

Pursuing T. Rex

We had a ‘discussion’ over what to call them. I said “cotton balls,” but Lucas insisted that “dust bunnies” was more appropriate given their gossamer texture.

“They are surprisingly big – and fluffy, for sure – but if one falls on your hand, it’ll melt in a second,” he said.

He was right. These were the biggest snowflakes we’d ever seen. Amazing. Even with the early-darkening gloom of a snowy Vermont afternoon in February, we found the mountain scenery rapturous. The snow accumulated slowly so there weren’t too many snowplows and the driving wasn’t hard. An inch of snow on the highway made it so quiet, something I always liked when riding in fresh snow.

But what I liked best about driving when it’s snowing is looking above the horizon ahead of you. At night, with headlights, the snowflakes were stars coming from infinity and the car’s windshield was the view screen on the bridge of the Starship *Enterprise*.

“Warp Factor 9, Mr. Janssen!” I commanded.

“I am driving fast enough, Nathan.” His gray eyes prudently stayed on the road.

Right. We were not in space, the final frontier, but we were boldly going for a weekend at our favorite Vermont inn, a belated Valentine’s Day celebration.

When we pulled up to the Spruce Hill Guest House, the sky was only light enough to show the outlines of the treetops. But the inn was so gorgeous Lucas took my hand and we squeezed. It was a Victorian mansion meticulously restored and converted to an inn, and this Friday evening it was beautifully illuminated, so welcoming in the dusk and snow: subtle floodlights on the exterior and a warm yellow glow within. Jewel colors shimmered from the front door’s

stained glass. Picture postcard perfection, like a Thomas Kinkade painting, but without treacly sweetness.

We parked, and bumbled our luggage up the steps and into the inn's entry. Tall, thin Rowan greeted us with hugs. He and his partner Gerald were the proprietors, and our friends for the twelve years we had been coming to Spruce Hill.

"We are so happy to be here," Lucas greeted. We admired Rowan's sweater, this one in maroon and gold which set off his auburn hair.

Rowan said, "Since the ski lift closed, it's dead here in the winter, except for holidays." He leaned in and added portentously, "Usually."

"Right," I said. "We've been looking forward to spending quiet time with you guys. What's up since we visited last fall?"

Raucous laughter exploded from the parlor.

Rowan glanced toward that room's doorway, then stared at us. "There is *another couple*." His tone matched the arch in his eyebrow.

"I'm sure it will be fine," Lucas assured.

Rowan gathered our luggage to take to our room. "You can come, too, if you'd like to freshen, but I suspect Gerald is – *most anxious* – to see you."

Another roar of laughter emerged from the parlor. It was so intimidating we decided to follow Rowan up the stairs.

I whispered to Lucas, "Did he say 'another couple?' That's a lot of noise for just two."

In our room, we hung our clothes and 'discussed' which dresser drawer was most appropriate for whose items. Once things were squared away, we descended to the parlor.

“Nathan! Lucas! I’m *so happy* you’re here,” Gerald called when he spied us coming in. He rushed over and gave us each enthusiastic hugs. Twice. He was natty in a cerulean blue sweater with white snowflake designs, accenting his Nordic blond hair and blue eyes.

Gerald held us at arm’s length to give us a good looking over. He’s a great cook, and ‘quality control’ sampling was making him a bit stoutish.

“Uh, I’m surprised you have other guests at this time of year,” I said, looking around his shoulder.

“Oh, of course, how rude.” He cringed, but it wasn’t clear if it was his imagined rudeness that caused the cower. “Let me introduce.”

We followed him to the other couple standing by the fire.

“Nathan Rosenberg, Lucas Janssen, I’d like you to meet Rosalinda and Rex King.”

Rex was tall and wide, quite imposing. He had hair surrendering dark color to gray, sun-leathered skin, and a handsome face with squarish profile – think Jim Rockford from ’80’s TV.

“Nathan? Call me Rex,” he said with a room-filling all-caps voice. He shook my hand very firmly.

“This here’s the little woman,” Rex drawled, indicating Rosalinda. Literally true – she was half his weight or less, a wispy five-four to his solid six-two. She wore her flame-red hair up.

“So nice to meet you. Call me Roz,” she offered while providing a soothing hand.

When Rex turned to Lucas, Lucas suggested with a bit of cheek, “Rex King: isn’t that redundant? Rex means ‘king’ in Latin, I mean.”

Rex laughed, a roaring, pounding laugh, “Ahar har har!” That was the noise that earlier chased us up the stairs. And when he laughed he leaned forward with eyes wide, as if to see that you thought it was as hilarious as he did.

“Oh, dear,” Rosalind chortled, “that’s clever. He may be *redundant*, but if we eat many more of the delicious meals here at the inn, Rex will be *abundant*!” She laughed while patting Rex’s belly, hers a tittering laugh like a soprano’s fluttering vibrato.

“Call me redundant, heck, you can call me anything. Just don’t call me late for dinner! Ahar har har har!”

“Oh, Rex,” Roz trilled.

“Ahar har har!”

Rex was wearing a tan western-style leather jacket with fringe, and a string tie with a turquoise and silver clasp. But what you simply could not miss were his shoes: cowboy boots of a silvery snakeskin, with toes so pointy they reminded me of elf booties. I might ordinarily have made fun of such extreme footwear, but these were gorgeous.

Gerald wheeled in a cart with decanters of sherry and dry port, and fresh-from-the-oven chocolate chip cookies. The aroma provoked Lucas and my stomachs to embarrassing ferocious growls. We sat in wing chairs on one side of the fireplace, Rex and Roz on the settee opposite.

Roz said, “This is so genteel, having sherry before dinner. And way out here in the woods!”

“Say, uh, Gerry, would you have something a little stronger?” Rex inquired. “I’m a Scotch man, myself.”

“Of course,” Gerald replied.

Lucas quipped, “A *Scotsman*, Rex? I had you pegged for a Texan.”

“Ahar har har!” Apparently, Rex’s funny bone was easily tickled.

“Oh, Luke,” Roz giggled, “so amusing.”

“Yup,” Rex admitted, “ya got me. I’m from Texas, born and bred. My family ranched from the 1870s to the 1990s. At one point, we had 32,000 acres, just north of Fort Worth.”

We knew nothing of ranching, but 32,000 acres of anything sounded pretty impressive.

“The TRK Ranch. My family’s named King, but don’t confuse us with the King Ranch in Texas. That’s the largest ranch in the world.”

We nodded to assure him we had no such confusion. Perhaps ignorance is good for something.

“My first wife died, oh, eighteen years ago, and my kids – two sons and a daughter – never took to ranching. The city had been creeping towards us for decades, and finally developers started making offers I couldn’t refuse. So over the years I sold out, section by section, and decided to see the world. Been to all seven continents.”

“That’s how we met,” Roz chimed in. “My book club organized a tour of Europe, and in a café in Vienna, one of the girls said, ‘Who is that obnoxious American?’

“I turned and saw this big, handsome man just being open and gregarious, interested in meeting locals and travelers alike.

“Well, we kept in touch, and eighteen months later I became Mrs. Rex King.”

“Awww.” Lucas likes cute romantic stories.

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Breakfasts and dinners at the Spruce Hill Guest House are served family style, with guests and hosts seated at the mahogany table under the gleaming chandelier in the dining room. With only the six of us, leaves had been removed from the table to provide a degree of intimacy. A wood fire crackled in the fireplace.

First course was salad of baby kale, goat cheese with toasted hazelnuts, and pomegranate seeds. Then came salmon with maple mustard glaze, winter chard tian (a Provençale au gratin dish), and creamy potatoes with roast garlic. Heavenly.

After dessert featuring bergamot crème brûlée, Rex regaled:

There's this story about a Texan. He gets on a plane at JFK bound for Houston. He settles into his aisle seat. Then along comes this little Jewish fella, all nervous, checking his ticket, checking the seat number, checking his ticket again.

"Excuse me," he quietly says to the big Texan, "but I believe that's my seat by the window."

"Sure thing, pardner!" the Texan says, and lets the little fella in. Jewish fella's fidgeting, wringing his hands, looking around.

"First time flyin'?" the Texan guesses.

Jewish fella says yes.

Texan tells him planes have never been safer, there's nothing to worry about.

Well, just after takeoff, the big Texan stretches out, holds his ten-gallon hat on his lap, and falls asleep. Wouldn't you know, about mid-flight, the plane gets into major turbulence. Whee, way up! Whoosh, drops way down – scarier than any roller coaster. Anything loose is flying around the cabin, but the Texan is dead to the world.

Little fella is ready to toss his cookies, so he looks in the seatback for a sick bag, and there isn't one. He tries to wake the Texan so he can go to the john, but just can't rouse him. He starts climbing over, and BLEEEYECHCH! He fills the Texan's hat with gastric goulash.

Now he's got another worry: how mad is the big Texan gonna be when he wakes up and finds his hat ruined?

As they get ready to land, the Texan wakes up, sees his hat is full of slop.

Little Jewish fella leans over, puts a hand on the Texan's shoulder, and asks, "Feel better now?"

"Ahar har har har har har!"

"Oh, Rex, how terrible." Roz giggled nonetheless, her coloratura flying over his booming baritone guffaws.

I was stunned, and not only because his laughter reached a new level of enthusiasm.

Gerald and Rowan laughed nervously.

But Lucas was having a fine chuckle. I must have been staring at him. When his eyes met mine, he scooped up his chin several times, like he was pointing with it. Finally, he reached over, and with his finger under my chin, closed my mouth. My jaw had dropped.

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Getting ready for bed, Lucas and I had a real discussion (not a 'discussion').

I'm a Jew, and even though I'm non-observant I was offended by Rex's story.

Lucas said it was the Texan who was the butt of the joke.

"That may be," I complained, "but it employed a Jewish stereotype – the nebbish."

“You mean the joke’s not an allegory about schlemiels and schlimazels? The klutzy schlemiel spills the soup, but it’s the schlimazel who gets spilled on, right? I thought the schlimazel is more disdained, and it’s the Texan who got the hat full of soup.”

Don’t marry a lawyer if you want to win discussions.

“Not just a Jew, he was ‘a *little* Jewish fella,’” I emphasized, wiggling air quotes.

“Seems as if Jews have for centuries selected scholars over, say, sportsmen,” Lucas noted.

“You’re saying we *bred* ourselves small?!”

“Emphasis on education has its compensations. If you look at success in law, medicine, industry, the academy, the arts –”

“Jeff Goldblum is six-feet-six,” I interjected.

“Six-four,” he corrected, hanging his pants in the armoire. “And a very successful actor.”

“Well, it’s always been tough for me, being short.”

“And I love *every inch*,” he responded, tilting his head seductively and waggling his eyebrows in a lascivious manner.

No fair being charming.

More pissily than I intended I said, “I am not in the mood.”

“Anyway,” he said, “when he mentioned the ‘little Jewish fella’ in the joke, I pictured your Uncle Larry.”

Conjuring the image of Uncle Larry fretting over a hat full of vomit, I snickered involuntarily. He’s small, and has a reputation in the family for being a ‘momzer.’ Literally, that means bastard, but he’s called that for his being, shall we say, allergic to responsibilities.

That Lucas made me laugh only made me madder. I sulked into bed.

He joined me. “I think Rex is probably an okay guy, though definitely rough around the edges.” With conciliation, Lucas promised, “Alright, tomorrow, let’s have a talk with Rex and explain that using stereotypes in jokes is hurtful.”

They say don’t go to bed angry. I inhaled deeply, exhaled meditatively, and took my love into my arms.

§ § § §

I was quiet at Saturday breakfast fearing that a conversation with Rex might be uncomfortable, or worse.

Lucas excused me to the others as “not a morning person.”

Hmmph. I queued that characterization for later ‘discussion’ with Lucas.

Roz had wrenched her knee skiing the slopes at Courchevel the prior year so they were trying cross-country skiing. Cross-country is what we like and one reason we came to Spruce Hill.

It was sunny all day. Lucas and I skied by ourselves some, then with Rex and Roz. They seemed to be joyous, generous people, and that wore down my apprehension of being around Rex. I remember particularly how we came to a huge tree fallen across the trail. Rex led the charge, removing his skis and climbing atop the trunk to help the rest of us get past the barrier. He even lifted Roz up and over with only one hand.

Breathing fresh air and skiing fresh snow is a delight, especially in such a beautiful Vermont valley. We trudged back to the inn just before dark. We were dragging, but it was an exalted exhaustion. After a hot shower, with my fatigued limbs as limber as wet noodles, I was feeling fine and looking forward to sherry.

As beverages were served, Rex said, “Let me give you fellas my card.” He handed us shiny black business cards with raised silver lettering, saying

T. REX KING, IV

DALLAS, TEXAS

along with contact information.

T. Rex? How perfect was that? We learned the T was for Theodore. I suppose Rex is a more rancherly name than Theodore.

Roz asked, “Do you boys ever get to Texas? If you do, please let us know. We can put you up. The guest house has everything, even a swimming pool. Come and go as you please – there are extra cars. We’d love to have you visit.”

We provided our cards in return, but compared to the hospitality offered with Rex’s card, what we could offer in our two-bedroom downtown Boston condo made our cards seem to us as pathetic as wilted lettuce.

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We were having a most luscious dinner with pleasant conversation. Cauliflower and celery root soup with truffle oil, to start, followed by roast Cornish game hens with kumquats and wild rice stuffing, roast winter vegetables, and pan juices. Awesome.

At one point, Rex wanted more sauce, but rather than interrupt the conversation to ask for it, Rex leaned for the gravy boat mumbling, “Pardon my reach.”

Lucas said, “It’s a good thing you’re not one of those short-armed T. Rexes.”

“Ahar har har!” Rex laughed at other people’s jokes, too.

Later, Rex referred to Texas as the largest state.

Rowan gently corrected that Alaska was the biggest state.

“They’ll try to tell you that,” Rex argued, “but if their snow and ice was to melt, Alaska would be no bigger than Delaware!”

And with that, Rex told a Texas-sized story:

Fella from Chicago visited Texas for the first time, and was having supper in the restaurant at an old country motel. The proprietor was happy to tell him all about Texas, and got to bragging about how big the state was, how big the oil industry was, how we have the biggest ranches, the biggest steaks, the biggest people, the biggest horns on the cattle, the biggest hairdos on the ladies, and on and on.

The visitor asked for the restroom, and the owner said, “Go into that hall, turn right, and it’s the second door. The light’ll be turned out, so just feel around for the pull string.”

The fella goes into the hall, but turns left, and opens a door to an indoor swimming pool. It’s totally dark in there, too. He feels around for a pull string, and *splooosh!* – falls into the water.

The owner hears the fella yelling and splashing, and rushes back. “You all right?”

The guy yells, “Don’t flush! Don’t flush!”

“Ahar har har har!” Instead of a rimshot to punctuate his punchline, Rex had his bellowing laugh.

“Oh, Rex, you and your stories,” Roz twittered.

Gerald and Rowan laughed polite-innkeeper laughs.

I was baffled.

Lucas was chortling heartily. Seeing my bewilderment, he leaned to my ear and explained, “He thought he’d fallen into a Texas-sized toilet.”

It might have been funnier, of course, if I didn’t have to have it explained.

“Say, speakin’ of Texas-sized things,” Rex continued, dipping into his Texas-sized repertoire of stories, “the TRK Ranch was pretty big, and I was mighty proud of it. When I visited the Holy Land, oh, back ten years ago, I checked on a kibbutz to learn about their agriculture practices.”

Darn, I thought. We were with Rex much of the day and forgot to ask him to avoid stereotypes in jokes. And now he’s telling us about a trip to Israel. Was it going to be anti-Semitic? And he said “Holy Land,” not Israel. Could it be he’s with one of those apocalyptic Christian groups that support Israel only because they want a war to start that will end the world? I braced myself.

It’s dry there, as dry as much of Texas. They showed me their beef herds, poultry, row crops, olive groves, and so on – very diverse, very efficient. But they were all on tiny bits of land compared to what I was used to.

Then the little Israeli fella asked about my ranch.

Here it comes. Do I quietly excuse myself? No, I’d hate myself for not speaking up. Do I storm out? Same thing, but worse form. Do I try to explain how, even if he doesn’t mean ill,

stereotypes are harmful because they can embarrass, making people feel singled out? Or worse, how they excuse, abet, and even encourage prejudice? That's clear and succinct, but I'd better have a speech prepared so that I don't sputter and sound crazy.

So I start to say how many acres I ran when I remember they use hectares for land measurement, not acres, and I didn't know how to convert off the top of my head. So I thought I'd slip in a little brag. I said, "I don't know how many *hectares* we've got, but it's a *heck* of a lot!"

He enjoyed that.

I puffed up my chest went on with my brag, "You know, if I was to drive from one edge of my ranch to the other, it'd take me a full day."

Without missing a beat, he said, "I had a car like that once."

"Ahar har har har! Ahar har!"

"Oh, Rex, he sure put you down a peg," Roz's lilting trill sang out yet again.

"Ahar har. Yep, popped me with a pin and left me flat as week-old beer, ahar har!"

I was furious, not at Rex for telling a tasteless joke, but at Rex for *not* telling one. I wanted to set him straight, but his self-deprecating story pre-empted me from deprecating him. Rats.

I looked at Lucas. He was enjoying himself and set his smiling gray eyes on mine. He thumped under his chin with his forefinger three times. Then he thumped three more times.

Oh. My mouth was hanging open – again.

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We went to bed. I was still preoccupied, annoyed by the jokes. Maybe not the jokes, exactly, but perhaps my reaction.

Lucas told me, “You are obsessing; let it go.” Diagnosis and prescription. He kissed my cheek, sugar with the medicine.

He was right, as usual. I’ve laughed at plenty of ‘a priest, minister, and rabbi walk into a bar’ type jokes. Because of Rex’s over-the-line joke I had stereotyped him, and became frustrated when I couldn’t fully fit him into that box. Rex did seem like a good sort. Perhaps I envied his carefree Texas-sized joviality.

I inhaled deeply, exhaled meditatively, and vowed to work on letting go.

Gray can be such a cold color, like metal, but Lucas’s gray eyes are warm. With a little gazing into those gray eyes I found I *was* in the mood.

I slept well, but had a strange dream. I was trying to escape a monster. As the monster barged through the forest with earth-shaking footsteps, tree branches cracked, sounding like gunshots. Then, from among snow-blanketed spruces, a twenty-foot-tall tyrannosaurus emerges. It sees me and lets out a roar that echoes through the valley, “Ahar har har!”

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After Sunday breakfast, we sat in the parlor by the fire. Rex and Roz leafed through magazines; Lucas and I sipped coffee and read the Sunday *Times*.

Rex put his magazine down and moved to sit on a hassock by Lucas’s chair. Putting his hands on his knees, he cleared his throat. “You fellas are from Boston, right? Tell me, how’s that gay marriage thing working out?”

Two years before, in 2004, same-sex marriage became legal in Massachusetts. That fall, Lucas and I headed to Provincetown and were married on Herring Cove Beach at sunset, in the presence of close family and friends.

Rex went on, “Don’t think we’ll ever get that in Texas. There’s some liberals there, but they’re mostly corralled into Austin. Ahar har!”

“Oh, Rex, they’re in Dallas now, too.”

“Yep, some blue areas in Texas. Lack of oxygen, most likely. Ahar har har!”

God, is it happening? Gay bashing from retrograde Texas conservatives? Maybe he’ll ask one of the Straights’ Questions for Gays: When did you *decide* to go gay? So, which one of you is *the woman*? What do you gay fellas do in bed? Ooo! Ooo! I hope he asks that. What do gay men do in bed? I’ll answer: the same thing most straight men do – snore.

Something weighed on Rex; it showed in his face. “Well, the reason I’m asking, my nephew Lonnie is fruitier than a Waldorf salad.”

Aha! I *knew* it. He has a gay nephew and calls him a “fruit.” Surely now would come a homophobic rant.

Rex continued, “It was real tough for Lonnie growing up, terrible. Getting picked on, called names. Got beat up, sometimes bad. He has a boyfriend now, Tyler, and they’re real good to each other, real good *for* each other.

“Anyways, after all the hardship they’ve been through and still face, they deserve happiness so much. We’ve suggested they might want to move to Massachusetts so they can get married and have a normal married life. You know, be able to do everything from holding hands outside the house to adopting and raising kids.

“So, I was wondering, can Lonnie and Tyler contact you and find out what their prospects might be up there?”

Lucas took Rex’s hand. “We’d be honored to help. And if we’re not the best resources for them, we’ll put Lonnie and Tyler in touch with people who are.”

Lucas – *without even looking at me* – thumped his chin three times. I shut my gaping mouth.