

A Fair Trade

Ranchin is all I've known my whole life. Big open sky. Just workin the land. Runnin the animals. No one bothers no one much out here. It's a simple life, but I'm happy. I need simple on account I don't always remember things that good, but I get by. The other ranchers are nice enough. They don't talk much to me, but they don't talk mean to me or tell me what's to be done all the time. Dale is the funny one. Ben is serious all the time. Lucas is the nicest. He's got a wife that's a school teacher. He talks about her a lot. The boss rancher, Mr. Dylan, ain't so nice. Mean as a snake with a bulletproof soul. I don't think he really likes any of us. He never talks to me, but that's good. Cause the only time I hear him talkin is when he's yellin. But he's the boss, so what can you do? His ranch. His house. His cows. We just work here and follow the rules.

I hear a song in my head:

I don't like the hat they make me wear, but other than that, they treat me fair.

And that sure is right. I have a god awful lookin hat. That's how I know the other ranchers are nice, don't none of them make fun of my hat.

Sun's been up a couple three hours now, but my time is just startin.

-Ranch rule, early is on time, on time is late-

Today I'm on barn duty. I'm alone in the barn shoveling the poop and spreading the-

*Hey cowboy.*

Not alone. Little Bobby is playin in the hay. I see him and hear the drizzle on the tin roof round about the same time. It's a soft drizzle. Just plinkin away on the tin roof. But the way them clouds is lookin, we might be stormin soon. At least I'm dry in here.

*What's up boy?* I say back to him.

Bobby's a good kid. He's a kinda shy eight year old but he plays hard; scraped knees all the time, bruises, bee stings, shiners. Always fallin or bumpin into stuff he shouldn't. Fell backwards down the steps cause he was tryin to catch popcorn in his mouth. Got a tooth knocked out from runnin straight into a tree branch cause he was lookin at one of the cows. Last month he got hit with a baseball square in the eye. The month before he fell playing superheroes out of the high rafter and broke his arm. But his daddy, Mr. Dylan, the ain't so nice one, just plastered his arm up hisself and they kept going with their day. I guess he was a medic or something in the army, I don't rightly know. But Bobby says his dad is a better doctor than most doctors. Something like that. I don't remember things well.

We ranchers ain't allowed to talk to Bobby and he ain't allowed to talk to us. But sometimes, when it's just me and him and no one can see us, we chat a bit. I don't mind the company since everyone else always keeps to themselves.

*Nothin. Wanna play hide n seek for a bit,* he asks me.

*I'm workin.*

-Ranch rule, no chit chat-

*Who's workin point today?* He asks.

*Lucas is.*

*Why not you?*

*I don't know.*

I hear the rain pick up a bit. The plinkin gets faster and if sound could blur together, that's what the rain starts to do. It sounds a bit like the static when the radio on the porch is juicing out.

There's cracks in the roof, so little leaks stream in as the rain gets harder. Bobby sticks his tongue out and licks at the falling water.

*Hey, don't do that.* I say it nice, I ain't got no right to yell at the boy. That ain't my job. Plus he likes me and I always worry if I say something he don't like, he might not come around no more. Though I try to focus on work, I do like the company. He's a good kid. He's funny. Course if the boss man comes around and sees me chatting it up with his kid, I might be on the wrong side of that yellin. He ain't never yelled at me yet. Least I don't remember that he has.

*I just mean there might be bird poop or something coming off the roof. You don't need to get sick.*

*Sorry.*

I'm gonna tell him it weren't no big deal, but before I say anything I notice in one of the empty stalls is a bunch of balloons some fellow tied up new. All bright reds and yellows and blues. This whole barn is old and creaky and dull and dusty, but right there is a bunch of balloons lookin so colorful like they don't belong. That's odd.

*Them your pretty balloons?* I ask him.

*That your ugly hat?*

*Yeah. Them your pretty balloons?*

*Yeah. When the rain stops I think I might fly away over the house,* he says as he pulls his sweatshirt up higher on his back, so as to cover up his neck some. I don't know why.

*I'd like to see you fly over the house.*

*But there might not be enough balloons.*

*Well, it's okay, probably best to use a plane. Or a helicopter,* I tell him.

*Were you around when my daddy let the movie people fly their helicopter over the ranch?*

*Naw, I don't remember that. But I don't remember a lot of things. I got a condition. I ever tell you that?*

He laughs and jumps in the hay, *Like a hundred times*. He sits up like he just thought of something for the first time, *but you never told me why. Like why you don't remember things. You fall of a horse or something?*

That's a good question. It's weird not being able to remember why you can't remember. I just don't think about it much. It's like wonderin why the sky is blue. Ain't no answer. It is what it is. But I guess I gotta tell him something. *I just reckon most of my memories are bad memories so my brain just turned them off.*

*That scare you at all?*

*What?*

*That bad memories are in there. Maybe someday might want to come out?*

*Well, they'll come out whether I worry about them or not.*

As the rain gets stronger, the leaks in the ceiling get fatter. There's like four good leaks comin through the roof. Soundin like four little waterfalls around the stalls. I can tell the clouds are rollin in as the barn gets darker. I only got the floor light on which ain't all that bright.

My hat starts to get heavy. I probably got a look on my face since I don't know why my hat is gettin heavy. I'm standin still but the boy is laughin it up. He's laughin at me.

*What? I ask him.*

I don't really like him laughing at me, but he tells me, look *at the floor*.

As I do, a big puddle of water falls off the brim of my ugly hat and splish splashes on the ground. The boy rolls laughing on the floor. My hat's lighter now. I bring my head up slow and give him the evil eye til we both laugh about it. I can feel the strip of water fillin up my hat again. I give it a minute, then I fling my head toward him, sprayin him a little bit with the water before it plops to the ground. We both laugh at that. But time's up for that stuff, I still got plenty of hay to move.

*Can you play with me?*

*Kid, I'm workin.*

-Ranch rule, no distractions, no cell phones, no horsing around-

*Can you tell me a story?*

I shake my head no as I am about to answer, but I need to wait a sec before answering seeing how now I notice a mermaid hanging upside down. Like lifesize, real mermaid blinking and moving and all. I find myself thinking up a rhyme about her. Her fishtail is red, yellow and blue and wrapped around a rafter, but I give no reaction. She looks shiny and new so I'm gonna hafta count her as a distraction and get back to work. But that is an odd thing indeed to see. The boy ain't lookin at her, so I'm a little worried my bad memory is catching up to the right now. I slowly go back to the boy.

*How can I tell you a story. I just told you I don't got good memories.*

*You just remember you told me that, that was pretty good, right?*

I smile at that, *why don't you tell me a story. Tell me how you broke that arm a couple months back.* I do remember that story, how he thought if he jumped off the rafter he'd be flyin, even if only for a second. And flyin straight down. Which most people just call fallin. It makes me laugh when he tells it.

*I broke it on the swings.*

The rain starts beating harder now. Louder. The mermaid is kinda creeping me out, just swingin slowly watchin me, like she's waitin for something, but I try to ignore her.

*What? Naw. It was the rafter,* I remind him.

*No, it was on the swings.*

I really think I'm right. But I also see a mermaid in the barn, so I can't be sure no more.

A puppy comes scampering up, chirping out little puppy barks. She's a beagle kinda shy with an eagle eye for trouble and sportin a brand new red, yellow and blue collar needin someone true to follow.

She's the cutest thing I've ever seen. Maybe. I don't really know.

*Who's that?* I ask.

*This here is Stella.* Bobby is giggling as she is lickin his hand. As he bends down to pet her, I see some marks on the back of his neck for a second. He stands up without letting me see his back again. He's laughin, but he eyes me to see if I'm gonna say anything. But I ain't. Ain't my place to ask about every little scratch. Plus he's laughin, I don't want to get in the way of that.

*Where'd she come from?*

Through the rain, I hear an ATV pulling up and I feel a tightness in my chest. Like somethin bad is gonna happen. I glance over at the mermaid. Yup, still there. She looks sad, but she's still quiet and swayin back and forth, upside down.

-Ranch rule, all trades must be fair trades-

*I don't know, just showed up when I turned six on my birthday and she been following me around from time to time,* he says.

*That there puppy . . . puppy . . . showed up two years ago?*

*She's a good puppy. She's funny.*

*You gonna tell me your broke-arm story? And don't tell me it was the swings.* I tell him.

I see a figure of a man walking past the window. I feel like I need to hurry this up.

*You broke that arm playin superhero on the rafter.*

*Are you sure I said that?* He asks, looking away.

*Yes.* But not really, I'm not sure about anything. But this one feels right.

*Tell the truth.*

He doesn't look up.

*Bobby-*

He looks down as he starts petting the puppy.

*Why do you wanna know who broke my arm?*

What? *I didn't say who, I said how. You said who.*

Behind Bobby, I see the side door open slow and the rain gets a little louder. A man in rancher gear walks in slow. He don't see me and Bobby. I reckon he don't see the mermaid either, that's probably just my thing. But now I gotta know . . .

*Bobby who done broke your arm?*

*Maybe it was the rafter. I don't rightly know.*

I know I should stop talking. I know I should get to work. No chit chat. I don't remember getting up in the morning or how I got to work or even where my bed is. But I remember Bobby's bruises and shiners and scrapes. I remember ranch rules and how to throw hay and shovel poop and I remember Bobby's stories. I know he told me it was fallin from the rafter.

I know he's lyin.

*It weren't no swings. And now I think it weren't no rafter. Bobby who done broke your arm?*

The rancher walks past the horse stalls and takes his gloves off. He's got slow, big muddy footsteps. I should stop talking, but part of me thinks this is important. This might be the most important conversation I had in my life. Maybe that's why I'm scared.

And that mermaid just stopped her swingin.

Bobby just keeps petting the dog.

*I don't want her to know*, he says quietly and nods toward the upside down mermaid who's just starin at me. She ain't helpin things. I'm shaking as the man is getting close enough to hear us. I know the worst is yet to come. But I ain't gonna stop with Bobby. He's got to say it out loud.

*You see her?* I ask.

*Yeah. She's one of my special friends.*

*Special?* Oh no.

*She special like the puppy?*

*Yeah.*

I stare at her as it all comes together.

*Special like how? Special like . . . imagined?*

*Yeah.*

The Balloons.

The Puppy.

The Mermaid.

*Special like me?*

*Yeah.*

I lay my hat on the haystack. That ugly red, yellow and blue hat.

I suck in a slow breath. I guess that makes sense. No one else talks to me. I ain't got no family or car or home even. My only memories are when Bobby is around. He's a good kid. Right nice of him to make me a cowboy. But we ain't done talkin. The mermaid nods when I look at her. Noddin upside down is still noddin. It's just a little weird.

*Bobby, I'm not playin around. Who done broke your arm?*

I say it firm and hard. The words practically have edges on them. Bobby looks up kind of scared at the tone I just took.

*Is it the same person that did that to your neck?*

Behind him I see a man walk in, boots covered in mud, long duster jacket soaked through and his hat pointed down, hiding his face, as he lets the rain drain off.

With his head hung down Bobby pets the imaginary dog, and I can see better the cuts on the back of his neck going down. Like claw marks, but jagged and too far apart. More like if a fist were holding a set of keys, with a key sticking out from between each-

"My daddy did it," he whispers.

Them balloons are shrivellin up, like the air just drained out of them.

The man walks in slow and turns toward Bobby, like he heard something, but he can't see Bobby in the hay, and probably didn't hear what he said over the rain. The rancher takes his hat off real quiet like and looks around.

*Did what? Say it.*

That puppy is just lying there, not even movin now.

"My daddy broke my arm. My daddy ripped his keys on me." His voice is a quiverin now.

The Cowboy in the dark walks toward the words when he hears Bobby speak.

I give him my firmest voice, *Take off your sweartshirt and cover that there dog up, it's cold.*

*What? The imaginary dog is cold?*

*Yeah, I'm imagining it cold. Now do what I say.*

The rancher, behind Bobby, now comes up close enough to see him.

I know what needs to be done. I just wish I was smart enough to figure out a better way. But I can't and there's no more time. It's gotta happen now.

I full on yell at the poor kid, *Get that off now! Get it on the dog or you're gonna get a woopin!*

He looks at me, afraid, betrayed. He's never seen this side of me. I yell one more time and he ain't never gonna forgive me. I know I aint comin back from this,

That mermaid starts to cry, but her tears roll up, since she's still upside down. They roll up over her thin eyebrows and into her hair. It's an odd thing to see. I want to cry too, but that ain't what he needs to see. I raise fists up and give him the evil eye. But this time there ain't gonna be no laughin on the other side of it.

*BOY GET THAT SWEATSHIRT OFF NOW!* And I lunge forward with my fists up and stomp my foot right in front of him.

He jumps back and rips it off quick and tosses it on the floor and the crying starts.

The puppy, Stella, is gone.

"Don't hurt me!"

The rancher sees Bobby and puts his hands up, open, like he's sayin it's ok.

*Oh yeah? Hurt you like who else? COME ON BOBBY WHO HURTS YOU?!*

"My daddy, my daddy hurts me. Please not you. Please."

*I can't hear you over the rain! LOUDER!* I raise a fist high.

"Don't hit me! It's my daddy! He hurts me! He's the one, he hurts me!" He's cryin and shakin. His secret pops out of him spillin out the fear and the shame and the anger. And now that I done yelled at him, he ain't gonna forgive me. I know that.

The balloons are gone.

The rancher steps up as Bobby breaks down.

-Ranch rule, if you're workin point, you work the barn when it rains-

Lucas stands over Bobby hearing him groanin and cryin out, seeing him shaking and curling up. Seeing Bobby's finger-shaped bruises on his upper arms. Seeing the cigarette burns peppering his shoulders. Seeing the rugged old scars and jagged new cuts down his back.

The mermaid is gone . . .

I reckon I'm next. Bobby was a good friend. I feel bad I wasn't smart enough to think of another way. I'm gonna miss that kid.

Now the ranch rules start breakin.

No talking to the kid.

"Easy, Bobby, I'm not going to hurt you. It's okay," Lucas tells him in a soft, strong voice.

Bobby sits there petting his sweatshirt on the ground. Crying, shivering.

No cell phones.

Through the rain, I hear the click of Lucas' cell phone as he takes pictures of Bobby's back.

Lucas is a good guy, he'll do the right thing.

Bobby, I think he's got a chance at a better life now.

And me . . .

. . . I fade away forever.

I don't even say goodbye.

But it's a fair trade.