

Sailing

When he jumped down from the military transport for the last time, onto the tarmac runway, was the first time Dennis felt the ground loosen and give way under him. The horizon rose around him and he felt himself sinking down into crumbling earth. Surprised, he spread his arms to catch his balance. Instead, his arms were as wings, propelling him downward, looping into the soil. When he looked up again, the last of his buddies were picking up their packs and searching for faces in the crowd. “Come on, Dennis. Stop kissing the ground! We made it!”

But every day since then, he was still falling, soaring, sinking, jumping awake in the dark. He could never be sure, when he jumped down from his pickup, if the sailing would start again, and learned to grip the door for a moment. Sometimes it was just turning a corner too fast, and he was off. He would lean into the wall, casual, he thought, until it passed. And no one seemed to notice.

This morning he bounced down a long rutted drive that curled into a small farmyard, floating in an ocean of grass. Little Kenny was already there, leaning against his red Ford, arms folded, boots crossed, head tilted against the south wind. Little Kenny was taking over the farm from Old Kenny, and Dennis had heard, just in time, that he was going to burn the old farmyard buildings just to get them out of his way.

Dennis jumped out of his truck and it happened again. He stood for a moment and pretended to search in the seat of his truck while the sailing stopped.

“Musta dropped my fence tool in the weeds. Isn’t in here anywhere,” he said.

Little Kenny smiled slowly. “From the sounds of it, you’ll be needing a new one anyway. If you’re gonna run cattle in this pasture.”

“I haven’t bought it yet,” Dennis replied. He hadn’t seen Little Kenny since high school. Getting round and bowlegged already. “But I can take it all off your hands. You can use the money for better wheat ground?”

“Yeah, I’ll sell it. You, no problem.” He looked up at Dennis. “What are you thinking?”

Dennis scuffed a boot in the dust. “Run a few cows, probably fix up the house some.”

Little Kenny grunted. “You know what I think of that old yard. Pay me for the pasture and you can have the rest. Give me a call when you’re ready to write the check. The house isn’t locked so, unless you want a survey done, we’ll just call it ‘the yard and pasture.’ You keep up the fences and we’ll get along good.”

“Sounds like a deal.”

“Ok. Well, better get that alfalfa baled before it dries out. Let me know if you need anything.” Little Kenny jumped into the red Ford and Dennis watched him roar off through the dust.

He walked across the yard to the house, opened the door, and stepped into the kitchen: porcelain sink gone cream against velvet grey backboards. Linoleum floor in red and ivory, carefully inlaid with a black looping pattern snaking along the walls, disappearing and reappearing on either side of the gas stove and the Servilator. A strong smell of mouse, fresh and old. The house wheezed in the wind, old-growth Michigan pine, crisp from a century of hot and cold, and harder than oak. He smiled. Termites couldn’t

touch this wood. He walked across the yard and peered into the dark coolness of the barn. Tall square stalls for work horses on one side and battered milking stanchions on the other. He'd have to make a few changes for his cows.

When he drove out to the sale barn later that week, he could already feel the first hard heat of the summer. He stepped inside and filled his lungs with the pungent combination of animal lather, lunch counter chili, and the warm funk of manure. He settled himself on a plank near the ring and waited. One of the bid spotters looked at him curiously, and then limped over and peered at him through too-thick glasses. "Didn't I used to see you here with your dad? Glad you made it back."

"Yeah, Gene, thanks. How are you?" Dennis leaned back a bit. "But not buying heifers any more."

Gene looked at him for a moment. "Right. Okay." He walked away, scanning the bleachers for his usual buyers.

Dennis spotted them as soon as they clanged through the iron gate into the sale ring: old cows that wobbled like he had when he stepped off the transport. They were straggly and awkward and used up, some Scottish Angus and Texas Hereford and French Charolais, black and red and cream and speckled whatnot, bodies too short and legs too long. Dennis bid so fast the auctioneer had to remind him when he was bidding against himself. When Gene figured it out, he stood near Dennis and bid for him. "Don't let any of them go to the killers," Dennis said to him quietly.

When he got them home, they clambered off the trailer, still swaying uncertainly,

waiting for whatever was next. They stood in grass up to their knees, blinking softly as he admired their awkward angles and aging hollows. Here and there a crooked horn gleamed in the sun.

By July, the hot wind rolled the grass in waves toward his house, sifting golden pollen from big bluestem and indian grass under the window sills. He sneezed and sneezed and laughed at his cows as they turned their tails to the wind, swinging their heads through the grass like scythes.

Come November, the grass glowed red and orange in the low afternoon sun, the warm tones of the old Herefords. They chewed it thoughtfully. He could hardly see their hipbones through the rich eddies of their thickening coats.

As winter surrounded them, crimson grass tufts pushed up, brush strokes through the hard white of the snow. The crisp blue sky gathered around them, frighteningly cold. In the mornings, he rocked across the frozen mud with his pickup full of alfalfa bales, stopped, jumped down from his truck, and clambered into the back. With smooth sweeps of his arms, he sailed the bright green flakes out against the sky to his girls.