

CHRIS DONAHOE

WHERE POISON GETS YOU

WE STOPPED IN TOWN LONG ENOUGH to buy milk and chew beef jerky. Spitting dark tobacco juice onto the dusty ground, Craig's grandfather tilted his dirty baseball cap back on his head and spied the only other truck in town. *John bought another Ford for chrissakes. Found On Road Dead. Let's get the jesu outta here before the flies get us.*

In rural Alberta, where towns are defined by their number of traffic lights, Bymore had none. Its centre, marked by a dirt crossroad, boasted little more than a motel, with its boarded-up windows and lonely horse hitches, a silo and feed store, and a shack the locals called the general store.

We climbed into the old Chev with the road set before us like a landing strip. Craig's grandfather steered with his knee and tore open a new pack of Redman. His teeth were small, like a child's, but chipped and stained. We crossed unmarked junctions with dust still settling from trucks we could see in the distance. There were no trees or landmarks, just flat, fence-post land and, occasionally, far off the road, the worn buildings of farms. Most of what we could see was sky.

We passed cows sheltering under a stand of trees and pulled into the driveway that followed. The smell of manure would have made a city person roll up the window. Farm dogs greeted us by running circles around the truck. Craig's grandfather leaned out the window. *Get outta the way'r I'll runya over.*

We pulled up to a small house that looked like it had been transported from a city suburb. The vinyl siding was stained the colour of nicotine. The inside looked like it had never seen a woman, surprisingly clean, but devoid of anything that wasn't useful. Craig and I saw no art on the walls, no pictures or magazines, and nothing more colourful than the fake wood wallboard as we dropped our bags in the back room.

We put some hay into the truck box and rolled slowly out to the pasture. The truck bobbed over the uneven track as the cows began to gather and follow.

Craig and I were nineteen and had met in Calgary at a landscaping company. Craig was saving money for Mount Royal College in the fall, but he talked daily about how he longed to be on the road, traveling to sunny destinations. I was saving money too, planning my own trip overseas, and so we worked together, dreaming the days away.

The landscaping company had been a headache all summer, docking hours, switching around work crews, and screwing up our paycheques. One morning, after having received our latest incorrect pay stub, we threw our green uniform jackets onto the receptionist's desk and stormed off the lot.

After a week of watching TV, drinking and looking for fights in Calgary's honky tonks, Craig suggested we head up North to work on his grandfather's farm. He said the pay wouldn't be much, but having nothing better to do and no prospects, we packed our bags and bought Greyhound tickets to Red Deer.

With bellies full of bloody steak, the three of us sat on the open tailgate sipping warm beer. Craig held a .22 in his lap. The truck was at least twenty years old, but looked brand new, dark brown and beige, scratched only on the rails of the box from years of loading feed. Flies buzzed around our heads and cows dotted the field behind us. Craig's grandfather pointed suddenly. *There's one. See the little bastard?*

Craig brought the rifle to his shoulder and aimed at a prairie dog standing at the mouth of its burrow. Without anything to provide echo, the report dissipated quickly into the snowglobe sky. A plume of dust rolled on the ground where he'd aimed. We all took another sip.

Little cunts cost me two head last year.

Craig's grandfather threw his empty bottle into the box and opened another. *John says I should poison the bastards. Poison don't work. They're spreadin fastern Mary down at the motel. One morning they'll be biting my arse when I sit down to shit, Jesus. It's cause there's no foxes around anymore. That's where poison gets ya.*

We sat in silence as the sun set. The sky was a trap lowered over us, pink and reddening slowly. West was every way we looked.

Well boys, I got a dirty job for ya tomorrow.

Craig and I nodded obligingly.

One a them wild boars died in the pens a few days ago, a big sow. I lefter in there because usually the other sonsabitches'll eat it. She musta died

a something awful because they won't go near the pen. Anyhow, now she's all blown up and stinking and we gotta getter outta there. So, first thing, you boys'll dragger out, we'll tie her up to the back a the truck and dragger out to the coyotes. Careful though, they're hateful little pricks. Nasty. Can't get nothing for pigs these days but those black bastards get good money from those new fancy restaurants in the city, y'know, them gay ones.

It wasn't long after Craig's grandfather had picked us up from the bus depot that Craig and I had come to an unspoken understanding about him. We said very little and instead shot each other looks behind his back and laughed. He saw us, of course, but it only encouraged him.

He stroked a sore knee and told us stories about the old amateur rodeo circuit until the brighter stars multiplied. We heard how farming wasn't worth it anymore, that he'd sell the whole thing and live with his girlfriend in Red Deer if only he could get a fair price. We folded the tailgate and rolled slowly back to the house as the empties clinked around in the back.

Get to bed boys. Better dream a pussy, you won't be seein any for a while.

I woke to the sound of Craig's grandfather kicking the bathroom door open and creating a flat drone in the toilet bowl with his piss. He groaned and sighed until he was finished and then poked his head into our room.

Ya got a hard-on? I still wake up with a stiff dick every mornin. I guess the day I don't, I'll be dead. Or wish I was. He laughed and tossed a pair of overalls onto my bed.

As we entered the kitchen, he asked me about my plans and I explained that I was trying to save money for a trip to Asia. He rubbed his whiskered chin and nodded. *Oh ya. Ya, ok.*

He and Craig fried some eggs while I took the milk from the fridge and poured it on my cereal. Craig's grandfather took the milk jug from my hands and put it directly back into the fridge. He explained how milk lasted twice as long if you kept it in the fridge as much as possible. *You could feed starving Africa with all the sour milk people pour down the drain. People hungry in the world when you little fuckers'll take more'n ya need and throw it out before it's done. The fuckin fat kid on the teeter-totter, christ.*

I tried to rub the sleep from my eyes, but the truck rocked and swayed and I only poked my eyeball. Craig's grandfather dropped us at the pens and

threw a pair of gloves out the window. *There's some rope in the back. I'll go feed the cows and be back when you gotter over the fence. Don't turn yer back on those sonsabitches and keep yer hands outta each other's pants.*

The boars, black and hairy, crowded around us sniffing for food. The humps on their backs remained still as they moved. We walked sideways with our backs to the electrified fence and followed our noses to a small shed with three walls. When I saw the sow, I immediately gagged. Bloated and dotted with white spots, the body was covered with flies and maggots. When Craig turned his head and spit, I realized we only had the one pair of gloves between us.

I put on the gloves and held the body's hind legs while Craig tied the rope around them. The skin was almost transparent. Together, we grabbed the rope and pulled the rotting corpse into the light. The flies buzzed around us, hitting our mouths and eyes. We rested silently for a minute at the edge of the fence.

My mouth was wet with saliva, forcing me to swallow continuously to keep from drooling. Craig picked up the rope and we looked at each other and laughed. The front legs were like rubber in my hands. I spat as the putrid snout came closer the higher we lifted. A small pack of boars began nudging our legs and backs. Just as the body reached our chests and we were ready to heave it over to the other side of the fence, the skin on the front legs began to slide off the bone. Thick white liquid oozed out onto my gloves. Craig was yelling as the head and ass came up to our faces. The spongy hooves finally broke off in my hands, dropping the corpse on our side of the fence with a thud. Its rib cage split open, spilling out a puddle of milky liquid and maggots.

We kicked and cursed the boars until they retreated, squealing and snorting. Craig gagged and spit and picked up the rope again. I tried to grasp the splintered leg bones with my slimy gloves. With one hand on the bones and another under its soft head, we lifted again. We reached the top of the fence just as the rope tore through the hind legs. The carcass wavered on the fence and dropped to the other side, its torso clapping together with a hollow sound. We climbed the fence and waited in silence under a tree for the truck to return.

Well jesus christ, that's enough ta shrivel the hairs on anyone's ballsack. You boys earned yer steaks tonight. Let's run this bastard out to the woods, go have a beern get cleaned up.

It was only seven o'clock in the morning, but I hoped the beer would help remove the smell from my memory.

After dinner, we sat on the porch teasing the dogs with a filthy tennis ball.

Those poor fuckin bastards'd chase that ball up satan's arsehole. That's what ya get when you got shit for brains.

Craig's grandfather scratched one of the dogs behind the ears as it whimpered for the ball. *Isn't it, shit for brains?*

The dog licked his face.

Well boys, we got another big day tomorrow.

We nodded.

At least five or six head got pink eye, maybe more. Ever had that?

We shook our heads and mumbled.

Nasty shit. Vets think they get it from gettin shit in their eyes. Shit in their eyes, do you believe that? They say it's from the flies. I see them out there though, rubbin their heads in each other's arses. What kind of animal rubs its face into another animal's arse? Huh, shit for brains?

He scratched the dog again. *So we gotta round em up, separate em and get em patches and needles. Can you still handle a rope, Craig?*

Craig nodded.

Good, I might need ya tomorrow. I'm goin to lay down for a bit and read. Ever read that arsehole, Tom Clancy? It's like the whole world's always just waitin to be blown up. Christ, people got nothing better to do than try to blow up the world or write fuckin books about it.

He shook his head. *It's all so fuckin crazy, I don't know what to think anymore. Puts me to sleep though.*

He stood up and opened the front door to go inside.

In the morning we rolled out to the field in the truck. Craig's grandfather sang loudly to the Shania Twain song barely coming through the static on the radio. *Man, I feel like a woman, like a beer and a woman.*

The cows followed the hay on the tailgate back to the corral while Craig and I walked back rounding up stragglers with sticks. The racquet-shaped corral was a Frankenstein mix of old barn boards and fencing that ran from the cattle squeeze up a straight chute to a large crowd pen. Two smaller pens sprouted off each side of the chute.

When the crowd pen was full, Craig closed the gate and hung three ropes on the sturdiest fence posts. His grandfather walked over to the truck with a slight limp. He reached into the box and grabbed a five-pound bag

of white sugar and a square, vinyl case that looked like it might have been an old woman's make-up bag. While he walked backwards down the chute, we herded the cows down slowly after him. He opened the smaller pens and directed a quarter of the cattle into each one. We entered the pens and coerced the infected cows back into the chute, six in all.

You boys keep em in the chute and send em down one by one. If one a them bastards turns on ya though, you climb that fence quick, she won't stop just because yer ugly. Just letter go, we'll getter up in the pen.

Craig's grandfather climbed the fence gingerly and waited by the cattle squeeze at the end of the chute. Craig waited behind the last cow in line, keeping them from going back up into the crowd pen. I pressed the first cow down into the squeeze. When she was in the squeeze, Craig's grandfather pulled the lever and the metal cage clamped shut around the cow's torso. The cow kicked and panted, its eyes wide and searching. Craig's grandfather walked around to its head protruding from the bars like it was mounted on a wall. He opened the vinyl case and pulled out a pile of small leather patches, a tube of Crazy Glue, a large hypodermic needle and a medicine bottle. *Now, you bastard, I wish ya were smart enough to realize that shit smells bad for a reason, especially your shit, but I know we'll probably have to do this again before next year.*

He rubbed the animal's nose softly. *Maybe we'll get you a big hat to wear to keep the shit out of your eyes and you can parade around like you own the place. Queen Shit we'll call you, Queen Shit and her shit-hat.*

He drew some medicine into the needle, applied a circle of glue to the perimeter of a patch and pulled a handful of sugar from the bag. With a quick, gentle motion, he pushed the sugar into the cow's eye and fitted the patch over it. The cage rattled as the cow bucked and bellowed inside. Craig's grandfather walked to the rear of the squeeze, injected the needle into the cow's hind quarters and released the lever to open the cage. The cow jumped and trotted back out to pasture, liquid oozing from the patch. He glanced after it. *I guess she looks more like a shit pirate. Ol Captain Shitbeard.*

The second cow went into the squeeze with almost no hesitation, as did the third. But when the fourth cow's turn came, it had seen and heard enough to know it didn't want to follow the others. I prodded it with a stick and yelled until it moved into position, always ready to climb the fence if it had other ideas. When it had been treated, it took all three of us to move the last two the rest of the way down the chute. When the fifth one had finished,

the sixth finally reared up its front legs and turned for the crowd pen, forcing Craig and me to scramble up the fence and out of its path.

In the open pen, Craig and his grandfather grabbed the ropes while I attempted to steer the cow in their direction. When it was close enough, they lassoed it around its neck simultaneously and pulled it towards the fence. The cow grunted and resisted, staring at them from the side with a wild eye. They sent the ropes around a post and pulled on them, reining the cow in slowly until its head was flush with the fence and it was unable to move. Craig and I held the ropes while his grandfather administered the treatment.

When we were finished, Craig's grandfather bent over his knees wheezing and laughing. *My girlfriend's daughter is a vegetarian. Last week she asked me if I feel bad raising and eating these cunts. I didn't know what to say, I mean, jesus I know they got feelins and everything, but christ.*

He took off his hat and scratched his head. *She has her cat and sees the animals on tv and the cows in the field, all like little souls to be saved. Feeds the cat better foodn I eat for chrissakes. Long John Shithead over there, eatin and shittin, lookit her over there.*

The cow turned slowly and looked at us, ropes dangling from its neck.

Makes me wonder why in christ's name something like that's on the planet in the first place. Almost makes me believe in god, y'know what I mean? Like he created all these stupid, slow animals for the other animals to eat. I'd believe it too if it wasn't for all the fuckin people whose brains are no biggern hers.

He pulled the Redman from his pocket, tucked another wad under his lip and spat dark juice. We waited a few minutes then slipped the ropes off the cow's neck while it chewed.

That afternoon, I got a call from my mother. She told me that her friend had offered me a job on the oil-patch making more in a day than I would make in a week on the farm. I hung up the phone and hesitated when they asked me what the call was about. I told them what she'd said. *Christ, that's great news. That's where the money's at these days. Bettern draggin around maggoty boars and shitty cows. I can drop yat the bus station in Red Deer tonight if you want, I'll stay in town with the missus, been hankerin for some pussy anyhow. We'll leave Craig here with the dogs, he likes dogs.*

I told Craig we'd probably be back in Calgary having a beer in a few weeks.

The dogs chased us down the driveway and out onto the dirt road until they became small in the sideview mirror, sniffing their way into the yellow grass that lined the ditch. The late afternoon air was cool as it blew in through the windows and stirred the dust in the cab. Craig's grandfather turned the radio off and we sat, staring straight ahead, our heads bobbing slowly with the ruts. The road seemed like the only road in the world, like it could take anybody anywhere they wanted to go, straight to the horizon and off into the blue sky. But eventually we met the highway. The semis and work trucks whizzed by, their cattle trailers and feed wagons full. We rolled up the windows. He found a radio station and turned the truck towards town. Not a word was spoken between us.

When we pulled into the bus station parking lot, Craig's grandfather pulled off his cap and threw it onto the dashboard. His thin grey hair stood from his head in strands. *Go find out what time the bus comes and I'll head across to the bank to get ya yer money.*

I waved my hand and told him I didn't want his money. It'd only been a few days, I merely worked for my room and board. He looked at me and smiled. His tobacco-darkened tongue pushed against his upper teeth as if he was pushing them back into place. I told him not to worry about it.

Go get yer ticket and we'll go get dinner somewheres, you'll take a beern a steak wontchya?

He stuck out his hand, rough like raw-hide. I nodded and shook it.

The young waitress sat us in a booth with an uneven table and paper placemats printed with the history of the town. We ordered beers with steaks and fries. He followed the waitress with his eyes as she left the table. *I don't come here for the steaks.*

He gave me a wink and I laughed. *You wouldn't even know what to do with pussy if it landed in your lap, wouldja? A girl like that'd be out the door within a week. Listen, I tell ya, learn how to fuck and a woman'll follow you around like you shit diamonds. Men spend all their time tryin to get rich so they can get some hot little bimbo, but all you gotta do is learn to use your cock and women'll give you every cent they make. How much'll you make on the patch?*

I told him what my mother had told me over the phone.

Jesus christ.

He shook his head and undid the top button on his blue canvas pants to let his belly push against the zipper. *I remember bein on the road, shovelin*

shit by day and ropin by night, trying to impress the girls and not spend everything I made on beern whiskey. The farmers came to the show in their new trucks, fulla kids. You could get good money for pigs then, land was cheap. I only had the house, the well and the acres to the road when I started. Saturday nights down at the motel, took the kids to the fair when it came near enough. Y'know, but now, I'm just holdin out. Holdin out for what, I don't know. Somebody who wants it I suppose. But you little cunts, flyin off to India or Pakiland, sittin around cross-legged tryin to find yourself, jesus. I tell ya, there were moren a few boys around in my day who'd a given their left nut to get what I got.

He rubbed his knee. The food came.

But now I had enough.

We ate and he paid. I held the door while he winked at the waitress and grabbed a toothpick from the shotglass by the cash register.

When we pulled up to the station, he came to a quick stop and threw the shifter up into park. *Now listen, you little bastard, remember what I told ya. Don't worry about makin a fortune, these are your fuck years. Fuck. I hope you make some good money on the patch, enough to see ya through. Next time you're through Red Deer, gimme a buzz, I'll always let ya buy me a beer. Eh, big spender, eh?*

He nudged me in the arm and nodded at the door. *Go on, get outta my fuckin truck. Don't let any strangers feel you up on the bus.*

I shook his hand and got out. When I reached into the back for my bag, I saw him give a wave through the window in the back of the cab. Then he gave me the middle finger, shifted and drove over the curb into a u-turn back down the street.