

MAYBE

Slim Sherman strode across to the house from the barn and every step showed his irritation. Most days he could ignore his concerns about his struggle to keep a Wyoming ranch and relay station going, with help only from an ex-trail cook with a bad sacroiliac who was scared of horses and a twelve year old brother, by just looking at the land around him, breathing in the deep Wyoming air and knowing he was part of that land.

This morning, however he could not find any pleasure from the land. This morning he was feeling every bit of the weight of responsibility of keeping the ranch going, through a drought and raising a 12 year old brother who at best resented him, and openly threatened to run off at every opportunity. A brother who made sure that Slim knew how much he was resented, by making friends with every no account drifter and saddle tramp, who could tell Andy about anything that was happening in the world away from the Sherman ranch and relay station, a world he did not want to be in.

Slim admitted to himself he did not understand his young brother. If Andy had yelled back at him and fought him openly, he could have dealt with that but when things went wrong between them, as they did nearly every day, Andy just spoke quieter and quieter, never looking up and never quite disobeying but his expression mutinous, and his eyes hurt. And then Andy made sure Jonsey knew just how angry he was with Slim, and Jonsey made sure that Slim knew.

It had not always been like that between Slim and Andy. Before their mother Mary had died a couple of years ago, Andy had hero worshipped the big brother who returned from the war to make things better. Slim had not been around much, off trailing cattle to the new Colorado mining camps, and the railroad builders and vigilantizing down Kansas with Mort Carey but when he returned home Andy had run down the road yahoing with pleasure to greet his hero. Andy never came yahoing down the road these days when Slim came home, more likely run in the other direction. Since Mary Sherman had died and instead of trailing cattle across the country, Slim started the relay station franchise so he could look after his young brother, things between the Sherman brothers had fallen away. These days far from being Andy's hero Slim felt like Andy's jailer.

Maybe, Slim thought the problem was that he had taken the hero worship, without really taking the time to get to know Andy. Maybe what he needed to do was find a way to get to know him but the fact was he had no idea how to do it.

Slim knew he was in for another long day. It was early in the morning but although there was still frost on the ground he had already brought in the relay teams from the pasture, and replaced shoes on the two horses he had run out of time to do yesterday when Jonsey's milk cows, and the spare relay team and a couple of young horses had decided to make a break through a gap in had in the back fence caused by a falling tree. By the time he had found the cows, and rounded up the horses, discovered their best colt had lamed himself during the escape, put Jonsey's liniment on the colt's hock and fixed the fences, it had been too late to start shoeing horses.

Shoeing horses in the frosty cold half-light was not Slim's favourite job, and it had not been made easier or improved his temper when the cantankerous lead sorrel horse had reared back 3 times , once breaking the rope, and once the hitching post. After shoeing the horses, Slim had checked everything that needed checking, fed everything that needed feeding, except Andy's cursed strays and pets, put away all the fencing gear that he had left in the buckboard last night because he got back so late and kicked Jonsey's donkey and Andy's goat away from the horse feed. All of which needed doing before he went off to find out whether Jonsey's liniment had fixed their best colt and check fences and cattle around the place before the afternoon stage came in.

Normally Slim would have sent out whoever was working for him to check for cattle problems and fence breaks, but since yesterday Slim had no-one working for him. And he was worried that the tree down on the pasture fence was not the only problem. Alvie the latest in a long series of no account drifters who Slim had hired and fired in the last couple of years had claimed he checked the pasture fences regularly but the tree that Slim had found down yesterday appeared to have been there for some time. If Alvie had checked the area in the last few days, he hadn't looked hard. It was anybody's guess what else had not been checked or missed. And Slim needed to spend a long morning he could not spare finding out.

Slim was never afraid of hard work, no son of Matt Sherman would be, which thought brought him to the subject of his brother Andy again, but when it was time wasted checking on some no account drifter who did not even have a passing acquaintance with what was meant by an honest day's work, he resented having to do it....angrily.

The day before Slim and Jonsey had watched Alvie ride up the road toward Laramie after Slim had fired him when he found Alvie asleep in a nice comfortable hollow instead of checking on cattle. Alvie had not been to unhappy to go, but he had departed with a few choice words about what he thought of working at the Sherman ranch. The truth of some of Alvie's views on the future of the ranch, no matter how angrily said, were weighing heavily on Slim.

“Probably just as well he’s gone” Jonsey had said “Didn’t like the way he was talkin’ around Andy. Andy’s been too friendly by half, and Alvie’s been takin’ advantage, getting’ him to do chores for him. Was going to say something but....” Jonsey did not say he kept quiet because he was concerned about another dispute between Slim and Andy over Andy’s impulsive friendliness to strangers. Which Slim realised.

“Ain’t one of those drifters worth the trouble it takes to pay ‘em” Slim had told Jonsey irritably.

“Ain’t much of a job” Jonsey had said philosophically “Cain’t expect much of a man.”

Slim glowered down at him. Jonsey ignored the glare “Good hand get twice as much at one of them big spreads” Jonsey said. “and a chance to lose it in friendly bunk house poker game at night. Nothing out here at night but odd game of checkers with me and watching you fuss and stew over them account books”.

“I ain’t around to entertain the hired help” Slim had muttered.

“Don’t hurt a fella to be pleasant, ‘cept when he’s called on to be mean” Jonsey had replied turning back to the house. “You better get into Laramie an’ see if you can find some no account drifter who needs a few bucks. You cain’t do it all out here by yourself.”

“Most of the no account drifters hangin’ round Laramie likely to be Bud Carlin’s men.” Slim had replied.

“Wait til after the trial” Jonsey told him before going into the house. He looked back “But you cain’t do it all by yourself”

As he walked back toward the house thinking of yesterday’s conversation Slim snorted “Maybe I cain’t do it all myself” he thought “but it’s better than chasing after no account drifters.” He stopped and looked back over his shoulder at the hills, but not even telling himself how good the land was restored his mood. Maybe his problems would be fixed if the drought broke, or maybe if nothing went wrong today and he could get a half a head clear of the work, he could find time in a few days to spend with Andy. Maybe.

“Maybe I cain’t fix the problems with Andy today” Slim thought “but it would be a start if I didn’t make it worse.”

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Promising himself he was not going to let Andy provoke him into another dispute, Slim went into the house, feeling the weight of his world on his shoulders. He was stopped in his tracks by the sight of his young brother Andy, eating breakfast and sharing his plate with a big ginger cat which was the one thing Andy could do that would drive all Slim’s good intentions about getting on with Andy out the door.

Andy looked up at his brother guiltily then pushed the cat away. Slim had to turn away, take a deep breath and count to ten, before swinging around to face Andy who was still sitting at the table, head down, playing with his food refusing to look at his brother. As he turned, Slim noticed that Jonsey still wearing an apron from making breakfast, was standing at the edge of the kitchen pursing his lips, ready to step between the brothers, which added to Slim’s annoyance because even though he considered he would have been justified if he had just walloped Andy, he would never have done it.

With considerable effort Slim, managed to give Andy what he hoped was an understanding smile. “Andy, we’ve been through this” he said finally, the attempt at patience straining in his voice, “it ain’t... you can’t keep those... critters in the house.”

Andy looked at Slim, eyes wide, mouth pulled, not quite sulky, not quite ready to get angry. Resisting, with every line of his body. “They ain’t hurting anyone” he muttered “Just as clean as me” For a second he met Slim’s eyes “ Or you” he added a touch defiantly.

Slim glanced at Jonsey who inclined his head and took a hard breath. No sympathy for Slim there. Slim turned back to his brother. “Andy, I keep tellin’ you. We gotta ask the stage passengers into the house, we gotta feed ‘em, offer ‘em coffee. Stage coach company pays us. Andy” he said really pushing the patience “Most folks, passengers don’t take kindly to eatin’ off tables where a racoon’s been sittin’ on.”

Andy stirred food on his plate mutinously. “Wasn’t the racoon on the table” he said.

"I saw that" Slim said between his teeth. He bent down to lean on the table, too close to Andy ignoring Jonsey's signals to back off. Andy still not saying anything avoided looking at Slim's face by staring at the picture of his parents on the wall behind his brother. Shaking his head, Slim put his hand on Andy's face to turn it so Andy had to look at him. "Andy, its not just a kid's trick havin' those animals in the house. You gotta understand that stage money is what keeps this place going. War did hard things to the land. Money ain't easy and ranchin' is maybe the hardest way to get it. Those animals in the house could cost us the contract. We lose that contract, we lose everythin'. Everthin' Pa built. Everythin he wanted for...me.. for you ..for us "

Andy pulled free from Slim's hand on his face, still refusing to look at Slim, he took a deep shuddering breath. "Take a fool to stop the contact just 'cause a racoon sniffed around a door" he half whispered.

Slim sighed and stood up straight "Andy it ain't just racoons around. You saw the way that eastern reverend fella was last week, when the cat jumped up and started lickin' off his plate. Stared like we was... wasn't fit to open the door to him. You know he complained to the superintendent in Cheyenne, made a real fuss about how we wasn't fit to eat with, how the stage line could be in trouble if someone got sick from eatin' at a relay station.. What if he'd seen a racoon in the kitchen, what if some fella from the stage line came an' saw a coyote in here, right where Jonsey's cookin'. You think we could keep that contract. You think this ranch is worth loosin' over a racoon in the kitchen." Slim took another deep breath then as calmly unemotionally as he could told his brother "Andy if you can't keep them... critters under control, keep 'em outta the house, they gotta go."

Andy's expression flashed between anger and tears. "They go I go" he said in his voice choked as if he wanted to yell but was afraid.

Slim's jaw spasmed as he wondered for a second if his young brother did not even trust him enough to risk showing anger at him. "Andy" he started to say.

"I hate it here" Andy muttered softly " Don't care about no stage line." he said ' Don't have no say in this ranch. Didn't ask for the contract. Never got no choice about it. Don't see why I should care." He half whispered, "Don't care if I stay or go, better places to be than here, better things to do than soap harness." His voice became stronger " I ain't stayin" he insisted. "I'm goin' first chance I get, first offer I get I'm outta here. And there's nothing you can do to stop me."

Slim decided his best option was to ignore the threat and try to make Andy understand. "Andy, you know we gotta have everythin' right for that contract" Slim pushed while Jonsey threw his hands in

the air “Like the harness, you gotta do it to keep the supervisors, right. Supposin’ horses pulled into Laramie and the supervisor sees it not done.”

“You see it not done from next stop up” Andy muttered making sure Slim heard every word.

“We ain’t riskin’ the contract” Slim muttered, making sure Andy heard every word.

“Don’t see why I should stay, not like I get a say here. Wouldn’t think Pa left the place to me too.” Andy stood up, dropping his fork on the floor and pushed past Slim toward the door which he opened roughly then let go with a loud bang as he went outside.

Slim frowning picked up the fork then went to the door and watched Andy head off behind the house. “Andy” he roared “ get off and clean that harness”

Andy for a second glared at him then sort of shrugged knowing he could not win the battle, shuffled toward the barn

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Slim sighed and turned back into the house going into the kitchen where Jonsey was crashing plates and making far too much noise as he did the dishes.

“I just want to do it right for him.” Slim said to Jonsey as he helped himself to a coffee, pleading for sympathy.

“I know” Jonsey answered, not giving Slim any “You know what they say about good intentions.” He watched Slim shrug helplessly.

After a certain silence between the two of them, Jonsey shook his head “Well at least you didn’t say it” he said. “Did one thing good.” He shook his head at Slim’s confused expression. “Didn’t say, don’t come back” he explained.

Slim half smiled “You think I would, ever say that, being raised by Pa?” he asked. “You think I’d forget what Pa told me about that.”

“Be disappointed if you had” Jonsey answered honestly. Jonsey carefully put down a plate. He took a deep breath “Slim” he said seriously, “Sometimes the way you are with Andy, the things getting’ to you. You sure you rememberin’ what Matt said, taught you, said to you. Not criticisin’ just wondering if you maybe worrin’ so much you forgettin’.” He watched Slim carefully for a reaction.

Slim straightened up rigid then relaxed a little and shook his head slowly. He sipped the coffee and scowled at its bitterness before answering. “I remember. Only what Pa told me don’t seem to get through to Andy” he replied carefully. “Jonsey I know I’m not Pa. I know I was away during the war and not so much around until Ma died and Andy, maybe, doesn’t know me so well as he should. But I’m his brother. I’m just tryin’ to raise him like Pa would, do for him what Pa did for me. And he’s fightin’ me at every point. And he’s winnin’” Slim admitted “ Reckon if he could find a way he would go.”

Jonsey carefully started to dry another plate “Maybe that’s what’s wrong between you two” he told Slim. “Don’t reckon Matt woulda raised him like you.”

Slim stared at him.

“Reckon if you think about it you would remember Matt sayin’ every man has to ride the trail his own way. Andy ain’t you” Jonsey explained. “Matt would a raised him like he was... Andy, had his own ways. Matt knew things” Jonsey wiped his hands on the side of the apron he wore. “Andy’s just a boy Slim” he said. “You ask him to do a man size work but he’s just a boy. And a boy needs to...play, to be a boy. That’s what Mat used to say when you ran off fishin’ when Mary wanted you to book learn. ‘He’s a boy and he has to have time to be a boy Mary, or else he’ll never be a man. “

“You reckon, lettin’ those cursed critters lose us the contract is playin’,” Slim finally demanded feeling on safer ground with something he knew he was right about.

Jonsey pushed “Keepin’ critters isn’t such a bad thing, for a boy. Learns re-sponsibility, learn to care. Good thing. Matt thought it was a good thing for you. Ain’t no-one can say you didn’t turn out re-sponsible” he added.

Slim swallowed the rest of the coffee, then none to gently put the cup in the wash dish "It ain't the same. I was just a kid when I had those critters. Not near grown like Andy" Slim said determined not to be worn down this time. "I knew when to grow up. When there was work to be done. Didn't let them cause Pa more headaches."

"Yeah" said Jonsey started to wipe more dishes. He considered the problem, "I remember now. You was.... not twelve like Andy. Yeah you must be just a kid of eleven years and a bit more when you bought that baby buffalo home. Remember like yesterday, you and that stupid red pony, draggin' the thing down the road there on the end of a rope. "

"I wasn't that old" Slim started to say. Then he stopped and thought about it "Didn't think I was that old " he said and grinned. "I didn't whine and moan about my critters." He insisted. "Just looked after'em." Still determined to win.

"I remember " said Jonsey thinking about it, "You're right. Never whined about your critters at all. Way I remember it, is you howlin' the place half down when Matt thanked you so kindly for bringing home dinner. Course if you'd been all grown up you woulda just been just ready to help him get it ready, but you was yellin' fit to kill no-one was gonna eat that cursed critter. So I guess you wasn't so grown up."

"Pa was just teasin'" Slim said, still determined Jonsey wasn't going to justify Andy letting the cat on the table, again. "I knew it."

"Yeah" said Jonsey.

Slim frowned "Jonsey, I don't say no to Andy's cursed critters. It ain't too much to ask Andy to keep them outta the house. If he thought I wouldn't give him a hard time, every one of 'em would be runnin' round the kitchen. Just doin' what Pa was doin' for me. All Pa was doin' was sayin' don't bring everything home. There were limits. And he wasn't riskin' everythin' over a critter.."

"Thought he was riskin' everythin' when that buffalo critter got into the hay, and near wrecked half a year store." Jonsey replied, holding his ground. "Seem to recall hearin' you howl that day when Matt was so mad he was grabbing a gun to shoot it, and you must been near 16 then."

“He didn’t mean it” Slim said. “I knew it.”

“No Matt didn’t, you knew he was just belly achin’ “ Jonsey said seriously, “but you trusted Matt and knew he wouldn’t . Andy hasn’t gotten round to trustin’ you bellyachin’... yet “ he said. “ Ain’t your fault you weren’t around so much when Andy was a young’un but maybe you need to remember, Andy hasn’t learned to trust you so much.” He stepped close to Slim “So you gotta learn to keep your mouth shut and not threaten him on things he don’t understand.”

When Slim did not reply, Jonsey stepped back. “Cursed buffalo” ‘he said “Still be out in that pasture yonder if he hadn’t died of old age . You know Matt was real determined that critter was gonna be here when you got home from the war. No matter how bad things got. ‘It was the boy’s pet” he kept sayin’ when I reckoned it was eatin’ pasture for three cows. ‘Boy would never forgive me if I... broke faith “ then Matt grinned, you know the way Mat could Slim ‘Boy would forgive me’ he said ‘I wouldn’t forgive me.’”

“What are you tryin’ to say?” Slim demanded “You think I’m not doin’ this for Andy. Keepin’ it goin’ for him and then all he says is he don’t want to be here” He slapped his hand against his thigh in frustration.

Jonsey hesitated “I’m sayin’ don’t break faith.You heard what he said before Slim. Listen to him. Maybe he don’t want it because he don’t have a say in it,” Jonsey hesitated again carefully trying to find the words to talk about this to Slim. “Slim he works like a man to keep the relay teams goin’. Every time we lose another no account drifter hand, Andy’s out there doin’ a man’s job and you never gave him a say in takin’ on the relay.”

“We didn’t have no choice” Slim muttered. “ Couldn’t leave him to go trail herdin’ no more. Needed to find some way of gettin’ regular money.”

“Maybe “ said Jonsey carefully “ But maybe that’s why in particular you shoulda asked him.”

Slim just stared at Jonsey.

Jonsey shook his head understanding. "You remember, boy when we came here. Remember comin' over that first hill down south " Jonsey said " I was drivin' the wagon and Mary was up on that horse helpin' you and Matt push those cattle. Remember what he said to you."

Slim thought about it. "I remember " he answered slowly " I remember stopping and lookin' down the hill and Pa askin' me whether I thought we ought settle this place. Course I knew he was already sold, 'cause he'd been talkin' all the way up about this country sayin' all along that it was good country, so I wouldn'a said no."

"Even so Matt asked you" Jonsey said "and he asked Mary."

"Wouldna' said no" Slim repeated. "Neither would Ma. Pa had his heart set on it."

"But ever since you had a say, it's your place" Jonsey pushed. "Young Andy didn't get a say, didn't get asked."

"You reckon Andy woulda said yes" Slim demanded. "if I'd asked him about the relay. You reckon he'd be any happier if I had done it after he said no."

"Didn't get the chance" Jonesey insisted as Slim slapped his thigh irritably again. "Too late now. Maybe it would help if you let him keep just one of those strays he keeps findin', in the house, help him think he had a say."

Slim half raised his hands in the air. "I gotta go check those cattle" he said accepting he was not going to win this argument with Jonsey, and he could just end up allowing not only the racoon, the coyote and the cat to sleep in the house but Andy's grey pony as well if it kept going. "Seein' we got rid of the last no account drifter yesterday, so there ain't no one else."

'Where you goin'?' " Jonsey asked. On a ranch where a man could get into trouble with anything from a lame horse to a run in with no good drifters, letting someone know where to start looking was an unwritten rule.

Slim thought about it. "Everywhere that no good drifter Alvie was supposed to check" he said. "Gullies up north I guess. I'll check the colt on the way back"

"Liniment will fix it." Jonsey commented. "Alvie was supposed to check the lake down near the Laramie road too"

"Maybe check it tomorrow" Slim said. "Cain't be everywhere in a day."

He went into the other room and took his chaps off hook near the door. Jonsey followed him and stood at watching Slim as he put them on, " Andy..." Jonsey started to say.

"You get those horses ready good, groomed up, see Andy cleans the harness" Slim barked a little too sharply trying to avoid the discussion "Superintendent's checkin' that every time they get into Laramie. "

"Andy's right " Jonsey said " Down the road don't do it so well."

"Supervisor isn't checkin' them" Slim insisted. "Checkin' us"

Slim put his gun belt on and then his hat, adjusting it to the way he liked it. Like Matt had worn it he remembered for no reason. "I'll be back in time to help hitch the stage" he said.

"Andy and I can manage if you don't" Jonsey said ' Andy's doin' a good job, actin' like a real grown man."

Slim took a deep breath "Jonsey " he started to say. He looked down at Jonsey. "You telling me it's actin' like a real man to want to run when things aren't happening to suit you."

"Depends on the man" Jonsey answered. "When things get rough, maybe a real man would figure best to go instead of hurtin' someone they care about real bad." He took a careful breath and caught Slim's arm. "Slim I know Matt's son would never shut the door on someone he loved. You need to make sure Andy knows that."

“Ahhh” hissed Slim not daring to answer. “I’ll be back to hitch the stage.”

“Andy and I can manage” said Jonsey. “But watch the sun or take your Pa’s watch.

“You know how I feel about that” Slim replied sharply.

“Heard it often enough” Jonsey drawled. “You had all that time with your Pa. Andy didn’t so Andy gets his watch.” He patted Slim’s arm before letting t go. “Slim maybe it would help if you remembered what Matt was like. Matt woulda laughed at the cat in the reverend’s soup. Slim, I was laughin’. Mose was laughin’, even the reverend’s missus was smilin.”

Slim looked at Jonsey. “I remember” he said “Pa was a laughin’ man, thought everythin’ was funny,” he said seriously

“Even thought that cursed buffalo was funny” Jonsey nodded “ wasn’t laughin’ about you goin’ to war though.”

“‘Cept that” Slim agreed “we was happy then before the war” he said contemplatively. “Ma and Pa and young Andy and me. You.” He opened the door seeing Andy working a way angrily on the harness by the coral. “Not so much now” he added

“No” answered Johnsey and just as seriously said “ I miss Matt knowing how to laugh. Need someone here who knows how to laugh.” He put his hand on Slim’s shoulder. “I think you forgot boy, maybe some things Matt said. Maybe laughin’,” he said “Understandable, the war and losin’ your Ma and Pa and this place is ... re-sponsibility and young Andy. I know it’s not easy. But you need to learn to laugh again. Like when Matt was around.”

“Not sure I can ever remember again” Slim said feeling the weight of responsibility on his shoulders.

“Maybe, maybe not. Jonsey half smiled “Next no account drifter we hire, find someone who can laugh” he suggested “Maybe could live with ‘em not knowing how to work if they knew how to laugh.”

“I couldn’t” said Slim jamming his hat on firmly and then striding toward the barn.

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Slim rode off up the hill opposite the house, up the ridge following the track that he had always ridden as the best view for checking cattle, the track Matt had made. He rode at quite a speed, riding easily the way Matt had taught him. At the top of the ridge, he lifted his hat to shade his eyes, just like Matt used to, he realised wryly.

Slim cursed Jonsey because just at the moment the last thing he needed was his father’s ghost riding beside him, reminding of all things past. Just now he needed to think of the future. Just now when he was seriously worried of the possibility of a future without the ranch, Slim did not need to remember back, when despite the desperately hard work, the danger of Indian attack, drought and snow wiping out cattle herds, Matt had somehow made that small house below him a happy home. A home where there was laughter and often raised voices, and none of the family had worried about it. Slim could remember Matt exhausted, coming home covered in mud from struggling to save cattle caught in bogs after a bad winter. And Mary yelling at him to keep the mud from her house, then Matt chasing her through the house till he caught her in his arms and she ended up as covered in mud as he was. As Slim thought about it, he realised Matt had gone to a great effort not to let the worry defeat them in those years, even when he was spending most of his days pulling dead cows from bogs and stopping the rest being rustled by Indians and any no good drifter passing through.

“If you want to stay ranchin’ you gotta quit worryin’ boy” Matt told him. “Always somethin’ to worry about so worryin’ ain’t gonna fix nothin’” So Matt had not worried. He had gone on working hard and kept laughing. Slim wondered how he had done it. Maybe it was because Mary could laugh at the hard times too. Maybe having someone around who could share the hard times and keep on laughing, kept Matt laughing.

Just at the moment, Slim was not laughing. He was close to admitting, with only help from a old trail cook with a problem sacroiliac, a twelve year old boy and a never ending succession of no account useless drifters running away from who knows what, he was not sure he could keep going. It was not the idea of failing. His father Matt had been fine with failing if you had tried your best. It was the idea of quitting because he had not tried enough that worried Slim. The feeling that something was missing and all he had to do was find it and things would work out. Only he did not know where to look.

“Nothin wrong with knowin’ when to quit” Mat had said once when after he and a fifteen year old Slim had spent all night trying to save an injured horse he had finally accepted the injuries were too bad and picked up a gun. “Takes more of a man to know when to quit, than keep fighting when it ain’t no use. But you gotta try boy, you gotta try first, you gotta be sure you’re quittin because it makes sense, not because you’re scared to try harder.” .

Slim stared down at the ranch below him. “I’m tryin’ Pa, not winnin’ so much but I’m tryin” Slim said out loud.

Then he cursed Jonsey again. He really didn’t need Matt’s ghost riding beside him today.

He turned off the hill and headed toward the north fence and the gullies at the back of his ranch. As he neared the fence, he heard some calves bellowing and when he turned toward the sound he spied a small camp fire, near some sheltered trees. He rode up to it dismounting to check it. It was a few days old, cold. He mounted again and headed to the sound of the bellowing calves. They were not hard to find. A group of about 5 calves were bellowing near where the fence had been cut.

It did not take Slim long to work out that some no account drifter has been camping there in the last few days, then been too lazy to ride to the nearest gate. The drifter had cut the fence, gone through and left the wire around the ground. Slim with no real reason at all to suppose it, bet himself the drifter was some fellow from Texas making a point about fencing on the open range. Some cows had pushed through and separated themselves from their calves that were warily keeping away from the barbed wire on the ground. Fortunately the cows had not strayed too far from their calves, and Slim was able to get then back through the gap in the fence. He narrowly avoided being gored by a particularly nasty long horned old cow as he restrung the fence but his thoughts toward no account drifters riding in his land were not kind, especially when they came from Texas.

Matt had had his own ideas about the wild Texas boys drifting up from the cattle trails. “Wild hot head sons of..” He had told Slim. “

“You got no time for ‘em Pa?” Slim had grinned. “Uncle Tom’s down in Texas.” he added.

“So” snarled Matt. “Tom’s his own man.” He had frowned. “It ain’t that I got no time for them Texas boys. Ain’t that “ Matt said. “When they’re good, ain’t none better. Known some of them tough Texas boys as gooda friend as a man could have” He had laughed “Like them mustangs down there in Texas, get one tamed and you have a horse that will see you through, no matter what. But ain’t so

many of them mustangs that will tame, most will kill you with the fall then tromp your body into the ground to make sure you're dead."

"How do you tame them Texas mustangs?" Slim had asked Matt, amused. Matt had his prejudices, mostly left over from his trail herding days. Slim had a strong suspicion from things Matt had not told him about his trail herd days, down Texas way there would be quite a few folk who had prejudices against wild hot head Wyoming ranchers who would as soon tromp a fellow into the ground as pass the time of day.

"How do you tame 'em" Matt had answered "You go real careful with them Texas mustangs. Boy, you go real, real careful."

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Slim glanced up at the sun, and realised it was taking him longer than he intended check stock and fences. Jonsey as usual was right. There was no way he could let Andy come out alone with those big horned cows ready to swing at him, and there was no way he could run the ranch, keep the stock and fences in order and manage the relay station by himself. He needed help. Which brought him back to Andy again and wondering where he could get help who would not take advantage of Andy's impulsive offering of friendship.

"You know Pa" Slim told the ghost he finally conceded was along for the ride no matter what he did. " Maybe if Andy could be more like me, and not Ma. Just maybe things would be easier."

Or maybe the problem was that he and Andy were really alike. Maybe the real difference was that he had had Matt and Mary to get him through the recklessness and Andy only had him.

Slim could remember Mary and Matt taking opposite views about his impetuosity. He was only 15 and they had maybe been at the ranch 3 or 4 years when he had asked a couple of old time mountain men to stay at the ranch for a few days, just because he wanted to hear their stories. They had had a way about them those mountain men, not many words but when they spoke, they were worth listening to.

“Reckless son of a “ Mat had sworn when he came home and found the kitchen filled up with two giant mountain men while his fifteen year old son had forgotten to do chores because he was listening to their tales.

To Matt’s annoyance Mary had not been concerned, she was hovering around the kitchen enjoying the mountain men’s tall tales herself.

“Don’t that cursed boy know taking on with strangers in these parts is dangerous, just ‘cause a fella seems friendly don’t mean they ain’t dangerous” Matt had snarled at her.

“Now mister you don’t go hammerin’ at the boy for offerin’ a kindness” one of the mountain man had said standing up, tall ready to square off with Matt “Ya boy’s got a good heart mista. That’s what I’m tellin’ ya”

The mountain man and Matt had stared each other down, waiting wary, daring each other, while Slim nervously started to say ‘Pa, don’t.”

After what seemed to Slim a very long time while Matt and the mountain men eyed each other off, Matt finally grinned.

“Ain’t arguing” said Mat with his loud familiar laugh as he put his hand out to the mountain men.

“Just to show you no hard feelin’s me and my partner we’ll give ya a hand with those chores, we distracted the boy from” the mountain man said taking Matt’s hand.

“Be with you” Matt said as the two men left the kitchen, watched by Slim and his mother. Matt turned toward both shaking his head. “Boy you just gotta watch this reckless, streak. This time seems okay but you gotta be careful”

“Slim’s not reckless” Mary interrupted “He knows better than just take up with strangers but Slim’s got good feelings about people. And follows on ‘em. Impetuous maybe, deep down, not reckless ” she added with a sly smile at her husband. “Don’t wait for polite time when he feels he’s right. Like

me” she added. “You got any problems our boy’s like me. You make him bury it so deep” she accused Matt.” But wish sometimes you wouldn’t.”

“This is a dangerous country” Matt insisted “Good country but dangerous. Maybe Mary maybe a man has to learn to keep his head to survive. Not just act on anything he’s feelin’”

“Maybe” she agreed “Maybe a man need to trust himself enough to lose his head every so often.”

“Maybe” said Matt not convinced but putting his arms around his wife “Could get himself some bad problems, if he gets it wrong.”

“Get himself a grand life if he gets it right” said Mary hard against her husband’s chest.

Slim watching his parents grinned. He’d heard it all before.

Matt finally and reluctantly kissed Mary and moved toward the door, “Fool thing to do, makin’ frinds with every stranger passin’ the door.” Matt growled at Slim as he went out to finish the chores outside.

Slim with a sigh got up to follow his father but stopped as his mother called him back. She walked to him and put her hands on his arms. “You’re so cursed tall” she complained looking up at him. ‘growin, up getting so...”

“Yeah Ma “ Slim said because he was hearing complaints about how tall he wast almost every time she looked at him lately “Cain’t help that” he said looking down at her

“Go do you chores” she said letting him go. He turned away and then stopped and faced her.

‘Ma” he said “You ever regret it. Marrying Pa so impetuous like, goin’ west with him.”

She slowly shook her head. "Never had a regret once" she told Slim. "Not saying it's been easy. I love your Pa Slim, but he's got his difficult ways, no denying. But regret it. Not once. Only thing that worries me about it is what I would have missed if I hadn't had the courage to be ...impetuous. Don't know if I'd got another chance, don't know that at all."

Slim nodded

"I knew it" she said " I knew it when I looked up into his eyes.

Slim grinned. He'd heard that story maybe a hundred times. Mary would tell that story a hundred times more if she got the chance.

"Of course Your grandma did not see it that way " she said. "There we were in St Louis, had to walk past the salon cause the street was too muddy to cross. I was just 17 and Matt blunders out the door straight into me, just off the trail covered in dirt and mud, catches hold of me to stop me falling and gets that mud over me in my best town dress, breathing whisky down my face. Well your grand Ma is acting like I was being assaulted by the devil himself, yelling at him to let me go. You know I looked up into his eyes and I knew, This was a good man, maybe a lonely man, maybe a man who'd done some living, but a man I could trust. Matt is trying to apologise and brush the mud off and makin' everything worse.

He finally stepped back and said "Ma'am I guess I ain't helpin', Your grand Ma starts trying to pull me away from this wild dirty man but I ain't movin'..

"Reckon I'll do what I can to replace what I damaged" he says' "Ain't got a lot but if I can maybe buy you something.. Just come in from out the west ways, only stayin a few days"

"It'll wash I told him. I looked at him and he looked at me. Tell you what you can buy me" I said

"What He asks real suspicious

"Buy me a cup of coffee sir" I told him " Well your grandma she was grabbing hold of me so hard I thought she would pull my arm off and Matt starts to laugh, then I was sure real sure of him" "

“Sure thing Ma’m “ he said takin’ my arm and walking off, with your grandma trying to hang onto my skirt to stop me goin’ with him. You know we were married 4 days later and I went back west with him”

“I know “ said Slim grinning. He put his hand on her arm ‘ What if you’d been wrong Ma, being so impetuous like, if he wasn’t... well if he hadn’t been Pa.”

“Saw it in his eyes” she said shaking her head. “I had to trust what I saw, what I felt. But if I’d been wrong. Would have had to live with it I guess. Better to risk being wrong than risk ... never knowing what it would have been like” She reached up to put her hand her hand on Slim’s face.” I ain’t talkin’ about just marryin’ you understand Slim. I’m talkin’ about knowin’ folks. I’m talkin’ about there are times when you don’t get another chance, if you cain’t trust yourself to be impetuous. ‘Cause some folks has been hurt so bad, they just get to wary to trust you without you takin’ some risk. Matt’s a wary man” She told he son. “Sometimes I wonder, if I hadn’t trusted myself to be impetuous, whether he would have trusted me enough to ... well getting’ married changed things for him. Domestication went hard with him, took him a while to figure out gettin’ tamed didn’t mean he got broke.” she said. Mary put her hand up to touch Slim’s face. “You’re getting so tall” she said’ “You better get out to do those chores before your Pa gets down into one of his difficult moods “ she said.

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Slim riding along his north fence took a deep breath, from the distance realising maybe when he walked into the room with those mountain men, Matt had been wondering is young Slim was going to get himself into serious trouble, with his impetuous friendliness to strangers. Like he did with Andy.

But Matt had given into Mary and trusted young Slim’s good instincts... finally. Slim shook his head again, maybe all he had to do was find some way of letting young Andy balance his good instincts against plain common sense, without driving the boy away from home. Easy. Maybe.

“So Pa” Slim said to the ghost riding beside him. “Maybe you got an answer to findin’ some no account drifter who don’t care about money, company and hard work. And don’t swear and curse around Andy to bad” he added. And then he remembered Jonsey’s request. “And knows how to laugh. You reckon if I get impetuous enough, reckless enough, trust a few fellows like when I was a kid, like Ma, maybe it will work out.”

For half a second as a breeze whistled along the hill, Slim could have sworn he heard his father's voice say "Maybe."

Slim raised his brows, hoped his horse would not find a way of telling Jonsey and Andy he had been talking to ghosts, then laughed loudly at the stupidity of the idea. He turned hard right, intending to ride to the back gullies where Alvie was supposed to have checked.

As he reached the next rise, still remembering Matt and his loud booming laugh, and thinking even from a distance and a grave Matt would never be gone while Matt could make him laugh, Slim noticed a bunch of his cattle peacefully down in a comfortable sunny spot on the further hill, calmly chewing the cud. For no reason that Slim could think of, except the shadow beside him seemed to drift that way, Slim changed his mind about the gullies, deciding as long as Jonsey never found out he was breaking unwritten rules about letting folks know the direction he was going, it was okay to follow a ghost, and rode down to check the cattle. As he approached they all watched him calmly, not even bothering to jump up as he skirted around them. No reason on earth to change his direction Slim thought except the ghost beside him wanted to go that way, but even as he considered how stupid Jonsey would tell him he was being, he kept his back on the route to the gullies and vaguely headed toward the rises which overlooked the lake where it banked close to the Laramie Road.

Slim following the path that Matt had marked out so many years ago, rode up the rise. It lead to a fairly steep incline which provided good shelter for cattle, and then another rise from where he could get a good view of the lake and the Laramie road. By the time he reached the top of the rise, he didn't have to ask himself why he followed Matt's ghost that way. The reason was because he was worrying about Andy, and Andy wanting to leave, and thinking about Matt. The path he was now riding was the same one he and Matt had ridden the last time they had ever ridden the ranch together, the last time he had ever talked to his father more or less alone, just before Slim left to go to war.

What had he been? 20? A little younger. Right now at 28 , battling to keep his father's ranch going and raise his young brother it felt to Slim it was a lifetime away when he had been free and carefree and young. Despite Jonsey often calling him boy, that was the last day Slim could remember feeling like one. He had been edgy, excited all day, barely able to wait until tomorrow when he left for the war , when Matt had suggested the last ride, doing what Slim was doing now, checking cattle, Matt on his big grey horse with a very young Andy on the saddle in front of him. Teaching Andy to ride easily, almost before he could walk, just as he taught Slim. As always Matt rode hard, and young Andy, held safely by his father, had been laughing and calling out at the excitement of the ride. And Matt too had been laughing, enjoying the feel of the country, being there alive, with his sons.

Reining in, on top of the same rise where Slim now sat, 20 year old Slim had glanced nervously at his father and been relieved to see that unlike the rest of the week, Matt was back to his laughing self, although Matt's hat was pulled down lower than usual so Slim could not see his father's hurting eyes. Eyes that had been hurting been since the day a week ago when Slim had told his father he was enlisting for the war.

That had not been a happy day in the Sherman home. Slim remembered sitting on the edge of the table, opposite Matt who sat in the rocking chair, moving it violently. Slim was thinking that Matt had started to look old and wondered why he hadn't noticed that before. There was grey in Matt's hair and beard and just maybe he wasn't quite as straight as he had been, although at that moment there was nothing old about the flashing anger in Matt's eyes. Which Slim ignored.

"I guess it comes down to it" Slim told Matt determined. "Pa I'm goin'. Pa you raised me to be straight, to do what I believe was right. I'm goin'."

"This cursed war is nothing to do with us" Matt growled rocking his chair violently. "This war ain't about the west, it's about North and South it's about things a long way from this country. Things that don't count in this country."

"Figure a man has to take a stand and a view" Slim insisted stubbornly "I ain't the only one goin'. Tay Gaunt is goin'."

"Reckon Cam Gaunt is proud of him?" Matt asked sarcastically. "Could be the ruination of him. Ruination of you. Frank Buckley goin'?" demanded Matt.

"No" said Slim shortly. "He's staying' home to help Cam."

"Always said Frank had more sense than the pair of you." Matt snapped. "When a man takes a view that makes him fight his kin, fight his neighbour, kill 'em for somethin' that ain't his business" Matt shook his head angrily "You get my brother Tom in your gun sights, you gonna fire, you gonna kill my brother just 'cause he's livin' down Texas way. You gonna hate your own kin and neighbours as enemies."

“Thought you didn’t care much for them Texas boys” Slim snapped.

“Like ‘em maybe not so. You gotta respect ‘em” Matt insisted. “You gotta reckon on ‘em bein’ a man who can face you. You go to war Slim.” Matt said “ Like ‘em or not it won’t be respectin’ ‘em. It’ll be someone in a gun sight. They won’t look like man, Texan or anythin’ else. Just someone to kill.”

“You want me to fight for Texas?” Slim demanded.

“I don’t want you to fight” Matt snapped but his voice cracked.

Slim came to his feet. “But I’m gonna fight for the union army Pa because... I’m a man Pa and I gotta choose what is right..for me.”

“You ain’t a man yet sonny” snarled Matt.

Slim angrily moved forward, towering over his father then realising what he was doing , backed away. “ I’m a man Pa” he said slowly “and you justa gotta realise it. You raised me good Pa but you gotta know when I’m grown and have to do what I know I have to do.”

“You ain’t a man” Matt insisted stubborn. “But that war will make you a man, and I’m scared Slim, killin’ like you’ll have to kill, seein’ what you’ll have to see, maybe it will make you the kinda man, I never want you to be. Don’t you know you go to that war and you’ll change, you’ll change so hard, maybe folks who love you won’t recognise you. War does things to a man when he faces things no decent man should have to face. I love you Slim,” Matt said. “I’m proud of you boy” he said. “Wouldn’t like you to face things, make choices that maybe you might wonder whether I would still be proud of you.”

“You raised me to do what is right” Slim persisted. “And if I do what I believe is right, even if you don’t agree, don’t that mean you can be proud of me Pa.”

“Worried you might forget what’s right , ... when things get tough” Mat said meeting Slim’s eyes.

“Pa, I won’t forget anything you taught me. Cain’t say I’ll always be all the things you want me to be. But I reckon, you did a good enough job with me to keep me knowin’ what’s right.” Slim said tightly.

“Maybe” growled Matt

Slim sat back on the edge of the table, breathing deeply, while Matt sat, rocking the chair violently. Finally Slim said quietly “ Pa if in this war become some of the things maybe you don’t want.”

“You will” Matt interrupted.

“Am I welcome back?” Slim asked not looking at Matt’s face.

Matt stood up angry “You remember a few years ago when you and young Tay Gaunt got so stinkin’ drunk together you was scared to come home for fear of what I would think”

Slim smiled. “Yeah, you found me half under a rock near the lake, throwin’ up.”

‘What did I tell you then?’ asked Matt softly.

Slim met his father’s eyes. “ You told me there will never come a day, where the door’s not open to your boy. Nothin’ I could do, nothing I could be would change that.”

“Nothin’ is changed” growled Matt.

“Maybe” Slim started to say.

“No maybe” growled Matt. “No Sherman shut a door on friend or kin and the day you forget that is the day that ... I lose you.”

Slim suddenly grinned. "You won't lose me" he said.

"You make sure of it" Matt barked. He sat back in the rocking chair "Slim" he said "when you go, so you know. I'll be lookin' down that road every day watching for you."

Slim swallowed hard. "Maybe Pa" he said "That's not such a good idea. " Maybe you'll be lookin' ... a long time, way the war is going."

"Don't matter" said Matt "I'll be lookin' down that road for you every day till I die."

"Maybe I betta make sure I make it back" Slim said with a grin.

"Maybe that would be best" Matt said laughing but the laugh was forced and he was trying too hard.

"Maybe" said Slim.

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A week later on that last ride, Slim and Matt had sat in their horses on the rise looking at cattle sheltering below. Not talking.

"We could run more." said Slim more for something to say than any other reason.

"It's a good country" Matt said squinting as he scanned the rolling hills. "Run more now, no future. Take care of the land and it will take care of you."

"Yeah Pa" Slim agreed. "It's good country. We chose good, comin' here."

“We did” Matt agreed “You know Slim, I wanted to make somethin’ here for you, for young Andy now, find somewhere good... where a man can...be a good man.”

“Well Pa” said Slim grinning “If you did nothin’ else you surely did that.”

“I surely did” said Matt.

He suddenly let out a wild yahoo, and touched his spurs to the big grey horse. The horse took off down the incline, bounding forward, running hard. Andy started yelling again, and Matt did too. Slim’s horse started to plunge as Matt took off and then he let it have its way and gallop down the incline, going as hard it could go. Slim felt the wind in his face and the power of the horse and his heart pounded for the pleasure of it . He caught up with Matt and young Andy at the bottom of the incline.

“Beat you to the top” he yelled spurring his horse into a leap and bounding away. His horse thundered up the rise, with Matt and young Andy on his tail.

“Yahooo” Slim shrieked as Matt spurred the grey horse ahead.

At the top of the rise, overlooking the lake, Matt up. “ Eh Young Andy, that’s the way to ride a hill” Matt told his young son, a grin all over his face.

Slim thundered up behind, pulling his horse to a skidding halt.

“I’ll beat you one day” Slim told his father.

“Maybe” said Matt grinning “Maybe not.”

Slim half stood in the saddle looking down the hill, watching the lake below and the road, more a track in those days, some distance away. Slim was breathing deep, taking in the fresh air of the mountains, still feeling the joy of just running a horse, being part of the land.

Matt, beside him with young Andy still shrieking at the thrill of the ride, dropped his reins for second lifted his hat back and then pointed down the hill toward the lake. "Its good country, boy" he said to Slim his voice cracking just a little.

Slim nodded" Pa" he said. "Its good land, may be its all I'll ever want, feeling like that, maybe riding hard. Pa I'll come back" he said.

"Maybe" said Matt "I'll be watching' though."

"No maybe's" said Slim. He reached out and touched his father arm. Matt put his hand on Slim's, then with a deep sigh, pulled his hat on hard, picked up his reins and determinedly rode down the hill toward the lake, while young Andy begged for another gallop.

Slim frowned and then quietly followed his father.

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All the years later, after a war and what seemed a lifetime, Slim, sat on his horse staring down the same incline that he and Matt had ridden to on that last day.

"Maybe" he thought breathing deep to take in the Wyoming air. "Maybe if I'd listened to Pa and not gone to war, maybe Andy would be know me better, would know all I want is to give him what Pa gave me. "

Maybe. Maybe. Maybe if Matt had not gone out with those union soldiers and the gold wagons, a few years after Slim went to war whatever killed him out there would not have happened and Andy would have had a father who knew how to raise him, instead of a big brother who did not. Maybe. Or maybe if Ma hadn't got pneumonia after chopping wood in the snow when Jonsey got stuck in Laramie she would have had the strength to fight that last illness. Maybe.

Slim smiled to himself. Matt had not thought highly of maybe's.

“No use waiting around for the good hand to take your chances” Matt often said “Gotta play the cards you get.” Then he would grin. “But if you get an ace hang on to it boy.”

Slim lifted his shoulders as if a little of the weight of responsibility had fallen off. Maybe riding with a ghost was the answer to his problems Slim thought.

“Maybe not” Slim said out loud. Or maybe viewing all that responsibility from Matt’s standpoint made it seem lighter. Not that Slim was going to tell Jonsey that he was not so unhappy about having a ghost sent along for the morning’s ride.

Slim scanned the rise, seeing much the same view as he and Matt had seen on that last day. He smiled and then suddenly let out a wild yahoo.

He touched his horse with spurs up and sent it speeding down the hill, at a full gallop. The horse bounded down the incline, with Slim laughing out loud as he sucked in the crisp Wyoming air, feeling the land around him. Up the other side of the incline, he and the horse kept going at a wild gallop, riding hard, for the pleasure of just running. Finally as they reached the top of the rise, Slim pulled the horse up skidding to a halt, and took the time to view the land below. He stood in his stirrups, straining to see the view, feeling the pull of the land that Matt had loved, that he loved.

Slim glanced beside him but the shadow seemed to have gone in the exhilaration of the ride, leaving Slim just a little reluctant to move on . He sat down on the horse but continued to scan the land and the lake below.

Maybe he thought, maybe they could make it. Maybe it wouldn’t take Andy five years to grow up. Maybe Jonsey’s liniment would fix his sacroiliac and he could learn to ride a horse without falling off every fifty yards. Maybe some no account drifter would turn up, who could earn his keep and knew how to laugh.

“Maybe” Slim said and laughed out loud at his foolishness. “But not today.”

Nothing had really changed from the ride with Matt. Except maybe today he could put some of the effort he was putting into worrying into trying harder instead.

The thought took away some of the joy Slim had felt at the gallop up the hill. He rode down the hill, more soberly, half expecting Matt's ghost to be beside him but that like the joy of the ride seemed to have faded and he was alone. Because the reality was that Slim was alone and he was going to be responsible for everything alone for quite some time.

A thought that depressed him.

So when Slim started to ride down the hill still the scanning the lake below, checking for any movement of cattle caught in the water and he saw a big bay horse tied to a tree near the lake, right where he had put a keep out sign he cursed loudly, and angrily. A little way from the horse he could just make out a man lying against a log. Slim sucked his breath. Another no good drifter who couldn't stay on the road, who would maybe stir up Slim's cattle shooting for game, or worse, butcher calves.

"No account drifter" Slim muttered "Saddle tramp."

He leant down to pull his rifle from the scabbard. "One thing we don't need around here is another no account drifter" he told his horse then he rode down the hill toward where the drifter was making himself comfortable.

Slim dismounted half way down the hill and quietly moved the rest of the way toward the drifter, who lying at his ease, using his jacket over the log to add to his comfort, pulled the hat off his face to stare at a bird in the sky, then put it back, contentedly stretching his arms high behind him.

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