry day that sound fell dead as soon as it left the mouth, but Paula's words had an inborn quality of quiet, as if she wasn't addressing Anne at all. Anne noticed this as odd because, for the few months leading up until that day in the garden, she hadn't caught even a tinge of the detached cadence she was so accustomed to hearing in her mother's voice. In those few months, Paula started asking the girls about their love lives. She hummed and wore make-up. But Paula crouched in the garden with wooly eyes in June and she died in September. Anne grabbed the sides of the sink and squeezed as hard as she could, gritting her teeth and shaking her head. *How did I get here?* It was unnatural, what her mother had done, and Anne knew that nothing good could have come from it, but nothing like this. She never expected anything like this.

. . .

There had been Rowns in Belle Fourche for as long as anyone could remember – which, just three generations, was not all that long. The Rown men were known to have had broad shoulders, big guts, fat heads and no shame. And even though they had enough confidence not to worship idols, they venerated the famed Deadwood sheriff and frontiersman Seth Bullock with a passion not unlike filial adoration. The name itself implied some of his many virtues – boundless strength, virility, steadfastness.

Seth Bullock was forced into the Rown family history like an unfitting puzzle piece. Jackson Rown, the patriarch of the Rown's dynasty in Belle Fourche and self-proclaimed progeny of Seth Bullock, was a bastard born in Deadwood during the

Black Hills Gold Rush, the same year that Bullock first came to town. Jackson's mother, Rose, as he was made to call her, was proudly one of the first and foremost so-called prairie doves in Deadwood. Despite his ceaseless supplications, she never revealed to Jackson the identity of his father under the pretense of its scandalous nature. In reality she just had no idea.

One morning in Deadwood, Jackson, then a boy of seven, was walking with Rose to the general store when Seth Bullock passed them in the street. Bullock bowed to kiss Rose's hand and his moustache brushed her milky shoulder. She turned toward Jackson and winked as Bullock walked away. That was all the confirmation Jackson needed. Rose could have never known then that this wink was all the confirmation Jackson needed, and would continue to shape the Rown name up to its abrupt curtailing two generations later.

Seth Bullock, freshly made sheriff, had become a household name just as soon as he set foot in town. He was set apart from the other men of Deadwood by his sharp manners and his excessive mustache, giving him a coupling of sophistication and machismo that was anomalous; even Deadwood's finest had dirty fingernails. As a boy, Jackson asked Rose to tell the story of the first man Bullock ever killed over and over again. How he caught Clell Watson stealing a horse red-handed. How Bullock had escaped death by the skin of his teeth in the shootout, took Watson into custody and saw to his death sentence. How, when the lynch mob appeared and scared off the executioner on the day Watson was to be hanged, Bullock climbed the scaffold and pulled the lever himself, sending Watson to his

rightful death in the name of the law. And then, how he alone held off the angry mob with just a shotgun.

It was Seth Bullock who became known as the father of Belle Fourche after negotiating with the railroad officials to make the area a loading site for cattle, as he had a friend with a cattle ranch there to whom he owed a favor. Belle Fourche honored his memory by erecting an iron-cast bust in the middle of Center Street with the inscription “The Finest of Frontiersmen” chiseled proudly on the pedestal. At the time of Belle Fourche’s formal conception, Jackson was sixteen and he promised himself that the day he reached eighteen he’d find himself a wife and move to Belle Fourche to become the best damned cattle rancher in town. He proposed to the blacksmith’s daughter, a red-faced girl with a thick neck named Constance, after seeing her heft a giant slab of iron into her daddy’s store. She accepted with a single nod of her boxy head. Jackson’s mother had been running Deadwood’s brothel and had contracted syphilis of the brain, from which she was slowly wasting away. He abandoned her to her fate, and he quit Deadwood with Constance to seek his fame and fortune. They descended the north face of the Black Hills to find a rolling landscape of bluestem and wheatgrass dotted with cattle and sheep and a shallow brown river snaking across the prairie. Before long they had built a spacious ranch house, and Constance gave birth to a son, Samuel. Jackson had a steadily growing herd of cattle and the Rowns began their legacy of prominence in Belle Fourche.

The Rowns preserved the myth of Seth Bullock as their progenitor from generation to generation, passing legendary stories down to Mack Rown, the last in the line of Rown men, and the one who arguably revered him most.

“One time, he came face to face with Wild Bill Turner, the terror of Deadwood, Belle Fourche and every town in between,” his father, Samuel Rown, had told him of Bullock. “He’d shot a cowhand in the Red Dog Saloon and come out into the street with his pistol still hot in his hand – and there was Bullock, standing there like he was waiting for him. He didn’t even need to draw, he just raised an eyebrow, and I shit you not, Turner stopped dead in his tracks, dropped his gun, and turned himself in!”

Mack’s young heart raced at the thought of so much power.

But the legend found new life in the otherwise unimaginative mind of Mack Rown. Mack saw Bullock as a man who commanded intimidated respect from those around him, who stopped at nothing to get what he wanted, and who always had the last word. From a young age, he mimicked a misguided model of his hero and great-grandfather: he constantly wore a gunbelt, albeit empty, and swaggered so that the holsters slapped theatrically against his fat thighs. In school, he terrorized his teachers who reprimanded him for his frequent absences and sloppy work, once going so far as to hide a rattlesnake in one’s desk. Already as an adolescent, he was disliked for his truculent self-importance.

Another bastard in a long line a bastards the parents of his classmates said.

Once he was able to grow a mustache, Mack groomed his to resemble the hairy boomerang beneath his hero Bullock’s nose as closely as possible, modeled after the faded Albumen print hanging in the corner of his vanity. Though the mustache hid his thin upper lip, his face remained a homely amalgamation of misfit features. Even his mother thought he had a mug that was hard to love. He had a

bulbous nose exacerbated by hard, beady eyes spread too far from one another, and wore an invariable expression of smugness when his face wasn't twisted with anger. Atop his oiled hair he wore a Stetson, ever pristine and studded with silver, with a bolo tie to match. "A man's only worth as good as he looks," Mack announced, when asked why he was always dressing so much fancier than everyone else. He only wore crisp collared shirts and stiff blue jeans that he made his mother, and later his wife, Paula, clean weekly; he threw a fit if they were stained or wrinkled, even though he spent most of his days out on the ranch with the cattle.

When a young Mack lost the election to become Sheriff of Belle Fourche to a hot shot from Custer even younger than himself he was outraged by the betrayal of his townsmen, marching through the streets, bursting into every establishment and shouting:

"I *am* Belle Fourche!" His bungling mouth twisted "Fourche" into a wet "Foosh".

Lacking the official mandate to maintain justice in Belle Fourche, Mack channeled the unwavering self-made power that he believed Bullock embodied, and became a self-proclaimed vigilante, taking it upon himself to exact retribution for the most trivial irritations and offenses. His victims ranged from an occasional stubborn cow that was too slow to return from pasture to Jake Macon, with whom Mack provoked a bar fight because he didn't like his jokes, or Peter Badger, whose mischievous dog occasionally strayed onto Mack's land.

"Who in the hell does Peter Badger think he is, letting his mangy-ass dog run all over Belle Fourche, pissin' on my fields and chasin' my cattle? I swear, if that

damn hound comes near my livestock again, or anyone else's for that matter, I'm gonna kill it."

His dark jowls and double chin jiggled as he complained hyperbolically at the supper table. His wife, Paula, and two daughters, to his great displeasure, Anne and Faye, sat in indifferent silence, but he never noticed. When he shot at Badger's dog two weeks later and clipped his tail, no one was surprised but everyone – Peter Badger in particular – was outraged. "All in a day's work," Mack had said. This was how he made his many lifelong enemies and fearful friends. They carped about him often, but only carefully behind his back.

"Who in the hell does Mack Rown think he is, shootin' at other people's dogs like that?" Perry Buckle pounded the table with his fist.

"He's just a lousy blowhard," said Carl Poisson with a wave, "You think he's a killer, what with all those pretty little clothes on? He's just makin' a show."

"Man oh man, he sure does look ridiculous, don't he?" Wes Carlson sniggered into his beer, "He thinks he intimidates us with his pearl buttons and silver studs? He looks like a damn peacock!"

"Now now, fellas," Carl Poisson took up again, "let me remind you that while Mack Rown may be a ham-handed bully, he's also a loyal member of this community." A wave of groans and eye rolling. "I'm serious. You remember what he did when he saw that fella spyin' on Badger's wife takin' off her stockings, and touchin' himself all sexy like?"d

“Carl, that fella was an Injun just passin’ through town, and he wasn’t spyin’, he was just pissin’ up against the tree,” Perry Buckle shook his head, “and Rown beat that poor Injun within an inch a his life.”

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Though the cause of Paula’s death was officially unknown, the coroner, with the help of the Sheriff’s Department, released a tentative statement that she had most likely been mauled by a wild animal, maybe a grizzly bear or mountain lion, when she had perhaps stepped out for some fresh air in the middle of the night. These sorts of attacks were rare but not unheard of in Belle Fourche. As to the whereabouts of the unborn fetus, they assumed the animal either ate it on the spot or carried it off for its cubs. Sheriff Tom Hanson came to the Rows’ home before the funeral to share his hypothesis with the family. Anne wanted more than anything to believe Tom’s story, but couldn’t. She could barely bring herself to look him in the eye.

Mack was shaking his head and groaning “What am I gonna do? What in the hell am I gonna do?” while Faye cried into his sleeve. In the days immediately following Paula’s death, Mack erupted in fury when reminded of his loss – when opening the can of beans that would be his dinner, when the sink overflowed with dishes, when he had to dig a dirty shirt to wear out of the laundry. “God *dammit!*” he would yell. He began drinking more heavily and more often, out of self-pity and boredom more than grief. Anne and Faye had taken over the household chores once Paula’s pregnancy had entirely incapacitated her, but after her death they both got lost in their separate kinds of bereavement. Faye entertained guests: friends from school who she let hold her hand while she cried on her bed, reporters from *The Belle*

Fourche Post & Bee and *The Black Hills Pioneer* for whom she answered questions, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief and sniffing.

Anne was lost and alone. She spent most of her time sitting in Paula's rocker on the back porch or taking walks to the big spruce in the backyard, sensing the presence of death around her for the first time. Her childhood seemed to have died with her mother. Perhaps that was what it meant to be an adult, she figured, to know mortality, to feel the breath of the dead on the back of your neck and know with certainty that you will continue to feel it from now on. Her head was clouded with this notion of permanence, of infinity, and her heart was twisted by the loneliness of protecting a dark secret.

She began biting her nails, as much a nervous habit as a contemplative gesture. She'd sit on the back porch, looking out over the arid expanse of grass and dusty cows' backs, gnawing on her fingertips and thinking about how to think about her mother, a reflective act that she forced herself to execute with the reluctant performance of a chore like grooming the horses or milking the cows. As much as she was not ready for her mother's death to find a place in her reality yet, she desperately wanted to answer the question she had been asking herself since she'd stood over her mother's mangled body: *how did I get here?* It was a daunting and exhausting effort, wading through the murkiness of a mind in mourning.

Complicating this further was the nagging sense that she never truly knew her mother. She knew the lines in her face, the dirt under her nails, the sweet and mild smile Paula would shine on her that seemed to say *One of these days, all of this will come to pass*. Anne knew her mother had hated her father, had often watched her face briefly

darken when Mack's belly grazed her as he sidled behind her chair, the contact a reminder of her fate. She knew how alone her mother felt, because Anne's own loneliness ached like a deep, eternal bruise and she was not even married to a pathological egomaniac. And that sometimes Paula would leave the house to sleep with strange men under the pretense of visiting her parents in Spearfish, which was certainly not true – Paula loathed her parents for having sold her to the Rowns those many years ago and had not spoken to them since.

At that time, Paula had been passionately in love with a cowboy who had passed through Spearfish in the beginning of summer. His skin was dark, it smelled like cigarettes and earth and he grabbed her so hard when they made love that she would have bruises in fingers up her thighs. She loved him with the real and innocent idealism and selflessness of a nineteen year old, and when he left Spearfish after that summer she wept in grief and in elation, knowing that someone in the world could make her feel as he had made her feel, and that she might never feel that way again. She wrote him letters that she couldn't send about how she wished he could have carried her off with him into the Black Hills and that they would never find their way out again. A month later, her father informed her of her marriage arrangements to Mack Rown, the infamously arrogant son of a prominent cattle ranching family in Belle Fourche, and she was plunged into a deep, quiet, and indelible despair.

Paula was remarkably beautiful and had earned herself a reputation as such, just by word of mouth, within the tri-town area of Spearfish, Belle Fourche, and Deadwood. Her skin was like fresh butter against her dark eyebrows and wistful eyes, with a straight nose leading to the kind of lips one feels indecent contemplating. She

came from a well-to-do family, her father, Montgomery Chambers, owning and operating one of the more prosperous barley farms in the region, which made her a desirable candidate for a spouse. Monty Chambers was all business in every sense of the term. He had a gaze like a wolf and shoulders like a pit-bull. His boots were always buffed, his hair always coiffed, his belt buckle polished. He did not perform favors selflessly nor invest energy and emotion generously; he put in to take out. This included his relationships with his wife and daughter, to whom he spoke only when absolutely necessary, and even then, sparingly. When Samuel Rown approached Monty with an enticing business proposition, Monty had to accept.

“So, in return for his connections at the barley mill in Pierre, I’ve agreed to give his son Paula’s hand,” Monty Chambers leaned back in his chair as though he was partaking in the most mundane conversation.

“Pa?” Paula’s mouth was agape, her head cocked.

“Marriage, Paula,” he continued, sounding worn, annoyed, “You will be marrying Mack Rown. We’re going to have supper with them in Belle Fourche on Thursday.”

“But—“ her father shot her a look. She stood up, “But what if I don’t want to marry Mack Rown?”

“This is not about what you want,” he rose, a tall man, towering over her from across the table, “A deal’s a deal, and I have a name to protect. A Chambers never goes back on his word.” With that, Monty left the room, leaving Paula, her face in her hands, crying at the dinner table next to her silent mother, Ellen, pushing food around her plate with a fork and looking much like a ruffled bird.

Paula disliked Mack immediately – the way he chewed with his mouth open and how he did not look her in the eye, how no matter what the situation he raised his voice to speak, as though he was trying to be heard over others. She hated how he walked with his feet turned out and his pelvis thrust forward, and the sour way his breath smelled, that he never asked her questions. How all he seemed to be able to think about was cattle ranching, neighbor bashing, and money. But they were married in November. Paula was twenty, Mack was twenty-two.

She withdrew into sadness, her distant beauty emanating a poignancy that hardly anyone in Belle Fourche could appreciate. Women thought her standoffish and proud, men thought her frigid. Her despondency made Paula even more captivating, with a mournful grace that appealed even to Mack's gross sensibility. In the early years of their marriage, he pawed at her with the little gentleness he was capable of, and she yielded her body like a landlord giving a renter the keys of an empty house. After Anne was born, Mack was at her again within months, hungry for male successors. Paula had never been more relieved than when Doctor Hornwagen advised she avoid pregnancy at all costs after the hemorrhaging during Faye's birth. Mack stopped touching her, having lost all hope for the Rowns' posterity. When Paula found out she was pregnant a third time, nearly sixteen years after Faye was born, she seduced Mack with false promises of fertility, lying that the doctor told her in her advanced age she was more likely to conceive a son. He never suspected anything. For the first time in their marriage, Paula was grateful for Mack's denseness.

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Rown Ranch itself was five miles from Center Street, the largest dairy ranch in Belle Fourche, set on a yawning plot of land between the ranches of Carl Poisson and Peter Badger. Badger was gangling, unruffled, and had big purple bags under his droopy eyes for as long as he could recognize himself in a mirror. He and his wife Molly had hands that were perpetually red and calloused from shearing their sheep and pulling the wool. Even the hands of their six-year-old son were starting to pink. Despite their vehement Catholicism, the Badgers were the most loyal attendees of the Belle Fourche Episcopal Church and quite possibly the only residents of Belle Fourche that didn't drink. Peter Badger tried, good Christian that he was, not to hate a single one of God's creations, but Mack made this a true challenge for him, teasing Badger about his churlish wife and shabby clothes, and trying, every time he saw him, to browbeat him into taking a drink. The Badgers left their property as little as possible.

Carl Poisson was a gentle, gray rancher with a modest herd of plump beef cows and bulls and a nearly toothless smile. No one knew how old he was exactly; he had the air of a man who had been alive forever. He was a cowboy well into his adult years, until his hips creaked louder than the saddle he swayed upon, at which point he saved up to buy himself five beef cows and settle in Belle Fourche. His face and neck were like tanned leather from endless seasons driving cattle through the Black Hills under the unrelenting South Dakota sun. His heart ached with love for the hills, rocky summits like a row of jagged teeth emerging from the evergreen wood, for the smell of dust on sweaty hide, for the noble way his herd looked twilit in the pasture.

Posted on his front door was a wooden plaque upon which the Cowman's Prayer was etched:

*Now O Lord, please lend me thine ear,
The prayer of a cattleman to bear;
No doubt the prayer may seem strange,
But I want you to bless our range.*

*Bless the round-ups year by year,
And don't forget the growing steer;
Water the lands with brooks and rills
For my cattle that roam a thousand hills.*

*Prairie fires, won't you please stop?
Let thunder roll and water drop.
It frightens me to see the smoke;
Unless it's stopped, I'll go dead broke.*

*As you, O Lord, my herd behold,
It represents a sack of gold;
I think at least five cents a pound
Will be the price of beef year round.*

*One thing more and then I'm through,--
Instead of one calf, give my cows two.
I may pray different from other men,
But I've had my say and now, Amen.¹*

Poisson cottoned to the Rowns for reasons he could not understand, but he didn't trouble himself trying. At one point or another he had lived adjacent to each generation of the Rown family in Belle Fourche, and as much as they might have tyrannized the town, they were always good to him.

It was on Carl Poisson's land that Anne Rown, then 17, beheld the disemboweled body of her mother, the first occurrence in a sequence of violence and death that led the Rown family to its dismantling and ultimate ruin. Anne was Paula's

¹ Though the author of "The Cowman's Prayer" is unknown, the poem was included in an anthology called *Songs of the Cowboys* by Jack Thorp in 1921.

eldest, with Faye just barely a year her junior. Not only did Paula and Anne physically resemble each other, which they had to a remarkable extent since Anne's early childhood – granted Paula had thickened around the middle some with age, and the corners of her eyes turned down slightly with crow's feet – they had the same cowboy-coffee-colored hair framing the face with a delicate wave, same slight pinch to the nose and arch to the eyebrows that made them look refined and disenchanted, same soft curve of the hips and slender ankles that made them tantalizing to the men they encountered - but they had an interior resemblance, an essential closeness to one another that stemmed from something deeper than the likeness of their timeless beauty: they were dissatisfied. They felt like prisoners in the house of Rown, condemned to a lifetime of monotony on the languorous Belle Fourche prairie. It was an undeclared fact of their existences and it connected them in a feeling of foreignness in Belle Fourche that they could never reconcile. Their mutual sympathy was profound, each often weeping for the other's misfortune. They spent long hours in silent commiseration, Anne's head in her mother's lap, Paula stroking her hair, both imagining lives that neither led, to the tune of the creaking porch swing. Anne felt as though her mother was the only person in the world who was like her, the only ray of warmth in a world slowly fossilizing in its own stagnation.

Theirs was a closeness that Faye could not share, and for that matter did not care to share, as she thrived in Belle Fourche, reveling in her family's notoriety. This alone alienated the sisters from one another; Anne both disapproved of and resented Faye's ability to harmonize with the crawling lifestyle Belle Fourche demanded, and Faye, beautiful in her own right, thought Anne's looks were wasted on a loner. Faye

was glad, however, that, as a consequence of this, Anne went out in public less than she did, as she feared her looks would not get the credit they deserved when compared to those of her older sister. Their discordance was absolute, an ineradicable coolness that settled between them, like they were always speaking the same language with different accents.

Anne would never forget the day she first understood her utter incompatibility with her sister. Anne was seven, Faye was six. Anne was crouched over a cockroach in the driveway with a jar in her hand. Faye skipped up behind her and looked over her shoulder.

“Eww, what are you doing?” Faye asked.

“He’s hurt, this cockroach. He has some broken legs,” said Anne without looking up, “He’s gonna die if no one helps him, so I’ve gotta help him. He’s very scared.”

“Scared? He’s not scared. He’s a bug,” said Faye, incredulous.

“So what? Just look at him, all shakin’ and crawlin’ in circles... I just can’t stand to see him like this,” Anne frowned, about ready to cry.

“Well I can’t stand to see that nasty creepy-crawly at all anymore!” Faye stomped on the cockroach. It made a crunching sound. Anne was sure she heard it scream.

No, Anne would never forget that day because it was the day she recognized that the two things her sister lacked, she had in surplus: empathy and imagination. Faye had no recollection of such a day.

Faye loved Anne and Paula with all that familial obligation required, and made an exaggerated show of her relationship to them on Center Street, referring to Paula as “Mother dearest” and linking arms with a bruising tightness with Anne as they strolled through the market. At home, she would talk Anne’s ear right off her head, recalling endless inane stories of teenaged drama, never bothering to ask Anne a single question about herself. This behavior reminded Anne of Mack and it sickened her.

• • •

Sheriff Tom Hanson, the young lawman of Belle Fourche, came to Rown Ranch to check on Anne every day after the funeral, knowing Mack would be far from sensitive at a time like this. He thought these visits were heroically romantic gestures, his love for Anne trumping his fear of Mack’s wrath, as Mack already hated his guts and would boil over with fury if he knew the hotshot young sheriff and his daughter were together. He was disappointed that Anne seemed rather indifferent to his presence. Their relationship had cooled significantly around the time Paula got pregnant – Anne needed to be home to care for her mother, placed on bed rest two months into her pregnancy. She had cut her routine of late night visits to the sheriff’s house, had started keeping her eyes open when he kissed her. At the time, Tom suspected there was something else to it and had intended, just days before Paula’s death, to sort it out. But now he had to drop the matter forever.

His visits consisted of him joining her on the back porch as she sat in silence and watched the cows. He would make coffee and they would smoke cigarettes until smoke surrounded them like a veil. Every so often, Tom would take her face into his

hands and kiss her, his damsel in distress, tightlipped and hard. Then he would settle back into his chair, crossing his arms over his chest with a satisfied sigh, and silence would flood the space between them. Anne began to wish he wouldn't come at all. She saw Tom as a good, stable, happy force in her life that she was now certain she would one day lose. She feared that he would see the secret painted on her face, would hear it hissing between her teeth as she spoke. She resented that he would never be able to understand the kind of isolation she felt, that he thought a few dry kisses could pull her out of her heartache.

It was when Anne was sixteen that Tom first noticed her. He was driving past the reservoir when he saw a young woman on her knees bent over a hole in the frozen surface, her rear waving wildly in the air. It was late February, and the reservoir was beginning to thaw, the ice becoming thin as paper around the tree-trimmed edges. Tom saw the young woman's back strain through her wet blouse to pull something from the freezing water. He got out of his cruiser and began to hurry toward the commotion, but he stopped in his tracks when he saw two spindly fawn's legs emerge from the hole, scraping the ice frantically. The young woman plunged her arms into the hole a final time and when she pulled them out they cradled the fawn's slick body. Tom put his hands on his hips and let out an impressed "Huh!" The fawn trotted away awkwardly and Anne slumped back onto the ice, panting and smiling.

As he was contemplating the gracious curve of her neck he heard a deafening crack and saw the ends of her brown hair disappear into the reservoir. He sprinted toward her, chest puffed, eyes glued to the thin arms flailing in the water. He found a

patch of thicker ice and skidded onto the frozen lake. When he reached her, Tom lowered his forearms into the freezing pool and pulled a coughing Anne onto the ice by her underarms. When she caught her breath, she realized that the warmth she felt beneath her shoulders was his thigh. She looked up into his cobalt eyes and shivered. He looked like a rough angel. She let her gaze explore the features of his face; it traced his low eyebrows, his even nose, his strong jaw that jutted away from his smooth neck, the subtle cleft in his chin, the soft lips that framed perfect teeth. Then she popped up, thanked him, and rushed away.

“Let me at least give you a ride home,” he called after her.

“No,” she said without looking over her shoulder. “Goodbye!”

As she walked toward Rown Ranch, she couldn’t tell if the pounding in her chest was from the chill of the water or the way he had looked at her.

She was all Tom could think about as he lay in bed that night. He replayed the rescue over and over again, the look of pure awe and gratitude she gave him as he pulled her from the water. He fell asleep with his hand in his briefs.

Then a man of twenty-five and recently elected sheriff– the youngest Belle Fourche had ever had – he did not know that the benevolent beauty of his fantasies was Anne Rown, as he only knew of the Rowns by Mack’s reputation in town as a megalomaniac, a fact he came face to face with just days after his encounter with Anne, at the Full Moon Saloon.

Mack saw Tom sitting alone at the bar, wiping the frost off a half-drunk pint, his sheriff’s badge visible by its muted glint hanging off the side of Tom’s body. It pulled his thin blue shirt against his young chest and broad shoulders, revealing only

the very beginnings of the gut most men of Belle Fourche sported, save for Peter Badger who was as long and lean as a beanstalk. Mack, seeing an opportunity, plunked down at a table of men.

“Gentlemen,” he barked over their conversation, “believe me when I tell you that if, God forbid, somethin’ happened in Belle Fourche County that required any law-enforcin’ what so ever with this here *boy* on watch, we are fucked ten ways from Sunday.”

Tom’s neck stiffened; he kept his gaze steady and straight ahead of him. He could feel Mack’s eyes on the back of his head like a gun on a target.

“Yep,” he continued, “I’m concerned. I’ll bet his daddy rigged the election...”

“He was unopposed, Mack,” said Wes Carlson without looking at him.

“Well that’s what I mean,” he spat, “Like, his daddy, you know, e-lim-in-a-ted the competition...” He raised an eyebrow gravely, contrasting his maniacal smile.

“Mack, don’t be ridiculous,” Mayor Llewellyn Walker rolled his eyes, “I know you heard about all what that boy’s done over in Deadwood, working as an officer under his Daddy.”

“I have heard no such talk,” said Mack, looking away with feigned ignorance.

“Well I *know* you heard about that Deadwood bank robbery a few years back,” Llewellyn Walker pointed an accusing finger, “I think we talked about it ‘round this very table. Tommy Hanson took down three of Rapid City’s most famous gangsters by his lonesome, a boy of twenty-two! Just bam bam bam! All three. Shot in the legs, Locked up.”

Tom couldn't help but grin, remembering the rush, the incomparable exhilaration of exacting Justice and the celebrity it earned him in Deadwood County and apparently Belle Fourche as well. He relaxed his shoulders and reached for his beer.

"Sure did," chimed Wes Carlson, "And just last year, a little girl got ran over by a truck and was stuck, screaming and dying under the wheels. He *lifted* the car off the kid with his bare hands!"

"I tell you that kid is a genuine hero. And loyal as a dog," the Mayor nodded.

"Well isn't that the biggest load of shit I ever heard..."

It was all Mack could think to say. He brought his beer to his thin lips and sucked the rest down in a shameless show of virility. He slammed his empty glass on the table, and, looking around as if he had a better place to be, he sauntered toward the door. He brushed past Tom who was smirking into his glass, but stopped just after he passed him. Mack turned around and glared at the side of Tom's face until Tom had no choice but to look up into his hard, brown eyes. Mack stood silent for a moment in a transparent effort at intimidation. And then,

"You listen to me, boy. This is *my* town. I don't care how many cars you picked up, you better pray to Jesus you don't make a mess of anything 'round here. Or you'll have Mack Rown to answer to."

Two months later, the fiddling from the Belle Fourche square dance poured out of town hall into the road like warm water over cool hands. Mack saw to it that his family attended each and every social event in town, and dances were no exception. Mack made his presence known with Mayor Llewellyn Walker and other

Belle Fourche notables while Paula stood blank faced among the gaggle of their gossiping wives, and Faye dragged Anne to the dance floor, as there was a group of audacious young men who she trusted would cut in. When Tom arrived, the first thing he noticed was Mack's laugh roaring from the far corner. It stung him like a slap; he sucked in a sharp breath and walked toward the opposite side of the room. Julian Brock, the one-armed grocer, rushed to meet him, forcing a hot, dry hand into his. It was then that he caught sight of her, the exquisitely honorable young lady whose face had peppered his daydreams for two months, being whipped around the dance floor by a plainer but still lovely girl.

“Who are those girls?” Tom asked Julian Brock, pointing at the duo.

“Don't even think about it,” Brock pushed Tom's outstretched arm down to his side, “I know they're real pretty and all but you jest don't get mixed up with them.”

“Why not?” Tom asked, shaking Brock's grip from his forearm.

“Those are the Rown girls,” he said, lowering his voice, “Mack's kids.”

Tom looked to the corner and saw Mack pat Doctor Hornwagen so hard on the back it made the doctor's eyes bulge a little. His mind was made up; he adjusted his belt and strode toward the dance floor.

Anne blushed and looked down when she saw Tom approaching. He stopped in front of the two girls, removed his hat revealing sienna locks, and extended his hand toward Anne, who couldn't suppress her smile. Faye's face dropped, and she stormed away as soon as Anne rested her hand in the Sheriff's. As they danced, Anne caught her mother's attention and widened her eyes in excited disbelief, as if she'd

been given an undeserved gift, to which Paula smiled. Paula glimpsed Tom's revolver sitting heavy in his holster and her chest gave a violent, almost pleasant flutter. She straightened her skirt and looked around the room at the tired people having tired conversations. She dug her nail into her finger, and noticed Mack glaring hotly at the boy Sheriff while Faye whispered animatedly into his ear. Her heart sank as he advanced upon the young couple.

Mack placed a hand firmly on his daughter's shoulder, and her face fell. She closed her eyes, knowing, as she had spent the last two months listening to her father complain about Tom at the supper table. Tom, too, was unsurprised by this interruption, and he backed away from Anne quickly and respectfully. He found her irresistible, now more than ever - the high, round cheekbones highlighted by an inviting smattering of freckles, the small chin under flawless bow lips. She gave Tom an apologetic smile and took a few paces backwards, locking him in an imploring gaze that seemed to say *Save me*, before she turned around and walked off with her father, who had been glowering at him all the while.

They kept their courtship a secret, her sneaking off in the night to his house, a one-story cabin near the town center, and back to Rown Ranch before dawn. The bed, stove, tables and chairs all shared a common room that smelled perpetually of tobacco and frying oil. Anne loved to push her face deep into his pillows to feel as though she was drowning in his smell. She liked it in her hair, on the backs of her hands. She spent the first few months of their relationship apologizing for herself, for her inexperience and her apprehension. Tom was attracted to her innocence, to the idea that he was her first, her only; he liked teaching her about love and sex. It

made him feel big. Anne had never known what it was like to explore another person's body and to be explored in turn. She liked to grab him out of the blue, feel him grow hard in her hand. It thrilled her to feel the physical evidence of having inspired pleasure in another person. She felt like she had awoken from a dream when she didn't know she was sleeping. They could never be quite close enough. Often, while lying on top of him, she would align her face with his, the tips of their noses and lips touching, splay her hands inside his, and imagine sinking through his skin.

• • •

One could argue that, in a generous and kindly gesture, Carl Poisson became singlehandedly responsible for the violent disintegration of the Rown family, though Anne tried to abstain from laying a single person to blame.

One day, while Mack was paying Carl Poisson a visit, one of Poisson's cows gave birth. They were strolling around the grounds when they heard pained lowing, and they rushed over to find a British White on her side, her eyes and neck strained, the muscles in her abdomen contracting visibly. She was louder than any cow either rancher had seen in labor.

"Must be a real biggun in there," said Poisson as he crouched next to the cow, stroking her face as she convulsed stiffly.

A lopsided silver-blue sack began to emerge from beneath her tail, along with an array of liquids ranging between brown and pink as it inched its way out. Something snapped and blood began to pour down her rear between her legs as she flailed and shrieked. Poisson watched her with a deeply furrowed brow. She was losing her force with the blood, and suddenly, with a final squirm and cry from the

cow, the sack was expelled from her body and burst like a giant gelatinous bubble, revealing a slick black bull calf. The cow lay motionless, dead.

But this was no ordinary calf, as Mack recognized the moment he first laid eyes on him. Aside from his color, a black so profound that it had yet to be seen by Mack in the natural world, his head was square and perfectly symmetrical and his eyes were steady, slick and black like oversized marbles, framed by long curling lashes. His shoulders and haunches looked broad and powerful, more so than any other freshly born bull he'd ever seen, and he'd seen quite a few. The calf was flawless. Poisson, however, was slowly losing his sight, his irises clouding with cataracts, but should he have had his vision, and had he not be preoccupied with the death of his cow, he, too, would have recognized the signs of extraordinary build and unique handsomeness in the young bull. But Mack, after surfacing from a rare bout of speechlessness, kept his mouth shut for quite possibly the first time in his life, and merely asked, casual and serious:

“How much you want for him?”

“Aw, you know I couldn't possibly sell him to you...” Poisson shook his head, not looking up.

A flicker of panic passed across Mack's face. “Well why the hell not?”

“Oh I don't know... it's like doin' business with family: not a good idea.”

“What a bunch of horseshit!” Mack laughed with unconvincing dismissal.

“Why do you want him so bad, anyways? He look real good? Must've been a big sonagun to do what he did to his momma,” Carl squinted at the black mound next to the corpse of his cow.

“Nah, I mean, he’s okay. Nothin’ special,” Mack cleared his throat and rearranged some dust with his silver boot tip, “I’m just in the market for some new breedin’ stock is all.”

Carl Poisson scratched his gray jaw for a moment, the skin sliding loosely over the bone. “How bout I just give him to you. Like a gift. That way we’re avoidin’ all the troubles that money brings.”

“Oh no, Carl, I couldn’t possibly...” he trailed off prematurely, keeping his eyes on Carl Poisson, expecting to get interrupted.

“Of course you could,” Poisson said, “You seem to want him real bad, and Lord knows I don’t need another bull around here.” He looked down at his cow, “I have enough on my hands as it is.”

“Well, Carl, if you insist,” Mack said, gazing upon the starkest velvety black, a smile spreading across his face, turning up the corners of his mustache. He knew he had just become the owner of the finest bull Belle Fourche and maybe even the world had ever seen.

Mack resolved to enter his handsome calf in the bull competition at the Belle Fourche Fair in his first year of eligibility. He spent hours upon hours with him in preparation - grooming him, lunging him, talking to him - more time than he spent with any of his other livestock, let alone his family. The bull was Mack’s first thought as he woke up, his last before sleep, and a lead role in his every dream. He was leaving the ranch less and less, spending all the time he could spare with his bull. Rumors began to fly in town as to what Mack Rown was doing with his time instead of bullying his way around Belle Fourche. Faye filled them in.

“He’s spendin’ all his time with his new bull. It’s all he ever does anymore.”

“No shit,” said Jake Macon, an eyebrow raised.

“Shit,” affirmed Faye, “I tell you he’s more tender with that bull than I seen him be with anyone. Ever. Includin’ me, Anne and mama.”

“Somehow that doesn’t surprise me,” said Wes Carlson. The group of men broke out in sniggers. Faye shrugged her shoulders and walked away, swiveling her hips.

But those who knew Mack were stunned that the affection he bestowed upon the young beast was not just a passing phase. He spent months building a separate pen for the bull, or rather, overseeing the laborers he hired to build it, and stayed up at night sketching plans for the new breeding stall. Hoof picks and varnish lay scattered around the house. Short black hairs were sprinkled on the furniture. The bull became all Mack could ever talk about, aside from the occasional neighborly complaint. He saw the bull as his ticket to renown, and he was right in more ways than one.

. . .

Animals began turning up dead. They started small - field mice, squirrels, kittens – but after a few months it was dogs, goats, and deer found mauled around Belle Fourche. They were messily gutted, lying on their backs, limbs splayed and contorted. The Sheriff’s Department assumed the connection with Paula Rown’s death, and eventually called a town meeting where Belle Fourche was told to be vigilant, guarding for an elusively dangerous animal. The dirt was always too kicked up around the bloody messes of entrails to detect any prints. The minatory animal

warning was not entirely out of the ordinary for the inhabitants of Belle Fourche, having lost pets to coyotes and mountain lions throughout the years, so there was only a quiet hum of tension in the air. What concerned them was the mounting frequency of the attacks, a mangled animal corpse now turning up at least every other day. The ranchers began to worry about their livestock; they compared defense techniques on Center Street. Some, like Mack Rown and Carl Poisson, lit a torch near their corrals to ward off the beast.

But one evening, a chilling suspicion was illuminated. Carl Poisson was dozing in his armchair with a glass of whisky still clinking in his hand. He was drifting into an old memory of his herding days, his vision swaying and bouncing with his horse's gait, swigging brown water from a tattered canteen, sun beating furiously on his face, when he realized that the rumbling agitation and nervous whining of his drove were too real for a distant reminiscence. He shot upright, spilling his drink, and listened with his whole body. His heart thudded in his ears and under his skin and he couldn't hear anything. Frustrated, he took a few rasping deep breaths to calm himself. He was probably just imagining things, anyway. He ran a hand over his bald head and leaned back into his chair, closing his eyes. But sudden frantic lowing and an eruption of thudding hooves tore him from his seat. He pulled the shotgun from the wall as he scrambled out of his house, winded from fear. His corral, in his failing sight and illuminated only by a single torch and a razor thin sliver of moon, appeared to be a cloud of stirred dust as he ran toward it, and he cocked the shotgun on his shoulder. As he approached the fencing he was able to make out only the heads of cattle surging violently in the dust, their eyes bulging in panic. Carl

was paralyzed with terror and helplessness. Of course he could not shoot blindly into this madness, he would surely hit one of his own, his life and his love. His eyes searched the scene desperately for a sign of the culprit behind commotion. He could have sworn he saw a horned bull's head thrashing among the heifers and cows before one disappeared, yanked beneath the cloud of dust. He swung his shotgun in the air and fired twice wildly, hoping to scatter them. With the second of the two crisp blasts, Carl lost his balance and fell backwards onto the grass. He clambered for his shotgun and as he braced himself, creaky on all fours, to rise and shoot into the settled dust, he saw colossal feet tearing into the dark of the prairie. He blinked hard to refocus his eyes, but all was dark save for the twitching and gurgling body of his cow in the dim of the torchlight. He approached her, saw the bite taken out of her throat and the side of her face, the blood dripping from the corner of her mouth, her eyes straining with so much horror. He rubbed his face with his hands, stupefied by what he had just seen, and pained that he had not made it in time, but he knew what he had to do, as a respectable cowman. He lifted his shotgun with a curled lip, said a quick and heartfelt prayer, and, resting the barrel on her forehead with the tenderness of a lover, shot her between the eyes.

He disposed of the body himself, and waited till morning to contact the Sheriff's Department. He spent the night running the scene over and over again in his head. Had he imagined the giant soles of human feet catching the last bits of light as they vanished into the obscure prairie? Sure, his sight was going, but he'd be damned if he wasn't positive those were a man's feet. But then, shouldn't he have seen this man amidst the excitement? And what kind of a man would be killing and

eating all these animals? And what about poor missus Paula Rown? A feeling of guilt and foreboding settled over him over the course of the night, so that when Sherrif Tom Hanson arrived the following morning, Carl was solemn and pale, hardly able to put a sentence together. He retold the course of events as he remembered them, putting special emphasis on the feet, to Tom and his men's skepticism.

"Look," Tom said without trying to sound patronizing, "you have to know that what you're suggesting is very serious and not just a little crazy."

"I know, Tommy, I know." Carl shook his head in helplessness, "I'm just tellin' you what I saw." He reached a shaking hand toward his coffee, and saw Tom's eyes flit toward it momentarily. Carl dropped his hand and looked Tom straight in the face with a sternness that made Tom's hair stand on end.

"I may have lost my youth, but I sure as hell have not lost my mind!"

"Alright. I hear you. You mind if I take the boys out back to have a look?"

"Please."

It was uncommonly warm for November, and the kind of dry that stings your nostrils with each inhale. An officer held up a strand of barbed wire gingerly as Tom Hanson ducked into the corral. He paced toward the area where the dirt was stained a darker brown, then past it, the other men in tow. He told himself it was silly to be anxious, and to pull it together before his men noticed. Poisson had not gotten to him; he was old and blind and stunk to high heaven of liquor. He had no idea what he saw.

But a set of tracks stopped him dead in his own. He crouched in the dirt, and his eyes widened to draw in an image beyond comprehension. He traced his finger

around the gargantuan toes, the grapefruit sized depression where a massive heel must have landed. It was a footprint, two times the length and width of Tom's own foot, but very much human. His mouth was dry; he took out his handkerchief and dabbed his forehead, his upper lip.

“What you got there, Sheriff?” one officer asked, approaching.

Tom stood up and crossed his arms over his chest as if he were cold.

“Frankly, gentlemen,” a hard sigh, “I'm not quite sure.” He nodded toward the print.

The two officers' heads recoiled in amazement; one put a hand over his mouth.

“Holy shit.”

“That right there's a footprint!”

“Come now, have you ever seen a man with a foot that big?”

“No, but—“

Tom rolled his head back and looked at the sky to think and the two officers went quiet. They watched him as he began to pace, his fingers to his lips. A warm breeze whipped through the prairie, kicking dust into the air, and flattening the dried wheatgrass in silvery licks.

“We don't even know if this is relevant, and we don't want to stir up any panic in town, not without good reason.” He shook his head. “No, no. So take a report, but keep this in station. Not a word of this to anyone. Not yet.”

Tom Hanson couldn't sleep that night.

• • •

Days after the fair, Paula watched Mack bathing the bull from the window. Mack poured buckets of soapy water along his spine, leaving his coat slick in streaks down his sides, glistening, clinging to his muscles. Paula brought a finger to her lips. Mack took the currycomb in slow, small circles along the immensity of his body, his mouth moving in a low whisper as he went. Paula was entranced, her body awakened by this object of absolute and matchless masculinity. She couldn't remember the last time she felt so stirred; she brushed her tongue across the tip of her finger, delighted in the sensuality of it all. Mack rubbed oil into his horns and hooves. He massaged his muscles that looked fit to burst, and worked some ointment over his testes. Her knees felt loose. The bull blinked slowly, his eyes rolling back slightly into his head, leaning into Mack's touch. Paula was seized with a pleasant young spark of covetousness but couldn't bring herself to interrupt the affair. She told Anne to go offer her father a hand. Mack refused her help, as he never let a single person touch the bull outside himself, and Anne, looking up toward the house with a shrug, watched her mother's face disappear behind quickly drawn curtains.

. . .

Over the following weeks, Tom's nerves cooled with the weather. There hadn't been any big disturbances in town since Poisson's cow incident, and though his failure to settle the issue of the footprint harassed him, he tried to confine his vexation to the back of his mind.

But as December broke, a dismaying notion was confirmed, forcing Tom to look both his fear and his fantasy in the eye. He received a call at the station from one of his officers.

“You better get down here, Sheriff. A boy’s been killed. It’s the grocer’s son.”

The sweat from Tom’s hands made the steering wheel slick; he turned clumsily up the drive to the Brock residence. He could see a small crowd gathered out back, and Lisa Brock wailing, her face contorted in anguish, into the one arm of her husband as the officer ushered them inside. He killed the engine and sat for a moment in the car, pretending to look for something. He was afraid to find what was waiting for him behind that house, the responsibility that would imminently come crashing down upon him. He thought of Mack’s words at the saloon, how much he would hate to prove him right. He felt a sinking in his gut. For a moment he wished he were not Sheriff, then shook the thought from his mind. He had worked tirelessly and valiantly for this position, for an opportunity just like this. This was his moment, his chance to prove himself as the hero he knew he was. It was glory that waited for him behind that house.

He pushed the car door open and slammed it behind him with resolve, hoping to call some attention to himself. The people behind the house whipped their heads around and stared at him with wide, imploring eyes, making Tom’s heart leap into his throat. He walked with forced confidence toward the crowd, nodded at them in acknowledgement and watched the tips of his boots brush the grass for the rest of what felt like an endless trek to the back of the house. The crowd parted to make way for him, giving him a glimpse of the small mound beneath a white sheet.

“Okay, folks, I’m gonna have to ask you to back away please.”

They broke off into several smaller clusters, shooting quick glances at Tom that hit him like hail, but he would not break his concentration, his professionalism.

His manner had the mechanized awkwardness of acute self-awareness. He frowned at the covered body; blood had seeped through the sheet around the neck and chest and was beginning to oxidize into a deep brown. He blew hot air into his hands and rubbed them together as he crouched next to the sheet. In a deliberate and calculated gesture, he pinched the corners of the sheet and lowered it swiftly to the boy's waist. In the midst of his performance, Tom had forgotten that in stripping the sheet he would be looking at a young child's mutilated body, and his breath escaped him in a cough. The boy looked impossibly small, scrawny and shirtless on the cold grass. His lips were purple and his eyes, framed by deep shadows of grey-green, had already been closed, presumably by his father who had found him. He couldn't have been more than eight years old. A knot formed at the back of Tom's throat. He couldn't swallow so he spat in the grass. A gaping wound stretched from the left side of the boy's face to his stomach; his throat was torn out of his neck, his ribs were caved in. Tom put his handkerchief to his mouth and leaned in closer to examine the wound. He held a hand up to signal for the other officer.

“Officer Wallace...” he said slowly, to mask the trepidation bubbling beneath his speech.

Wallace jogged over, “Yeah, Tom?”

“Where's his heart? Or his stomach? Or any of his organs on this side for that matter?”

Both men stretched their heads toward the hollow of the boy's body.

“Sheriff, I don't know,” said Wallace, scratching the back of his neck. He spun his head around, searching the ground around him, and, not finding what he

was looking for, squinted back into the wound. “Looks like he was...” he looked up into Tom’s face with his mouth tight in disbelieving certainty, “well, Tom, it looks like he was eaten. Cleaned out like one of those animals.”

Tom deflated with a hard sigh of understanding. “Yeah. That’s what I was thinkin’, too.”

“What’s that?” Wallace said squinting.

“What’s what?”

Wallace reached for the already dried edge of the wound, and between his pointer and thumb he pulled a short, coarse black hair from the crust.

“Give it here.” Tom pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and folded it neatly. Officer Wallace laid the strand on the handkerchief and both examined it, engrossed.

“That’s animal hair, alright. I’ve never seen human hair thick like this.”

“Definitely not human,” Tom shook his head. “Not a mountain lion either, too dark.” Tom continued to glare at the fiber, as if the longer and more intently he looked at it the more likely it was to surrender its owner’s identity.

“Sheriff.”

Tom looked up startled, forgetting momentarily where he was.

“Look at this,” said Wallace, holding the boy’s arm.

Between his shoulders and elbows his arms were banded with deep purple bruises, yellowing at the edges, thick as sausages. Tom stepped back and examined both. There were four on each arm, ending abruptly in deep crescent punctures. The boy’s hands were twisted into anguished claws. Tom could only think of one cause of

such contusions, remembering a domestic abuse call to the Sheriff's Department, the arms of a young woman who had been beaten severely by her inebriated boyfriend, but disbelief seized him so hard he doubled over, putting his hands on his knees. Using all of his might, he straightened himself, and raised his arms in front of him toward the boy, curling his fingers into a tight gripping gesture. It couldn't be.

. . .

Mack came into the house huffy and red-faced for lunch. He told Paula that, for the first time in his life, the bull refused to mount a heifer.

"I mean, I never seen him like that before," he poured himself a drink. "He took one look at her and just walked the other way."

Paula stared at the full plate of food in front of her, mute.

"Hello? Are you listening to me?" he ducked his head into her line of vision. "This is serious, Paula. That bull is makin' us a lot a dough. I tell you what, if I didn't know any better I'd say someone was fuckin' with my bull. Sabotage!"

She looked up at him with a slow blink and said a soft "Sorry." Paula pushed her plate away.

. . .

"It just doesn't make sense," he told Anne later that evening at Rown Ranch, "something's eating these animals, these people..." He paced next to the banister of the porch, his mind whirring through the details almost audibly. He was visibly agitated, upset, no doubt, by what he had seen, but moreover feeling personally affronted by the threat to his community and his inability to eradicate it. Every

minute spent in inactive perplexity was another failure, another piece of evidence to support Mack's case against him; this notion sent him vacillating between exhaustion and invigoration. It was on him now to track down whatever this was, and kill it, putting an end to the slaughters and immortalizing himself as the greatest sheriff in Belle Fourche history.

"God. If I didn't know any better I'd think this was some kind of rogue gorilla." His chuckle fell dead. He looked up at Anne.

She sat smoking a cigarette, staring unseeingly at the table before her. Anne, only wearing a nightgown and Tom's green uniform jacket, was lost in concentrated reflection. He thought she looked very old and very young at once.

"Have you been listening to me at all?" he asked, hearing the indignation in his own voice.

She looked up at him, eyes wide, feigning innocence, "Yes."

As Tom continued, Anne slunk back into her chair, tipping her head away from him. To her, things were starting to come into focus; the details were gelling reluctantly in her mind. Right after her mother's death, she dismissed her initial flash of fear and suspicion as entirely ludicrous, out of the question horrific, and had buried it so deep beneath the wreckage of her family that she now had to struggle to unearth it.

She thought of her mother's pregnancy, of how violent it had been. How Mack had kicked Paula out of his bedroom because her groaning was unbearable. How she moved into Anne's room, shared her bed. How she writhed in bed so wildly in the night that Anne woke up with bruises and ultimately began sleeping on

the floor. How Paula had cried in the mirror after dinner every night for the last three months as her hair fell out by the brush-full. How her belly had swelled at an extraordinary rate, twice as fast as a normal pregnancy, Doctor Hornwagen had said. How the skin was paper-thin and discolored, the belly itself entirely misshapen, a lumpy protrusion of purple streaked with exhausted green veins. How her breathing was labored. How she had been put on bed rest. How absurd she looked, skin and bones with a belly big enough for her to fit inside herself.

What Anne had seen that night in the stables nearly a year ago left a permanent, disfiguring scar on her image of her mother, and it tore at her that in this way, she could not would she ever understand her, how alone she must have felt and how deeply that solitude penetrated. Even though it was precisely a feeling of isolation that bound them together as a unit of love facing a lonely world, Anne was pained that she, her affection, her existence, was not enough to sustain her mother. She opened her mouth without blowing and let the smoke escape like a ghost, watched it spread thin and disappear over the unlit pasture. She would never tell Tom what she knew.

The news of the Brock boy spread through Belle Fourche like a plague, infecting the town with fear. In general, violent deaths were few in town and almost never inexplicable. There had been hunting accidents, escalated bar fights, the occasional sociopath, but nothing so mysteriously and definitely threatening as this. Belle Fourche was buzzing with tension; families barred their doors at night and walked their children to and from school with shotguns. Those who hadn't already lit

torches around their stables and corrals did so promptly and anxiously, and all this before it struck again.

Old Mrs. Marshall was found dead in her living room, mauled in a nearly identical fashion to the Brock boy. She lived alone, her husband having died fifteen years before, so no one could be sure how long ago she had been killed. It was when the delivery boy, Lloyd Webber, came to drop off her weekly groceries that she was discovered. She had already started to stink. Her right breast lay withered and exposed while her left was reduced to a tattered flap of skin hanging pathetically beside her body. Poisson said that a naked old woman was a bad omen, that this was just the beginning, and no one doubted him. Faye and Mack put a shotgun at every door and bolted the stables at night. Center Street was quiet, and the few people down there could only talk about this public menace and the precautions they were taking against it. Then a teenaged girl went missing. Town socials were cancelled. No one walked alone. Perry Buckle was discovered in full rigor mortis with his two dogs in the middle of his alfalfa field. It was said that the look on his face could have chilled the devil. Some moved away. All drank heavily.

An emergency town meeting was called when the death toll climbed into double digits, which occurred only about a month after the Brock boy's death. Every attendee brought a firearm. Sheriff Tom Hanson sat behind the Mayor's podium with his hands in his lap.

"I want some goddamn answers!" bellowed Mack from the front row, half-facing the townspeople behind him. Most muttered in agreement.

“I think we have a right to know what the hell it is that’s killin’ our people! And if you don’t know we’re gonna find someone who *can* figure it out.” Wes Carlson shouted. Mack smirked.

“It’s a monster! I heard it’s got the body of a grizzly bear and a crocodile head!” Bobby Hicock shouted. People gasped.

“That’s not what I heard,” said Jasper Jones from across the room, wide-eyed and shaking his head. “Clay Averill told me his wife saw it in the yard. Said that it looked like a man, like you or me, but with a mouth full of shark’s teeth, ‘nuff to rip you clear open with one bite--”

“Enough!” Mayor Walker barked. The room hushed, leaving the Mayor panting before them, pieces of his usually greased charcoal hair hanging in disorder around his face. “No one has seen the monster, nobody has any idea what it is, not me, not Sheriff Hanson... I know how hard this is on you and your families, but we’re doing everything we can to put this madness to an end. The Sheriff’s Department is hard at work--”

“Hard at work?!” Mack shouted, incredulous. “Far as I can tell this so-called Sheriff hasn’t done shit!” He stood. “We’ve got people dyin’ two a week and then some, and I won’t stand for it any longer. If you pansies won’t do something about it then I will!” Mack turned around and faced the crowd. “I’m puttin’ up a reward!” Mack shouted over the rising murmurs. “One *hundred* dollars for whoever brings me that sonabitch’s head!”

As clamor erupted in Town Hall, Tom jumped up and shouldered Mayor Walker from the podium, taking his place.

“There will be no reward!” Tom hollered over the racket with his eyes fixed on Mack. “We can’t just have people runnin’ around, shootin’ blindly at unknown targets in our streets. Too dangerous.”

“And what would you suggest, Miss Hanson?” Mack sneered.

“Stay safe,” Tom said, choosing to ignore Mack and scanning the townspeople, “Don’t leave the house after dark unless absolutely necessary, and if so bring a weapon. I’m not gonna lie to you,” the room was silent, “this thing is big and it is bloodthirsty. So don’t be brave. That’s my job. On my word, I will track and kill this thing... this monster, if it’s the last thing I do.”

• • •

Tom patrolled Belle Fourche desperately at night, scouring highways and back roads for any sign of this beast. With each body he was getting farther and farther from his dream of glory. He promised Belle Fourche he would not rest until justice was served, and he took his promise literally. He had whittled his sleeping down to the hours between four and seven a.m. Tom felt more defeated with every passing day, but he tried to assuage his insecurity as best he could by keeping busy. He made weekly house calls to the families of victims to reiterate his condolences and make assurances he was not sure he believed himself. He spent hours upon hours in unenlightening meetings with Mayor Llewellyn Walker strategizing how best to comb the town in search of the monster, how to make the citizens of Belle Fourche feel safe again. He missed Anne, her compassion, her willingness to please him, and resented her disengagement from the situation at hand.

• • •

Anne had seen it. She had seen it several times. Because of her long stretches of sitting on the back porch watching the cows in the pasture, she noticed the slight disturbance in the prairie – even in the darkness. Her heart leapt; she had been waiting for this – half dreading, half hoping with all of her being. Would it look like her? She doubted it. Was it male or female? She couldn't be sure. She watched something giant and dark move across the plain, she had to strain her eyes to follow it. It moved in a crouching position on all fours – she couldn't tell if this was because it was built to move this way or because it knew it was being hunted. Her heart pounded so hard against her ribcage she was sure it would hear her. Uncommonly large snowflakes began falling like silver dollars and Anne bit down on her teeth to keep them from chattering. It moved toward the Rowns' corral – Anne had a feeling she knew where it was going. A wind kicked up and the house groaned. Anne and the beast both froze. She knew it couldn't possibly see her – she was in the moonshadow of the house, no lights were on inside, and everyone was asleep, but maybe it could smell her. It watched the house for what seemed like an eternity in complete stillness before moving toward the corral once again. As snowflakes collected on the beast it became easier to track, speckled white moving across petrified grasslands. Her palms sweated furiously even though she could barely feel her fingertips. It slowed considerably once it got within earshot of the sleeping cattle, weaving through them with stealth and precision until it came upon the bull's pen. It crouched next to the corral - it was closer to Anne now and looked enormous next to the fence. Illuminated by the hissing, crackling torch, she could see that it was the size of the supper table. It was still too far and too huddled for Anne to make out the details of

its body or the features of its face, but she understood why they were calling it The Monster.

The bull was asleep, standing under the flame's warmth, his thicker winter coat transforming the sharp licks of the flame into gilded waves over his body, muscles twitching involuntarily against the cold. The beast watched him, visibly struck by what? His magnificence? Before long it was in the pen, not ten yards from the bull. It rose on its legs – human legs. Enormous. Anne held her breath. It was clearly male. It – he, she corrected her own thought – must have been ten feet tall and as thick as a tree trunk. His body was human in proportion and shape but magnified twofold and immensely muscular. Veins bulged from beneath a thin coat of black hair, so much so that even Anne could see them throbbing from the porch. His neck was as thick as the mouth of her mother's favorite mixing bowl. His body was extraordinary and frightening; the power he must have had! But his face was disfigured, hideous. The kind of face you know will haunt your dreams but your eyes refuse to be peeled from the horror. It was, in essence, a bovine head, indicated not just by the eye placement and muzzle shaped nose and mouth, but by two young horns twisting menacingly off the sides of his head at severe angles. His head was so massive it diminished even his enormous body, reaching almost the breadth of his shoulders. He should have been off balance, too top heavy to walk upright, but his legs, trunk-like themselves, compensated. Anne still could not entirely decipher his features – all she could tell was that his eyes looked wild and sad and his face had a melted quality about it, contorted permanently in a confused expression she couldn't decipher. He walked toward the bull with a gentleness jarring for his size. It seemed

he was trying not to wake him. He held his arms out at the elbow just like a man wading into a cold pool; Anne found this familiarity eerie. She watched him peer into the bull's face as if he were looking for something there. Then he kneeled before him. He seemed to be smelling him. Anne worried for a moment that she had been wrong, that he actually intended to eat the bull, but the beast rose from his knee, and walking beside the bull, head hung and breathing heavily, he laid a gargantuan hand on the bull's flank. He closed his eyes. He deflated as he did so, looking suddenly very small. He was forlorn, alone. Anne cried silently as she watched him reluctantly pull his hand from the bull's body, slow like moving through water, and then recede swiftly into the darkness.

He came back every night for the rest of the week to visit the sleeping bull. And every time he did the same thing: creeping up to the pen, approaching warily, smelling him, touching him. Anne sat up and watched him, breathed with him as his chest rose and fell dramatically with the contact. She felt a deep tenderness for him and wanted to reach out, but didn't know how. She started leaving meat by the pen, watched as he lifted them to his face, sniffed them, looked around, and then parted his snarled lips and opened his fang-lined jaw to tear in. Whole chickens, tripe, tongue. He ate each less hesitantly than the last. Anne felt lighter than she had in months. No one had been killed that week. She wondered if her mother could see her.

On the eighth day, Anne sat on the back porch still, watching the beast pace around the rump of the bull, when she heard the unmistakable click of a shotgun cocked behind her. Her heart stopped and she gasped out of shock and fear of her,

and the beast's, discovery. She whipped around with her stomach in her throat, smelling the whiskey before she saw her father, glaring into the darkness with a fire like madness burning in his eyes.

“Go inside now, Anne,” Mack said without looking at her.

“Pa—“

He had already made his way down the steps and into the grass, moving with a resoluteness that seemed to straighten his stagger and carry him effortlessly across the plain. Anne chased after him, the sharp winter air stinging her eyes and breathless urgency in her chest. The beast flicked his massive head toward Mack, confused, and straightened himself so that he stood tremendous in the torchlight. Mack stopped dead in his tracks, fazed momentarily by the spectacle he was beholding, then raised his shotgun sloppily and sprayed metal into the sky, missing. Anne gasped, clutching her chest. The beast flinched, and then began a heavy, confrontational march to meet Mack, who, a fairly large man, was dwarfed by even the silhouette of the beast approaching in the distance. Mack had not blinked; he brought his shotgun to his shoulder again and fired. This time, spray grazed the beast's side; he let out a garbled roar and set to bounding with thundering strides toward Mack, Anne panting in her father's wake, tears streaming from the corners of her eyes. A territorial sound like a growl escaped from Mack as the beast was now merely twenty yards away from him.

Anne saw his face now, more clearly than ever before. It was anguished, a gnarled mess of flesh and fur molded confusedly around a bovine skull. He had human eyeballs placed awkwardly in bull's sockets, between which stretched a massive and uneven forehead, seemingly furrowed, screwed up in anger and pain.

Wide, fist-sized nostrils flared at the base of his warped, feral nose, steaming and snorting in the cold. But his bared teeth, sharp and jagged, were neither human nor ruminant. They were teeth to tear into flesh, to break through bone.

She was appalled, frightened from the grotesqueness of his face and his power, his danger suddenly becoming very real to her as he advanced. She stopped running after Mack; she wanted to abandon him, abandon them both. For the first time her heart reached for her childhood house, for the enduring stillness, the stagnant years of solemnity and boredom and safety and sureness. But her feet were planted, her legs unmoving, between her present and her future.

The beast was only strides from Mack, who fumbled with drunken courage to reload his shotgun.

“Son of a bitch...” he sputtered.

These would be the last words Mack Rown ever spoke, though no one would know it, save for Anne. The beast seized the shotgun with an enormous hand, contorting the barrel by the mere strength of his grasp, and tossed it aside. With the other hand he grabbed Mack by the throat, crunching bones and snapping tendons. A gurgling scream escaped him before his larynx was crushed. Blood oozed from the tear ducts of Mack’s distended eyes and his tongue wagged furiously outside of his mouth. His shirt had ridden up, and Anne felt shame and something like sadness at the sight of his jiggling body. His choking and writhing devolved into silent twitching, suspended in the air, as the monster snorted steam and stared into his purple face. The bull stamped and grunted in his pen. Then it was quiet. The whole scene was swift, no more than a few minutes, but now silence rang out in a deafening

hum and time stood still as Mack hung limp by the beast's arm. The monster turned to Anne, who stood in utter stillness, her arms dead weight at her sides, expressionless and serious. He fixed his stare on her for what felt to her like an eternity, and she wasn't scared, though she felt she ought to have been. Then he turned back to the corpse dangling at the end of his right arm and swept Mack's legs up with his left, cradling him against his chest, Mack's head hanging at an impossible angle by a few fleshy sinews. Mack had lost a boot in the struggle and looked boyish now, a plump sleeping baby diminished in the arms of an adult, and it occurred to Anne for the first time that her father had once been a child. The beast made off toward the hills with Mack curled up against his body. Anne watched her father's feet bouncing with unnatural flaccidity and vanish into nothingness in the dark.

She stood alone then, and felt like she was hovering above herself, having just watched her life's plot unfold with the detachment of an audience. Had she imagined the intelligence, the moment of recognition between them in the beast's stare? *Son of a bitch*, she thought when she looked down upon the mangled shotgun. Her legs were too heavy to move. She was shocked by her indifference to her father's death, felt nothing like the despair that overcame her when her mother was killed, found herself no more deserted now than she was then; in fact, not infrequently throughout her life she had wished for him to die. A string of memories pressed themselves into her mind: the fits of drunken ranting, the sour smell of his hat, the wheezing laugh he forced when trying to establish his superiority, the heat that flushed her cheeks when he made a scene. What she felt was not nostalgia, but rather the neutral and baffling contemplation of the mysterious finality of death - that these experiences,

antipathetic as they were, would never recur. She pitied herself for a moment for having just become an orphan.

She did nothing until morning, when Faye, peering out from the window, asked where Mack was. Anne said she didn't know. Faye grew more and more agitated over the next few hours.

"He's never gone for so long like this in the mornings," Faye said, wringing her hands. She looked at Anne, who was reading on the couch. "Are you sure you didn't fight with him again last night?" Faye asked, her hands on her hips.

"No, Faye. I didn't," Anne said without looking up from her book.

"Why aren't you more worried about this? Don't you even care?"

"No! I don't care," Anne declared, looking up into her sister's pale face, "Do you really think he cares about us? When has he ever done anything for us, or mom, or anyone but himself? I hate him and I don't care."

Faye called the Sheriff's office with shaking hands.

Tom sat with his hat in his hands between his knees. "You girls sure you didn't see anything suspicious or out of the ordinary?"

"No, nothing. Not a thing." Faye's voice was heavy beneath suppressed tears. Anne shook her head, looking at her legs. She could feel Tom staring into her face; she desperately avoided locking eyes with him.

"Okay," Tom whispered, after a prolonged silence, and he rose to his feet. "If it's all right with you girls I'm gonna take a look around the back."

A high wail escaped from Faye's throat as she collapsed forward onto Anne's lap. Tom searched Anne's face for a sign of something, anything, but found only the

withdrawn gaze he had grown so familiar with over the past year or so coupled with a stubborn refusal to look him in the eye. She was still, her straight back stiff and tension freezing her shoulders in their sockets. He began to believe there was something to her detachment beyond the disintegration of their relationship and the deaths in her family, that she was avoiding him for other reasons, though he couldn't imagine what. He tore his stare from her cautiously cold expression, unable to shake this idea from his mind. Anne sighed as the door closed behind him.

A half hour later, he reentered with the contorted shotgun in his hands, asking if the girls recognized it as their father's.

"Mmhm," Faye sobbed, wide-eyed, and blew her nose into her sister's handkerchief with a honk.

"I got to be honest, girls, it doesn't look good. Although this is the only sign of foul play I found, so don't give up just yet."

"It's that damned monster, I know it is!" Faye pounded her fists on the couch.

Tom stared Faye hard in the eyes, "If that's what killed your father, I will track him down and fucking kill him," Then he looked off to a nonexistent horizon, "It's gonna be normal around here, and you girls will never have to be afraid again." Anne felt an animal impulse to charge. She clenched her jaw.

"I know you will, and when you do, you're gonna be the biggest hero this town has ever seen, Tom Hanson." Faye took his hand, brought it to her mouth and kissed it. "Thank you."

He blushed, touching her cheek briefly before pulling his hand back “It’s my duty, an honor, to serve you ladies.” He straightened his jacket and made for the front door, putting on his hat, then stopped.

“One last thing,” he said as he turned toward them, “Do you know anything about why there were chicken bones next to the bull’s pen?”

They said they couldn’t imagine why, must have been something special Mack did with his bull, the girls weren’t allowed near it after all. He sure did love that bull. What would they do with it?

“Well,” said Tom, with an unsatisfied frown, “I’ll keep you posted with any new information we get as to the whereabouts of your father.”

. . .

Paula had never presented any discernible interest in the bull to Mack until one day, a few months after the fair, over a quiet lunch while the girls were at school. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again, clearing her throat, shaking her head. Finally, her desire to know conquered her self-restraint and she blurted, “How does it work, exactly?”

“How does what work?” Mack spat, chewing his meat like cud.

“The breeding,” she breathed, “How does it work?” She looked hard into his sweaty face.

He wiped his mouth and leaned back in his chair, “Well,” he half-grunted, tucking his thumbs into his suspenders to release some pressure, “first, you gotta pick a heifer with a wide pelvis, ‘cause obviously that calf ain’t gonna deliver hisself, if you know what I mean. Then you got to track the menstr’al cycle of the cow, see that

she's ready to conceive. Now, we've got two types of cow here: beef and dairy. So dependin' on the kind of calf you wanna have, you're gonna be lookin for different qualities in the mama, large udders, high muscle mass..." he trailed off and began picking food out of teeth with a toothpick from his pocket.

"Once you've chosen the cow you put her in a halter and tie her up in the breeding stall—."

"Which one's the breeding stall?" Paula interrupted.

"It's the biggun in the stable with the open roof. You tie her up there with her rear-end facing the door, and then you lead that handsome specimen of a bull to the stall, and as soon as he sees her ass over there he knows. He just knows what to do."

He chuckled, and the two of them looked back into their lunch. After a moment Mack scooted his chair back with a honk and laid his napkin down next to his plate.

"Good to see you finally taking an interest in the business," he nodded his head hard, sending his double chin slapping against his neck, "It's about damn time."

Paula said nothing, but rose to collect the dishes.

. . .

They found Mack's body half-eaten and putrid three days later. It was placed neatly across the road that led to the outskirts of town where the abandoned shacks that once housed railroad workers sat crumbling and creaking for decades. The corpse was blocking the road, as if placed to send a message to passersby. The

coroner's report revealed that Mack had died not of the wounds he sustained, but of strangulation.

Belle Fourche, which was beginning to wane noticeably in population, was stricken with the news of Mack's confirmed death. Commerce had almost entirely stopped. The railroad was not even slowing at Belle Fourche anymore, let alone taking or dropping passengers. The many funerals that took place in those last few months were attended only by the immediate family and perhaps a close friend or two, as people left their homes less and less and funerals became less and less exceptional. But somehow, Mack's death hit the town hard, and most everyone who knew him attended his burial. Perhaps it was because he was the last of his kind, or maybe just because he was an irreplaceable character in the town, a great creator of conflict, constant source of entertainment and drama, dedicated with a rare, blind, and absolute patriotism to Belle Fourche.

The day of the burial was one of those uncomfortably mild, still days when you don't know where the air stops and your skin begins. The Belle Fourche Cemetery lay on the fringe of the town, not far from where Mack was found, on a wide plot of dead grass, yellowing and unnervingly odorless. The girls did not speak. What was there to say? Faye discharged sobs soaked with self-pity into Tom's jacket, Tom, who watched Anne as she faced the coffin, a plain, flimsy box due to a casket shortage in Belle Fourche. She wore an expression that blurred shock and boredom, lips parted, eyelids heavy. He wished she would acknowledge him, show even the slightest reaction to his comforting the sister she begrudged. It was spiteful, after all, the attention he had begun paying to Faye after Mack's death, the visits to the house,

taking her for rides in his cruiser. Anne noticed, of course she did, but the shallowness of these gestures only further repulsed her from him, the hunter, the enemy.

Townspeople stood in respectful silence under the weighty reality of Belle Fourche's great misfortune. Carl Poisson held his very best hat politely in front of him, his eyes more wistful and watery than usual, and shook his gray head slowly and knowingly. And suddenly Peter Badger began to speak, in a trembling voice that most had never before heard:

“And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. And the Lord said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be a hundred and twenty years. There were giants in the earth in those days, and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bear children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.”

No one had seen him standing there, with his wiry son, his wife conspicuously missing - a few townspeople looked around for her, followed by whispering and the grave shaking of heads, gestures that had become all too familiar in those past few months in Belle Fourche. Many hummed in approval and feigned recognition of the verse, nodding and beginning to scatter. He muttered the next line to himself, so quietly that those around him took his quivering lips for crying. One put a hand on his bony shoulder. *And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the*

earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them.

Before long, the crowd thinned to a meager collection of straggling townspeople. Tom escorted Faye to his car as the remaining few put their hats back on.

“Come on, Anne,” he muttered as he passed her. But she stayed put. “You coming?”

“No,” she breathed, “I’m gonna stay here a little while longer.”

She looked out into the plain, and imagined God’s enormous fingers invisibly stroking the tall grass around the two closest abandoned houses, carving golden impressions into the prairie. There was something peaceful to her melancholy; it was yawning and irreparable and the certainty of that made her feel safe. She breathed deeply. She could taste the sweet, dehydrated wheat in the back of her throat and it made her nostalgic. She felt the air fill her body and channeled it into the sinking hole in her gut, the hole that the sight of her mother’s dead body carved out in permanence. These abandoned houses, for they surely weren’t homes anymore, frozen in a final stage of decay, exhausted and forsaken yet still brushed tenderly by the wind and the ghosts, beckoned her to them. He would be there, she was sure, because she, in her own marooned state, was drawn to this place by an irresistible urge she didn’t understand. Drawn so much that she had been pacing toward it slowly and without noticing since Tom left. She could see the splintering wood now, the shattered windows and rusted panes, a sense of urgency in her step. She wanted

to leave Belle Fourche and never look back, knowing that the longer she stayed here, the more surely she would collapse in on herself and eventually vanish, turning to dust. But she felt she had a responsibility to stay – not for Faye, not for Tom, but for him. He, like her, was alone, and she was stirred by the kinship she felt with him, a species of connection she was sure had died with her mother, one that she was compelled to nurture. She moved, fast and breathless.

She chose the more decrepit of the two houses to search first. She stopped a little way from the building, making sure she was out of earshot, and removed her shoes before tiptoeing to the front door, hanging grey and moldy on only one of its hinges. She peered into the sliver of space, blocking half of the triangle of light projected into what she imagined used to be a modest sitting room. Tufts of fabric waved from the corners of floorboards where threads from an old rug had snagged on the uneven wood, and weeds pushed up through cracks in the floor without a fight. Seeing no discernible trace of life, she crept around to the side of the house and, piling some rotting firewood, climbed atop it to look through the window, which was really just jagged shards of glass clouded with years of dust residue. She saw more of nothing, just a hollow shell to be consumed by overgrowth and the elements, neglected forever. As she lowered a leg blindly toward the ground, the ancient firewood caved beneath her and she fell, slicing her hand deeply on the broken window. She let out a howl and hit the ground with a thud; no sooner had she done so than her hands rushed toward her mouth, as if to shove the noise back inside. Her eyes shot toward the other house, seeming now a great deal closer than it had moments ago. The silence was leaden; Anne's breathing sounded cacophonous

in the still. She watched in complete paralysis as the only visible and still intact window of the other house became darkened with the shadow of a figure looking out. A hand half the size of the window itself cleared some dust and the whites of a wild eye flicked around the prairie. She couldn't be sure whether he saw her or not. As soon as the window cleared, Anne straightened herself, wrapped her sock around the dark gash in her hand, and made her way toward the other house, toward him.

She was shaken by the beast's appearance in the window, and as she approached the second, more intact house it occurred to her precisely what it was that she was walking toward; flashes of images, imagined and witnessed, of the victims of the monster's hunger and wrath played before her eyes, the house growing bigger and bigger after each conjured corpse. It was a large wooden two-story, ashy grey, with a thin brick fireplace that looked like a bite had been taken out of the side. Some of the wooden siding had fallen off the house so that the outer walls were streaked with irregular but straight lines. The roof caved in slightly in the center, giving the house an exaggeratedly haunted appearance, almost cartoonish. Anne was sweating, clutched suddenly with fear, so she resolved to wait outside the house until the beast fell asleep before entering, just in case he did not, in fact, feel the same pull toward Anne as she felt toward him. She recalled the look they shared before he carried her father away, and wondered if she had projected the acknowledgement, the understanding, onto him. She moved toward the back of the house where a bare, spindly tree stood with only two large branches like horns twisting out from the trunk. She sat up against it, enjoying the feeling of the bark scraping her back as she slid down to the ground, and cried for the first time in months. She fell asleep.

When she awoke the sky was violet, a thick layer of clouds illuminated by a large half moon. She wiped some moisture off her cheek and stretched her stiff neck, surprised by the depth of the slumber she had just risen from, and the striking lack of a familiar dream, usually a garish nightmare involving her mother's busted body. Instead, she dreamt that she was Mack's bull, and the beast visited her in her sleep. That, behind closed eyes, she sensed his breath on her as he sniffed her, felt him reach out to touch her face and hair with his rough fingers, then felt his warm tongue graze her cheek. The dream was so vivid that she brought her hands to her face and found dirt on her forehead. She indulged the notion that the visit had not, in fact, been a dream, and shivered. The quiet was oppressive, punctuated by moments of relief when a cricket would chirp, and the stillness was suspicious. She had no clue for how long she had been asleep, but the beast was either in the house or in Belle Fourche proper, hunting his dinner. Anne felt an acute pang of guilt for forgetting to leave out food that day. She rose without wiping the dirt from her dress, and sneaked toward the nearest window of the dark house where she was sure he resided.

. . .

Paula was sneaking out at night with more and more frequency. Of this Anne was certain, as she was also waiting for the dead of night to steal away to Tom's house. Anne began taking her cue to leave from her mother's particular tiptoeing, at once urgent and tentative, as if she had to will herself to peel her feet from the floor with every step.

Some months back, not long after the victory at the Belle Fourche Fair, Mack had hired a cowhand to help him with things around the ranch a few times a week so

that he could devote more time to the bull, to breeding. He was a sturdy young Cheyenne with terra cotta skin and a stern, chiseled face. His name was Otoahhastis, but Mack referred to him as Otto. Six and half feet tall, with massive, rough hands, broad shoulders and few words, Otto was uncompromisingly masculine and infinitely provocative, and Paula, whom Anne had seen blush for less, acted completely indifferent to his presence, never speaking to him, looking at him, talking about him. But it was around the time Otto came to work on Rown Ranch that Paula's mood lifted to heights Anne had never before seen. Paula seemed to be smelling and tasting for the first time. She began giving salutations to the other ranchers' wives in the road, inviting them to come take a pick of her garden or have a cup of coffee; they remarked that Paula seemed to have defrosted, and rumors began to fly that it was that smoldering Indian cowhand that was responsible - he was quite a handsome young man, after all. Anne concluded that her mother was in love, that she had finally found someone that excited her, someone to give meaning and purpose to her days. For the first time in as long as she could remember, Anne was happy for her mother.

• • •

She looked into what she imagined was once the kitchen based on the two objects in the room: a rusted sink and an iron stove. Though it was difficult to distinguish details – the room's interior appearing entirely monochromatic, blue – she was struck by the neatness of the dilapidation of this house; all debris from the cumulative crumbling seemed to have been cleared. There was neither glass nor splintered wood on the floor, and if there had been weeds growing through the

cracked foundation of the house they had been pulled so that the floor looked odd, pristinely clean, with missing floorboards, like a flawless face with missing teeth. She glimpsed a steep staircase with once ornate banisters now chipped, some split all the way through, which led to a termite-devoured second floor, or really just a suggestion of one, as the divide between the stories was paper thin in the center of the room. Anne saw no trace of the beast, so she pressed her ear to the window, and heard the faintest droning, rhythmic, slow, a familiar alternation of tones. Snoring. Her heart leapt.

When she tried the front door, she found it was boarded up, two planks of wood nailed in a threatening “X” in the frame. She circled the house, searching for a wide enough fracture in the paneling to crawl through, her breathing becoming frantic, the gash on her hand throbbing and hot now. Before she knew it, she was back where she had started. She began to circle again, panting and frantic, looking for other ways into the house. She came upon a pair of cellar doors that, unlike the rest of the house’s exterior, looked freshly handled, shaken of their dust. It was the only possible solution Anne could fathom, as she lifted a door and laid it down as gently as a mother would her infant. It opened into complete darkness, the moonlight illuminating only the first few lopsided stairs. She felt as though she was at once closer to and farther away from him as she had ever been. She drew in a deep breath as she descended the stairs slowly, deliberately.

. . .

Tom was parked on Center Street, flipping through old coroner’s reports in his cruiser, when he saw Anne practically fly past his car and enter the grocery.

Something about her countenance had changed; he could tell by her carriage - leaning forward, chin tilted upwards, eyes fixed. She more resembled, now, the soberly passionate beauty that he recognized from those hungry hours between dusk and dawn a year ago, that he had spent so many nights devouring with his hands, with his mouth. Not the shifty, wan shade with averted eyes she became around the time of her mother's death.

Tom knew Anne had not come home to Rown Ranch last night, because Faye asked him to stay with her until she did. *I couldn't bear to be alone right now*, Faye had said. Tom knew Anne would cringe to hear her sister talk like that, but it didn't bother him. He waited until Faye fell asleep to leave, checking his watch compulsively, torturing himself with agonizing images of Anne with another man. How was it possible that he had let her down? Whose affection could she have prized above his? He was, after all the, Sheriff of all of Belle Fourche County. Faye appreciated this, he could tell, so why couldn't Anne? He tried to shake the thought from his mind as ridiculous.

But now, watching her straight back bounding into the grocery store, jealousy burned in his chest like too-hot coffee and indignation left his mouth tasting sour. He had to find out what she was up to. He pulled down the brim of his hat, removed the star from his shirt - as if that would have made him unrecognizable - and hurried into the store. He settled himself behind the postcard rack, from which he could survey most of the grocery. His eyes flitted from aisle to aisle as he pretended to peruse the postcards. There was only one other customer - most everyone, at this point, was staying home and having their groceries delivered. The store smelled stale,

like it hadn't been cleaned in weeks, which Tom was sure it hadn't; Julian Brock had lost almost all interest in his business after his son's death.

Tom spotted Anne at the meat counter. Ernie Klein, the butcher, a normally ebullient gentleman, looked haggard, with deep shadows in his face. Anne's mouth moved quickly and incomprehensibly as she reached into her pocket and slapped a wad of money and change onto the counter. Ernie's eyebrows furrowed in puzzlement. He looked at her uncertainly for a moment, before retreating into the storeroom. Tom watched Anne fidget, shift her weight impatiently from one leg to the other. At one point she turned her head, perhaps sensing that she was being watched, and Tom ducked behind the postcard stand, hiding most of his face behind a particularly dramatic rendering of the Black Hills. Leaning his head out, he watched as Ernie emerged from the storeroom with a wheelbarrow full of meat. He plopped four whole chickens, two racks of ribs, several shoulders of beef and pork, an armful of tongue, and yards upon yards of sausage links onto the table. Anne nodded her head. Ernie put the money into the register and the meat back in the wheelbarrow. He offered Anne the handles and waved his hand tiredly when she promised to bring it back. Tom dipped into the dry foods aisle as Anne turned sharply and wheeled her mountain of meat out the door and toward Rown Ranch.

Tom scratched his head. That meat was not for those skinny Rown girls alone, that much was certain; most of it would go bad before they ever got around to eating it. Heat bubbled up in his throat. He checked his watch. Three thirty. The girls always ate lunch early, so she wouldn't be eating any of it until later when, if she had a gentleman caller, he arrived for supper, probably with a band of good-for-nothing

friends. His cheeks burned in the still, sour air of the grocery. He made a beeline to his cruiser and once inside began shuffling through papers so as not to be caught in his embarrassingly flustered state. He wanted so badly to believe that Anne, or any woman for that matter, could not possibly prefer another man to himself. He resolved to make an impromptu check-in with the Rown girls that night, around suppertime, to settle this matter once and for all.

. . .

Anne decided one night to follow her mother, to see first hand if Otto was in fact the source of so much joy, to substantiate her hopes for her mother's well being. As soon as she heard the swish and click of the back door, Anne popped from bed fully dressed and dashed after her, thrilled. Through the window Anne watched her mother skip into the night, having to wipe away the fog from her excited breath intermittently, and waited until her white nightgown virtually vanished from sight toward the corral before opening the door a crack and slinking out into the night herself. The sky was coffee colored and the air was so thick it felt like it had to be swallowed instead of inhaled. Anne smiled as she sneaked, caressed by the night, the soft earth under her bare feet and the damp air on her face, in her hair. Her mother's happiness was her own.

She saw her mother's nightgown rematerialize on the murky prairie before her, leaning over the corral fence. Anne watched her from a safe distance, scouring the landscape for a sign of human life approaching and seeing none. Anne's heart dropped; she watched as her mother, looking beautiful and tragic in her solitude, stood with a fixed stare into the bull's pen, her small chest rising and falling with

intensity. He had to come, Anne thought, how could he not? Anne felt guilt settle in her gut, the indignity of witnessing a public humiliation, and wished that she had never followed her mother out there that night. Her heart was breaking for her. But she couldn't tear her eyes away.

Paula stood there, quiet, chest heaving, for quite some time. Then, clucking and kissing noises, noises that sounded something like Mack's cattle calls. Anne spun around, sure that Mack had caught them both, but no one was there. Anne realized that the calls were coming from Paula, could see her mouth trembling nervously as she pursed her lips and clicked her tongue. *He's coming after all!* It was a strange lover's call, but who was she to judge. The only creature to emerge from the darkness, however, was the bull.

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Tom arrived at Rown Ranch just as pale lilac faded into deep plum, the last band of light washed from the horizon. He built enough momentum on the road that he killed the engine and shut off his headlights while still more than a hundred yards away and rolled invisibly up to the house. There was a dim glow in the living room windows quivering on the sills, which made Tom's stomach lurch. He decided he would peek through the window before knocking, to prepare himself for the scene he would be entering upon. He opened and closed his car door at funereal pace; the click of the door locking into place seemed thunderous, even amidst the blating of Badger's sheep – admittedly half as strident as it was before his flock was diminished by the monster – and the pained lowing of the Rowns' unattended cows, their udders swollen, tight with milk. Tom crouched beneath a window, tense from the creaking

of his boot leather, raised his eyes over the sill and set them on an entirely unexpected scene.

Faye lay on the couch, unconscious and breathing heavily, and Anne, bending over her prone body, was extracting a nearly empty glass of dark liquor from between her limp hands with the precision of a surgeon. Tom scanned the supper table, visible through a doorway, and saw no trace of guests, let alone any dinner dishes at all. Anne tiptoed to the table and placed the glass on it before picking it up again, tipping the contents into her mouth, and setting it back down. Then, with a passing glance at Faye, she disappeared from the room. Tom heard the back door click shut and the pounding of hurried footsteps on soft dirt.

. . .

Paula stood upright, drawing in a giant breath and gripping the fence tightly. Anne quieted her breathing to the faintest panting. The bull stopped before her and fixed her in a smoldering gaze before he began nibbling at the ground, shifting his weight between his great, black haunches. Paula ducked under the pen so swiftly Anne was not sure she had seen it happen. Paula approached him head on. He didn't seem to mind, continuing to blow the dust with hot breath from his flared nostrils. Paula reached out a shaking hand and placed it on his shoulder. Anne could not tell if she was cold or afraid. Paula stroked him, ran her fingertips down his twitching, pulsing breast. The bull swung his head toward her feet and began sniffing them; the foam from his frothing mouth dripped onto her legs, down her ankles. The rise and fall of her chest quickened so that she appeared eager, wild. Anne could hardly recognize her mother anymore. *What in the hell?* She whispered to herself, as Paula

pulled the sleeves of her nightgown off of her bony shoulders and let the white linen fall to her ankles, catching on the nose of the bull who she watched anxiously.

She was naked now, winded and frail before him. Anne felt shame burn in her cheeks, and wanted to go home, go to Tom, be anywhere but here, witnessing this scene. But she was transfixed. Paula closed her eyes as the bull shook the nightgown from his face and sniffed her bare legs, his whiskers tickling her shins. Continuing to keep her eyes closed, she pivoted, so that her back was now facing the bull, and took a few slow paces forward. Her face was tense, screwed up with uncertainty and nerves, but relaxing with a sigh as soon as she heard the first thud of a hoof in the dirt behind her. Anne was shaking and sweating, deathly afraid she knew exactly where they were headed; her confirmation slithered from his underbelly like a skinned garter snake. A wave of violent nausea passed through her as Paula opened the gate of the pen and, looking almost regal, naked with her chin held high, led him in this deliberate, incongruous processional to the stable.

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Tom crept around the side of the house in time to see Anne bounding in the direction of the stables. He was confused. He didn't like the way her arms pumped or how her hair flew wildly behind her as she ran. *I don't believe it!* he thought, *She's meeting a man in the stable. She knew I'd be coming by so she had to get out of the house, sneaky little bitch.* Tom waited until she entered the stable before following her. Once he arrived, he was about to peer through a barred window when an approaching rumbling made him press himself flat against the structure and suddenly Anne appeared, pushing the butcher's empty wheelbarrow out of the doors and thrusting it

to the side before reentering the stable. Tom peeled himself from the wall and peeped one eye in the corner of the window to see Anne saddling her father's giant bay, tightening the cinch of a saddle weighed down with overstuffed saddlebags. Tom strained his eye to see the end of a rack of ribs poking out from beneath the flap of one of the bags. Anne double-checked each buckle before mounting the mare nimbly. Anne gave her a swift kick to the sides and she loped out of the stable. Tom held his breath as they thudded past him, only allowing himself to inhale when they were safely fifty yards away. They were gaining distance rapidly, headed toward the edge of town, the hills. Tom was perplexed, frustrated, but he would not give up. He had come this far, hadn't he? He had to see this, whatever this was, out to the end. He would follow them on foot.

• • •

Anne couldn't help herself but to follow them, waiting a beat before they disappeared inside before racing to the stable, pushing a bale of hay beneath a window and mounting it. The door of the breeding stall was heavy, and Paula struggled for what seemed like ages to open it, the bull huffing and agitated behind her all the while. When she finally opened it, she entered alone, as if expecting the bull to wait at the threshold, which he did. She began digging through a tall pile of hay in the corner of the stall and pulled out a hollowed out cow's head, shaking it clean. It was a marvelously crafted piece of taxidermy, so lifelike that it sent chills down Anne's spine when her mother placed the cow's head over her own. She turned toward the bull to make sure he saw her, the giant head swiveling ridiculously atop her small body and the bull trotted into the stall eagerly.

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He stayed a great, but steady distance behind them at all times, so that they were always just a thumb-sized silhouette on the horizon. Sometimes he had to jog when they shrank as small as a bean. He was dripping sweat from his temples and the corners of his jaw. They were becoming increasingly difficult to see as the moon set behind the hills. He wasn't sure how long he'd been walking for, but it felt like it was approaching an hour when he passed the cemetery where he was sure they were going to stop, but Anne was not there. They had vanished; he had lost them. He kept moving through the darkness in the same direction. He was beginning to panic, sweating profusely under his arms and on his back. His strides grew bigger and faster, and he looked from side to side frantically for any sign of life, but all he could see were the silhouettes of two square structures growing as he advanced. But once he was close enough to discern the abandoned houses in the obscurity, he noticed the shadow of a horse tethered to a tree in between them. He sighed deeply. He had found her.

He chose a house at random and approached. He strolled now, feeling victorious, dry grass hissing beneath his boots with every step. The closer he got to the building the more apparent the severity of its decay; the smell of rotting wood filled his nostrils before he saw the graying, putrefied walls. A dark stain dripping onto the light wood from a shattered window caught his eye as he passed. He smelled it; it was blood. He was frozen temporarily, realizing he might have involved himself in something much more serious than he had first thought. He fingered the gun in his holster unconsciously, picturing himself kicking down the half-hinged

front door, but he snapped back from his reverie when light swelled through the windows of the neighboring deserted house, then dimmed into a flickering glow. He ducked down and tore over to it, spooking the mare as he flew behind her, his hand still on his revolver.

The forsaken structure looked almost livable with warm, throbbing light pouring weakly from the windows. Tom crawled on his stomach as he neared the house. He allowed himself only a few brief glimpses into the house, as he was afraid of being caught in such a cowardly endeavor as spying, but what he saw was wholly unsatisfying: Anne's rounded back as she bent over a pile of what he could only assume was the meat. He pressed an ear up against the house. She was not speaking to anyone; in fact she was barely making any noise at all. The only sound he could discern was a faint hum, a deep, cadenced vibration from within the house. He had to get in there. He checked the front door, but it was boarded shut. How had she entered? He pushed the door softly to see if the planks were just a front, which he discovered they indeed were not, so he began to circle the house to find an alternate entrance. No break in the slats was big enough for him to crawl through, and furthermore he didn't imagine that to be a very dignified way for the Sheriff to enter upon this scene. That was when his eyes fell upon the cellar doors, unlocked and intact. The hinges were quiet and the doors light, and he let himself into the shadowy cellar with ease.

He left the doors open behind him to allow that faintest bit of nightlight shine onto the treacherous steps down. Glow from the main floor of the house pulsed gold at the far end of the cellar, a beacon guiding him to his resolution. The

floor was littered with a thick layer of debris, muting the sound of Tom's boots. He inevitably kicked up clouds of dust with each step, carefully as he walked, which caught the light like cigar smoke swirling around him, opaque and elegant. He could hear Anne shuffling around upstairs; her footsteps shook dust and cobwebs from the creaking rafters that spread like spider's legs from the center of the ceiling. He finally arrived at the bottom of the stairs and realized he had been holding his breath. He exhaled and combed his hair down vigorously with filthy fingers. He could not be sure what he was going to walk in on in that moment; flashes of valiant scenes played before his mind's eye with every step upwards into the light

. . .

Anne gaped, not breathing, not moving. Paula brought her breast to the bull's mouth, which he nudged and nibbled with surprising tenderness. Her cow's head lolled back heavily in ecstasy. Her neck strained. She dug her nails into his skin, hot muscles pulsing under taut hide. She moaned. Anne was dismayed by the madness her mother was driven to, estranged from her for the first time. She wanted to cry out, wanted to run away but she was paralyzed, her legs leaden and rooted, her mouth sewn shut. She pulled her hair and gritted her teeth, praying this was a nightmare. Paula lowered herself onto her hands and knees at the end of the stall, unsteady and top heavy; he approached her from behind, blowing a hard, hot breath down the back of her neck, and her back arched reactively, offering herself to him, her hips beseeching.

. . .

Before he saw it, he smelled it, an acrid and feral smell that made Tom's nose twitch. Then he saw Anne, frozen in the candlelight, petrified under his gaze, a giant slab of meat in her hands, its juices dripping in pink trails down her forearms. Her face drained of color, her mouth agape, eyes wide and horrified, like she was seeing the ghost of her mangled father.

"Tom..." she could barely whisper, her throat dryer than sand.

Tom saw her eyes flit to the corner of the room. He was stoic as he turned to finally see what Anne had been hiding all this time, and there, lying gargantuan on the floor not ten feet from where he stood, the man-eating beast slept, his vast, fur-coated sides rising and falling with each thunderous breath, an assortment of raw meat laid out in a banquet before him. Time seemed to stop around Tom as he faced the source of so much pain, so much anxiety in Belle Fourche – his nemesis. A smile played at the corners of his mouth as he scanned the body of this fiend, this marvel. Tom was repulsed and delighted by this hideous sight, his gnarled face and giant twisted horns were enough to supply any child with a lifetime of nightmares, but even more remarkable was the brawn of this beast, pulsing beneath patchy, confused flesh. He took one step toward it.

"Please..." Anne breathed, pleading with large, terrified eyes.

"Shut up," he hissed, snapping his head toward Anne. The smile had vanished from his mouth and was replaced with a hot rage that twisted his features into something ugly and fearsome. The taste of bile filled his mouth at the sight of her; she looked grotesquely pathetic to him. To Tom, Anne had become the utmost deplorable kind of person: a traitor. He turned his head from her in revulsion, and

fixed his eyes on the exposed neck of the beast, bald and vulnerable, and paced toward him with the slow heel-to-toe stride of a hangman. He pulled his revolver from the holster around his waist and crouched condescendingly next to the slumbering animal, though Tom looked infinitesimal before him. He pressed the barrel into the soft skin under the beast's chin and his wild eyes popped open from the shock of the cold metal on his warm, sleepy skin, red veins reaching like fingers across the whites. But before the beast had time to react, Anne whimpered and Tom pulled the trigger and the bullet tore through his superhuman skull.

• • •

Before Anne had time to absorb what she was seeing, the vulgarity too profound to register, the bull mounted her mother, his long, thin spear impaling her. Paula held on to the bar where they tethered the cows and shrieked, her limbs collapsing under the excruciating pain, a film of sweat formed immediately over her entire body. The bull pulled his pelvis back and thrust it forward brutally and awkwardly, summoning another yelp from Paula. Blood started to trickle down her inner thighs. She was shaking violently. He lost his footing and crushed her hand and she howled. And suddenly he was out of her. And off her. And walking away disinterestedly, leaving Paula trembling, gasping, full and empty on all fours. Anne uprooted her feet and staggered off the bale a few yards from the stable and vomited nothing onto the grass, clutching her chest, crumbling to the ground. She collected herself in time to see her mother, the cow's head rocking on the ground behind her, pale-faced, limping weakly on shaky legs as she led the bull back to his pen. She picked up her nightgown, flinched as she cleaned the thick, bloody evidence from

between her legs, and began the endless trek back up to the ranch, her shoulders heaving with disappointed sobs.

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Blood and brains sprayed the wall, and black blood ran in a thick snake from under the beast's chin as his trunk-legs twitched involuntarily. Blood ran from his nostrils and his eyes, which slowly rolled back in his head. Anne sunk to her knees and watched the pool of blood expand from her brother's head like a crimson halo. Tom looked down on her wretched self with disgust.

"You're no better than that thing," he said; he spat on the floor, and left without another word.

• • •

Sheriff Tom Hanson asked Mayor Walker to call an emergency town meeting on his behalf the following day, where he presented the beast's head and recounted the tale of the previous night: how he traced the beast to its lair by careful calculation of evidence, how he subdued it in a gripping bout of hand to hand combat, and how, when the beast was charging toward him in a moment Tom was sure would be his last, he shot him. Square in the neck. Putting an end to murder and violence in Belle Fourche. He never mentioned Anne's presence that night to a soul.

Belle Fourche celebrated for a week without rest, dancing, drinking and eating in the streets. The town regained something like normalcy shortly thereafter, though it took two generations to rebuild its population to what it was before Paula's death. Belle Fourche erected a twelve foot bronze statue of Sheriff Tom Hanson, looking

proudly off into the distance, holding a severed bull's head in his extended hand by a long horn. In the afternoons, it cast a shadow over the iron bust of Seth Bullock, "The Finest of Frontiersmen."

The news of the young Sheriff's feat took South Dakota by storm, and soon after a deluge of interviews, articles, and autographs, he was offered the position of High Sheriff in Pierre, which he accepted without batting an eye. He took Faye with him.

Anne disappeared the night Tom killed the monster, never to be heard from again. Some said she took her own life, others said she caught the train in Spearfish and went to California to start over. And soon no one said anything about her anymore. Poisson took it upon himself to sell off the ranch and the cattle, including the bull, and never touched a dime of that money for the rest of his days. When, after his death, his own property was sold by the town of Belle Fourche, as he had no one to bequeath his possessions to, they found an engraving in the wooden door next to the Cowman's prayer, the last relic of the Rowns' having ever existed in Belle Fourche. It read:

*"Fate scripted the ruin of the House of Rown.
Though forward, unswerving, its course was down."*