

Some Fun

Nestled in the mountains of northern New Mexico—a five-hour sojourn from a Texas Panhandle city, if you drive the way Derrick Barron does—Peaceful Quarters is the name of his family property located near Cowles. *No stops. No eats. No peeing*—among his five crowded passengers he distributes Stadium Pals (portable urinals, one end clinging like a condom to your cock, the other end a bag tied to your calf). *If anyone stops to pee, it'll be the dogs.* Derrick *drugs* his three Danes, which lie flopped over each other in back. All luggage, food, and liquor are tied to the top of his Isuzu Trooper. They could be off to Africa. Derrick calculates that the vehicle will cough to a stop at the Mobil pump (singular) in Cowles, and the tank shall be replenished there.

The log cabin acquired by the Barrons was built by a couple of male composers from New York City in 1913. Peaceful Quarters is still not winterized, and even this being October 1997 when shimmering gold aspen leaves are at their peak, a roaring fire is fed all day in the walk-in hearth constructed of large rough stones—at least until bedtime. A black, rotary phone rests on the mantle, but Derrick usually unplugs it unless he needs to make a call. His Nokia, the size of a small cucumber, is turned off as well. Cell coverage ceased back at the Interstate.

PQ, located at 7,000 feet, isn't designed for sissies—what with its fussy electric range and fridge. Water must be turned on outside, and it fretfully migrates its way up the plumbing to a second-floor bath. There one may bathe in the stingy sprinkle of a shower housed in a tin stall, sit on a commode that rocks unnervingly beneath its occupant, or stare out a small window at the thoughtful gaze of deer or the antics of chipmunks. Such creatures keep the three dogs busy: *Go get the chipmunks, go sic 'em*, Derrick entreats,

and their horse-paws clomp across the wide veranda secured with metal fencing all around the front of the cabin to safeguard dogs and drunkards from falling ten feet to the mountainside. The Danes—Blackie, Harley (for harlequin), and Blue—gallop or gambol in sight of the six men spaced evenly from one another across the porch. They rest in six sling chairs lined with green-and-white striped canvas whose coverings billow in the wind when unoccupied—which is not often. Having carved his initials in the wood frame as a boy, Derrick occupies the third chair in. Always.

The great room inside is furnished with faded red-and-black plaid cushions—six cushions each for two large sofas (three for sitting on, three serving as backs), cushions for four clunky mission chairs, piles of plaid cushions stacked in corners for an overflow crowd who might position them anywhere in the spacious room or sneak them off to one of the two first-floor bedrooms, each with a double-bed mattress. (Upon first arrival guests observe a ritual of removing and folding heavy plastic coverings from all bedding, but not before shaking off collected mice turds outside.)

Nevertheless, six discriminating men minus the amenities of their bourgeois merchant city do their dead level best to rough it. And they ply their attempts with gallons of hard liquor—never straight, of course. In the mornings it is Salty Dogs. At noon, Bloody Marys, and from three p.m. various cocktails pour freely at an open bar with slim choices: Scotch, gin, or vodka. No one cares much for bourbon, and tequila has been known to craze a couple of the boys, all in their forties, so margaritas are out of the question. Evening meals, regardless of Derrick's sumptuous entrées, are served with two cases of spring Beaujolais, and he seldom cooks fish. Six men have never expressed more expensive piss down one mountainside. By the way, Derrick can afford the calories. He

works out at Gold's five days a week. It is more or less his *job* because he lives off a trust generated by the Barrons—tidied up by healthy interests in both cotton and oil.

Roughly three of the gentlemen are retailers, the other two educators. One thinning blond, Jason Towle, tends a floral shop. A longtime swimmer with body to match, he constructs little nosegays each day from the mountainside flowers to adorn the large oak table. Tall, rangy, and with crow-black hair graying at the temples, Diego runs a furniture store and has, during a previous trip, hauled up a large wicker bin in which to store the red-and-black cushions, which, to his chagrin, are still stacked in the corner. Diego offers, likewise, to reupholster all cushions because most are dredged in decades of dog fur. Nope, Derrick says. One other man, Standish Miles (Your mother should be shot, Derrick often chides), proprietor of a men's haberdashery featuring much glen plaid and cardigan sweaters, is doing poorly at the moment and brings little for the weekend except complaints of dismal sales. Short and a bit fragile, he doesn't remain sad for long, kept adrift by large stores of booze everyone has divvied up for.

Educators among them wait until the evening meal to tally ho with their gifts. Homer-Lin, thin black hair graying, is reading *Scarlet Letter*, one chapter ahead of the bright bulbs enrolled in his AP class. With mock interest, merchants wink at one another, chins on fists, elbows on table as Homer-Lin boasts of his pupils tackling such a difficult novel. Evan Strong, who could be a twin of Standish (they once were lovers), teaches kindergarten and has little to say because he's more at ease conversing with little ones.

On this golden afternoon, Standish and Evan thumb through *Gentlemen's Quarterly* or *Vanity Fair*, ogling ads for men's attire, sniffing the cologne samples. Though Standish attempts to dress as slickly as the models he admires in these glossy

pages, he has the ability to display an immense lack of taste. *At market*, where he searches out sedate fashions for his clients, he picks up for pennies on the dollar the most garish of shirts: tangerine, chartreuse, or large black polka dots on white.

You boys ever read the articles? Derrick inquires.

Well, I do, Standish says.

Me, too, Evan echoes.

All six men at one time or another have had lovers or, in a more enlightened parlance, partners, but no one has lasted for various reasons. A few of them have tasted each other's wares, but those times, too, have vanished. No, the bustling bonhomie of six Muskateens, as they refer to themselves, can overtake a restaurant faster than a busload of senior citizens can commandeer a Stuckey's. Together they have sojourned to Spain and Italy. England. The tropics and Hawaii in winters. And don't forget New Yawk Citaay, one of them inevitably chimes in. But it is Peaceful Quarters they adore: one safari in July and another in October to close the place down by slipping the plastic covers back on six beds (four of them stationed in the upstairs loft) and turning off the water. PQ is buried in snow all winter, but no Muskateen has ever seen what the place looks like then—only Derrick's unneighborly neighbors who dwell in their cozy Swiss *chalettes*—with stores of food and firewood for six months.

I don't know how a couple can keep from killing each other, Derrick muses on more than one occasion. And I hate all the trailer trash that has moved in up and down this mountain.

Oh, and Derrick's mother, years earlier, constructed a leatherbound guestbook with each dittoed page divided into three columns, an initial centered at the top of each:

G. F. W. In the first column, guests might sign in as *Mr. and Mrs. Jordan LaPook, Denver, 1944* | *Samson and Delilah, Muleshoe, 1957* | *Six Muskateens, 1973*. Under “F”—*Caught nothing today, not even a lousy little trout. Aunt Silvie* | And then there is “W”—*Finished off the booze and drove to Santa Fe through torrents to buy more (excuses, excuses), Doris* | *Beautiful day, azure skies, tromped up to mad scientist’s. Shame no one’s taking care of the place, Thelma. Trout are jumping out of the Pecos like flying fish! Derrick*

Everyone who views the guest book at Peaceful Quarters knows Derrick’s last statement is a joke. The Pecos River, though clear and swift, is not up to spitting fish into your arms. You wade in thigh-high boots—waiting, waiting—and only then might the mouth of a rainbow trout slide its way onto your hook. And only if you’re a manly man who would tolerate the cold and wet to catch one of the slimy things.

On the third day, a bit bored with their lackadaisical routine and with each other—even the dogs seem blasé—Muskateens set out to hike farther up the mountain. Some have never seen the mad scientist’s cabin. Homer-Lin, a would-be poet who rises each morning to work, writes about Oppenheimer’s place each visitation he makes upon the man’s property. By the time the six middle-aged troopers have mounted the *hill* and reached the crossbar-gate painted white, the unfit among them are winded and stop, gazing across the meadow of golden grass. They stare uphill to face yet another ascent and climb toward the clapboard two-room dwelling painted barn red with white trim.

They arrive, most everyone panting, and the Danes loll around in the tall, autumnal grass. A long porch is shaded with an overhang of five feet. Sash windows of separate panes have become pearly opaque from the sun’s sharp rays and mountain

storms. Vandals have knocked out some glass, leaving a few shards. Yet windows and doors alike are sealed tight at the edges.

The man certainly had good taste, Derrick declares, sipping Scotch and soda from a Thermos. This view is the best part of his place.

The meadow stretching out before them is as yellow as the aspens above the cabin. The six of them eke out places to rest along the porch railing, their legs dangling like blue denim from a clothesline.

What is it that happened to the son named Peter, isn't it? Homer-Lin asks, covering his balding head with a cap. His parents own the oldest Asian restaurant in the Panhandle—serving a mix of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean cuisine. Homer-Lin still works there on weekends.

Son is said to live out in the wilds north of here, close to Colorado, but I've never seen him around. S'posed to be about my age.

So old, you mean?

Asshole. Uh-oh, Derrick says. Looks like we have company.

Up from the gate, quite an incline, charges a passel of dogs and men dressed in camouflage hunting gear. The closer they get, the scowlier their scowls become.

What gives here? the redheaded Leader asks with a gruff posture, hand on hip. He sports a dark reddish beard with egg yolk smeared across the surface—the other three as bearded and scruffy as though brothers.

Just hanging around, Derrick replies. Family has a cabin farther down the mountain. And he throws out his last name because Barron is featured on the fading sign pitched in the ground at the foot of his property.

The guy shrugs. Never heard of it. You knock these windows out?

Done a long time ago, I suspect, he shoots back. Kids probably.

Leader snorts. His party, carrying rifles, possess a dog each: one black lab and several of a shepherd mix. They snarl at the Danes who are having none of it. The trio create quite a melee as they answer back. The Danes outweigh the hunters' dogs, but they don't have the same aggression—except when it comes to protecting their master.

Harley! Blackie! Blue! he thunders, words echoing over the valley. Get up here.

The Danes, slobbering as they are prone to do, come and sit panting at Derrick's feet, and he assures them of his allegiance with thorough pats to the head.

Them things don't last too long, do they? Leader says.

This one's stomach has turned twice, Derrick says, stroking Blue's neck. He's going on six years old. May not have too much time left, but he's a damn good dog.

You aimin to buy the place?

Didn't know it was for sale.

Yep. He spits at Derrick's foot and Blue clicks his jaws together.

Stop that! Derrick snaps. How much?

Don't know. Should check with the Realtor.

Not in the market.

Maybe you oughter move on then if you ainter gonna buy.

I figure we'll be on our way when we're ready, Derrick says.

Be back here by sundown. If you know what's good for you . . .

Derrick raises his eyebrows, tucks the Danes up close to him, patting them hard on their flanks like horses. You the local police?

The gang of hoodlums heads toward the trees, mumbling to themselves.

Wonder what the hell they could be hunting for? Derrick mutters. Blue goes Eruff, his shiny gray fur standing on end.

Five of the Muskateens take off toward the gate down the hill, but Derrick remains stock-still. Where you pansies going?

They all smile and wave like kids, and in a minute, after Derrick has given the situation some thought, he heads on down as well. Danes follow.

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The next morning, Derrick rises early to bake a ham loaf, a set piece for their fourth day—appearing much like a homemade loaf of bread, only the contents being baked into layers of pastry-like dough found in a croissant. The ground ham within is thoroughly blended with greener-than-green peas and slowly baked (no other way in this goddamn oven, he grumbles). By eleven the six have dressed for the cloudy, damp morning, and with backpacks full of food and Beaujolais, head up yet another path toward a different picturesque meadow (Derrick is razed royally for employing French). Entering the open area, Danes romp in the tall grasses yet manage to circle back to Derrick's side.

My goo boys, he gurgles, and they answer back. Yeah, my goo boys.

When they arrive at Derrick's special spot, Homer-Lin declares, I'm ravaged.

You haven't been ravaged in years, Derrick retorts, then gives orders. All the food over here. Booze over there. They nestle themselves under a large deciduous tree, perhaps a cottonwood, its leaves nearly gone. The sun, barely a disc at times, peeks through the fast-moving clouds.

Maybe he means ravished, Evan ventures like one of his kindergartners.

That neither, Derrick returns. Homer, you mustn't reveal *all* your secrets to me.

Within minutes the men have settled onto their large quilt, one that lives at the cabin in Diego's wicker bin, waiting to be useful on one of these ventures. It was stitched together by Derrick's paternal grandmother featuring fabric from his family going back at least a hundred years. There isn't much talk by this point in the week. The six of them have rehashed everyone's hash and dished all their friends who are seldom if ever invited on these safaris. Many of them, in the past, have dispensed with quiet cabin life to dash off to Santa Fe and cruise at the Senate—the oldest bar of its kind in New Mexico. If drunk or lucky enough, they then might spend the night at the Inn of the Governors, a slow inebriated slog from the bar. A young man's sport, Derrick laments on occasion.

Love this weather, he announces, holding a thick slice of ham loaf as if a sandwich. He gazes off across the meadow to watch himself as a child frolicking in the tall grasses. My cousins and I could get into more trouble.

A bit on the chilly side for me, says Standish.

Happen to bring your fur? Derrick says, mouth full.

No one says anything. Stan's grandmother gave him a mink jacket he insists is cut for a man but falls on his shoulders as if fitted for Auntie Mame.

Sold it.

To whom? Evan asks.

Don't know 'em. Used eBay.

The subject is dropped, not even the feistiest among them wishing to tear into Standish with regard to at least three issues—his mouthful of bad taste, his greed, and a bit of churlishness, to boot.

At that moment a filthy, exhaust-expelling pickup of some antiquity charges up the open meadow. Everyone stops mid-chew, stands, holds onto their red Solo cups, and stares out at the spectacle. Leader starts doing wheelies, ripping huge, circular gashes into the earth, while a familiar pack of dogs chases after the pickup as if they all might capture it and ravage it with all their beastly maws. Closer and closer Leader circles his way toward their picnic paradise.

It's that damn bunch from the other day up at the scientist's, Derrick says, and that truck, it was parked just outside the gate. The Danes stand at alert, dampening the ground with their slobber. Hold it, boys, you could get hurt if you go out there. Leader, his dull red beard still strewn with egg, crunches to a stop at the edge of their quilt. A dead stink emanates from the open window—all four mountaineers drunk but present.

Havin ourselves a little picnic are we? Bee-u-tiful day for it. With his open beer bottle he pounds the side of his truck, can-spray painted a pale blue. The others bray.

Muskateens begin to gather food and drink—loading it all into backpacks.

Don't leave on our account, Leader says. Just like to run the shit out of our dogs so's they'll sleep tonight. Otherwise, we get no peace. No sir, no peace at all. He finishes off his beer and tosses the bottle where it lands like a bomb in the middle of Derrick's quilt—which Derrick and Standish fold up and pack away, bottle within.

As they start down the open meadow toward their intended path, a narrow mountain road, Leader follows at a short distance, their dogs trying to get at the Danes whom the Muskateens have corralled by their collars and sandwiched between them. The faster their party moves, taxing their strides, the faster Leader follows behind, roaring the ancient engine in first gear and enveloping them in gray fumes as if being pursued by a

dragon run amok. When they reach the road, Leader yells out his window, Tried to let y'all know you wasn't welcome. Now maybe you'll git. He leaves them in a cloud of exhaust, but not before yelling out Heeyaw, and their dogs all jump in the truck bed.

The six remain silent, and Derrick passes around a bottle of Beaujolais. The closer to the cabin they get, the faster they lumber, stumbling with increasing drunkenness. Unopened bottles clank against each other, and flatware clangs like dull bells. Derrick stops and turns away from the others, removes a pistol from his backpack and holds it, half-hidden, in his hand which dangles to his side. Sumbitches, he says with uncharacteristic bravado, Better not fuck with me. Harley, Blackie, and Blue growl.

Yikes, Homer-Lin says. You're scaring me.

The others may be alarmed as well, but don't show it, may even be relieved. They hear a rumbling behind them and wonder how it is that Leader and his blue beast have circled back around so quickly. He smokes on by, holding down his horn with one hand, until he has thoroughly rattled them.

Ought to kill 'em all right this minute, Derrick growls, and the Danes howl a sort of war whoop. *Let's go get 'em, Dad.*

Might want to rethink your weapon, Derrick, Homer-Lin says. We could get our heads blowed off, as the locals say.

Soon the blue pickup is out of view, its smoke suspended as a kind of fog, and they have another twenty-minute hike to the cabin. As they come upon the Peaceful Quarters sign at the foot of the drive, they see it has been wiped with feces. Fresh. My grandpa painted that sign himself, Derrick says, kicking a melon-sized rock down the mountain. The six fail to realize that the blue pickup is now stowed farther along the

road, out of sight between two large elms, now scattering brown leaves that gather in the well of the truck's windshield wipers—Leader's companions lying in wait. All at once Muskateens realize that on the cabin porch Leader occupies the very sling chair featuring Derrick's initials. He appears to be chugging a drink out of the owner's expensive bottle of Scotch, a shotgun positioned across his lap.

Derrick stiffens and talks through his teeth: We're all going to continue our hike. Y'all mosey on over to my Isuzu and coast it down the back way. Locate a trooper. I'll steal around behind and surprise the bastard.

You're not going alone, Standish says, horrified.

Taking long way around. He'll never know it's me. Each of you hold onto a dog.

Don't, Homer-Lin begs, grasping Derrick's shoulder. At least let me go with you.

I've been sneaking through the back window since I was eleven.

With that, all resign themselves to completing the assigned tasks.

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You don't ever imagine having to take the law into your own hands, Derrick muses, trudging through tall, stiffening grasses, a neighbor's *yard*, to make his way to the rear of the cabin. The rocky terrain is so steep, as he overlooks the cabin's roof, he must dig his shoes in to keep from sliding into the cedar shingles of the back wall. His elevation is almost even with a second-story window opening onto the loft with four beds. As when he was a kid, he lifts up the screen and climbs inside. The floors are wont to creak, but Derrick sheds his shoes, slides his stockinged feet across the pine flooring. He once went *Boo*, and his brother jumped two feet off the bed they shared. Like a game of Ha, one would giggle and trigger the other who would then laugh until the two giggled

themselves to sleep. Derrick descends the stairs one at a time, slithers onto the floor, and scoots his way across to the screen door. Leader is still seated with the shotgun. Derrick crouches and raises his pistol.

Know yur there, dude, Leader says. I'd think hard before doing anything rash.

Derrick springs through the screen door, shoves the muzzle up against the man's occipital bone.

Aw, are you tryin to rune our buddin frenship?

Listen carefully. When I say to, you will unload your gun and put it over there by the post. You will not kick it off. You will follow the porch around to the drive, slither on down to the road, and never come the fuck back. Don't like to steal a man's gun so I'll leave it inside the gate, and after we're gone, you can climb over and get it. I'm reporting your intrusion to law enforcement, so I think you and yur buds will want to get in that blue beast of yours and lie low for a while. Maybe get that thing tuned up so it don't announce your comins and goins. Jeez, I'm starting to talk like you yahoos.

On three you will rise, and be careful what kind of moves you make. After you've shed your weapon, hands up all the way.

Derrick doesn't realize muscles in his left leg are quivering like springs until the man has reached the gate and stumbles along the road for his truck. He hears the engine turn over and Leader peel off down the road toward Cowles. He opens a new bottle of Scotch and sits in wait. The Pecos runs gray in the distance, reflecting the day's gray skies. A gray day indeed when you have to shoo some thug off your property.

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The evening's dinner talk is all about the Event. How the local trooper blocks the road and questions Leader while five Muskateens stand by. When he admits he was trespassing, he is taken into custody, his buddies are freed to walk away, and the blue truck left in the ditch like a beached whale. The guy protests that his gun has been stolen. Did you see the look on Trooper's face? What gun might this be? Turns out the weapon *is* stolen and that Leader is going to spend some time in jail.

The night's game of poker is particularly jovial, the Scotch being passed around till the bottle is nearly empty, the dregs always going to the host, if he wants them.

When play ends, the Muskateens scatter to their separate beds, Derrick with two dogs piled in with him in the room adjacent to the fireplace, where it remains warmer longer, as a rule. Blue prefers a spot by the window cracked a bit. An hour after Derrick has rolled onto his right side, the only way he can sleep, he is nudged to a level of consciousness by a whiff of something petroleum. He ignores the dogs' agitation, Blue's loud whine, and nestles into what seems like increasing warmth.

Yes, Derrick Ezekiel Barron falls into a drunken slumber, hoping it will last all night. A single image concerning Peaceful Quarters streams into his head, one of his striped canvas chair, its stiff twill twisting in the breeze like a body in agony. But most especially he luxuriates in the thought of aiming his pistol at that cretin's pointed head, then is hit sadly with a picture of the shitty sign, how for him things at Peaceful Quarters will never be the same.

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(Cowles, NM) — Firefighters in the mountain village, located forty-three miles northeast of Santa Fe, battled for two hours to save a residential cabin and prevent destruction of other properties.

“The place was a lost cause from the get-go,” stated one fireman. “There was so much gasoline poured around the foundation, and someone had even come up the back and doused the roof too. The gas cans were in full sight between two trees.”

Sheriff Dudley Morehouse said six bodies inside were scorched beyond recognition, and there were the charred remains of two large dogs as well. “Once we got the owner’s car traced, we were able to contact his next of kin and bit by bit figure out some of the others,” he said.

Four of six Texas men have been identified: Derrick Barron, Standish Miles, Homer-Lin Wong, and Diego Martinez. The names of the other two bodies have yet to be determined, according to county coroner, Stella Sanchez. Neighbors, gathered in their sleepwear, believed the six friends were on a regular retreat. One woman, who declined to give her name, said, “They come up here about twice a year, and mostly keep to themselves. Seem to like their booze a lot. Never have snooped around, mind you, but after they leave, critters sometimes get into their trash and scatter all them liquor bottles. You like to keep the place picked up. I can’t imagine anybody wanting to do away with the gentlemen. They were just here to have some fun.”

The arson event may or may not be related to the arrest of one local man, Horace Greeley McBeath, who has been jailed for trespassing on the Barron property and for possessing a stolen firearm. Some speculation exists that associates of McBeath’s may have set off the fire, but the sheriff’s office explains they can’t seem to locate the parties.

“We’ll keep after them, though,” Sheriff Morehouse said. “We always get our men in cases like these. Always. Don’t expect this time to be any different.”

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A Santa Fe reporter, granted permission to roam throughout the ruins, comes upon a leatherbound notebook. He squats and gingerly opens it to find the scorched edges of paper long ago shuffled out of what once was called a ditto machine. Each page is divided into three columns and labeled with lavender ink. There must be at least five decades of signatures here, the reporter says under his breath. Flipping through the pages, he stops at one near the end dated recently, and reads the tail end of a poem:

Next day we climb a path of dark soil,
push open a gate. A small log cabin
rests in a meadow of gold; aspen leaves
shiver and shimmer. The land is private,
but six of us and Weimaraners tromp
over tall tawny grass as if we owned it all.
Clay says, “My father called Oppenheimer
the reluctant poohbah of death.”

With great love and affection for Peaceful Quarters

—Homer-Lin W.

The reporter rises, and, glancing to see if the law is watching, stashes the book inside his coat. The slender man with long dark hair stumbles along the mountain road, past a pale blue pickup, to his Prius. He sits perusing the pages, that if he is persistent, could shed some light on his upcoming feature about the Peaceful Quarters murders. Reporter’s gaze is drawn by movement, and either the figure sitting in a halo of bushes is a ghost, or no, it may just be the sorriest-looking blue Dane he has ever set eyes on.