

Ninety on Jackknife

A loud knock rattled the door on Clayton's brand-new travel trailer. He took the last swig of his pre-ride beer and then yanked open the door. A kid with scruffy, blonde hair stood a few feet away from the metal steps that lead up to the trailer's entryway. After a few moments, he realized it was the young kid the office manager used to run errands and other menial chores.

Clayton said, "Well, what do you want?"

The kid held his hand up to shield his eyes from the midsummer Arizonan sun. "There's a woman on the phone asking for you."

Clayton leaned away from the door and tossed the empty beer bottle into the small trashcan next to the sink. He grabbed his cowboy boots and sat down on the upper step. His silver spurs were already cinched in place and jangled as he pulled on each boot. The kid shifted but made no attempt to leave.

"Okay, okay, run along. I'll be right behind you."

The kid spun around and took off jogging. His gait wasn't much faster than walking, but he covered a hundred yards down the main dirt road toward the arena before Clayton got more than fifty feet from his trailer.

Minutes later, Clayton's shoulder bumped the door frame as he stepped into the cramped rodeo office on the second floor. The office door was always propped open, and through the opening he kept his focus on a fellow bull rider straddling the back of a monstrous grey Brahman bull inside the chute.

Clayton tried to snatch the black handset off the counter but dropped it. The receiver banged against the front of the counter: beige paneling from the nineteen seventies. It would've fallen to the floor, had its long-coiled cord stretching to the heavy rotary base not caught on the

edge. After struggling with the cord for ten to twenty seconds, he placed the handset against his face.

Clayton said, "Hello."

"Hello. Clayton?"

"Yes. Are you a fan?" His turn to ride was approaching fast and he moved over to the large window that overlooked the arena. He tapped the tip of his boot against the banged-up trim that ran along the bottom of the wall.

"No. I'm Eloise from Ryebeck, Kansas." She fought her raspy voice as if she had a terrible cold.

"Oh. What's this about?"

The Brahman began bucking and twisting before the gate could swing all the way open. The rider flew off its back and Clayton winced when the man's lanky body slammed against the churned-up ground: flat on his side. Carlsbad, not the rider's name, but where he called home.

"There's no easy way to say this." She muffled a cough. "You're the father of my son."

The rodeo and announcers became dull, like it was all on T.V. "You're mistaken. The last time I was in Kansas must've been..."

"He's three. I'd given up on finding you, but then you showed up on the news riding bulls. You didn't," she paused, "don't seem like the type to drop everything because of some fling in Kansas."

Another rider clambered up onto the platform above the chutes. He lowered his body into position on top of a tan bull named Kistler's Whistler. Clayton frowned at the man, wearing a flashy black and red vest, who took first place from him less than a month ago.

He closed his eyes. "Three?"

“His name is Jesse.”

“I worked on the wheat harvest crews back then. We went through Kansas.” For a second, endless fields of golden wheat stretched out in all directions. “It could’ve been any one of the men on those crews.”

“Do you still have that huge belt buckle? The one with your name, two roses, and a colt revolver on the front of it.”

He opened his eyes right as Kistler’s Whistler sent the rider sailing off its back a fraction of a second after the eight-second horn. “I lost that one a couple years ago in Cheyenne—two colt forty-fives and a single rose.”

A southern drawl crackled out of the loud speaker. “Yowza, what a fine ride by Howie Lawrence, no doubt it’s going to post high. Anything over eighty-six will put him in the top three, don’t you think Terry?”

“Yes sir, it sure will.”

Eloise cleared her throat. “The buckle is about all I remember besides your face and that cheap motel out on route fifty, the one the harvest crews still overrun every fall. I’ve never been much of a drinker.”

“Nah, you’re that girl?”

“You’ve got a wonderful son down here in Ryebeck.”

He lifted the black Stetson off his head and reseated it, an attempt to make a straighter, tighter fit. “What do you want from me?”

The announcers’ chatter came again. “Sam, there’s only one cowboy out there who can run away with this and head off to the semifinals.”

“You got that right Terry and he’s up right after this next fine rider from Havilland, Texas.”

She said, “I’m sick.” A child began wailing in the background. “The doctors’ say it’s curable, but I’m telling you about your son in case they’re wrong.”

His face contorted. “Sick?”

“Cancer, but...”

“Look, I gotta go. My bull is going to be led to the gates soon.” He tried to step out of the doorway, but the long phone cord reached its limit and stopped him from going any farther than the threshold.

“I—we don’t expect anything. I wanted to make sure you knew about Jesse in case...”

“These are the quarterfinals. I’ll be disqualified if I miss my ride.”

Two of the three rodeo clowns rushed in and drew the attention of an agitated bull away from a fellow rider and the crowd’s roar made it impossible to hear anything she said except the word *please*.

He moved to the counter and stuck his finger in his ear. “What?”

“My phone number and address—write them down on something you won’t throw away.”

“Fine, fine just hurry up.”

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Eight months later, Clayton parked his truck at the address on the five-dollar bill he’d scribbled it on. After getting out, he yawned and stretched standing next to his truck. Driving non-stop from Albuquerque with his trailer in tow was the only way he could stop by before beginning another ranch hand job.

Eloise greeted him at the door unsure of what to make of his unexpected visit. Her face was gaunt, eyes haggard. Jesus, he'd have guessed she was at least sixty-years-old instead of thirty something.

A sister with the distant stare of a drug-addled brain and their feeble grandmother stood in the small kitchen gaping at him. Jesse, four-years-old now, rushed over to him and held out his hand to show off a deep cut with fresh stitches. The boy was his undeniable miniature and arguing otherwise would've been foolish.

After a bit, Eloise led him out the back door, which flopped and screeched, the bottom hinge torn away from the rotted frame. The lower edge had worn a deep groove in the wooden planks of the stoop and Clayton paused to assess the damage. He could fix the damn thing in ten minutes, but Eloise motioned for him to follow.

They passed through a backyard cluttered with two rusting lawn mowers, faded pinwheels with broken blades, and dead weeds choking out the patchy grass. She led him a hundred yards into an open field of ankle-high, green wheat before turning to face him.

"They talk about remission, but I feel worse than ever before." Her voice became croakier with each word.

He smiled. "You're recovering."

"I'm begging you to take Jesse when I die." She stared into his eyes—a piercing intrusion he was unaccustomed to getting from man or woman. "Momma's too old and sis does meth or God knows what."

"I'm on the road half the year chasing the circuit. That ain't no place for a child. Besides the ranches where I work offseason have strict rules against kids in the bunkhouses—wives too."

He waved his hat in a circular motion. His nicest Stetson, a white felt Boss of the Plains with distressed leather band, was still in his hand after taking it off to enter the house. The hat was in pristine condition, he only wore it for funerals, weddings, and the awarding of stunning belt buckles with prize money. The oddity of being outside without something covering his head struck him as she spoke.

“Ryebeck will be no better for him when I’m gone, likely worse.” She fidgeted with the strings of her bedraggled apron.

“I don’t know the first thing about young children.”

She slanted a smile. “You figure it out as you go along.”

“There’s must be a better...” He searched her face.

“If I could’ve found a more suitable place, I’d have left you alone.”

“You’re in remission. The cancer is gone.”

He turned away and stared at Ryebeck, which was four or five miles off to the west. The graffiti-covered grain elevator stood like a beacon on one side of town. Farther to the South, the greyish-blue water tower with R in fading white paint seemed taller, but it was too close to call a winner. The same small pit stop from his harvesting days should’ve shriveled up and died out. What in the hell was keeping the damn place alive?

“Banking on my survival is a fool’s dream.”

He snapped his head back. “I can ill afford to...”

“I’m sending him to you when the time comes.” She dropped the apron strings and pointed at him. “If you turn away your own son, then that’s how it’ll have to play out.”

He shied away as if her pointing had stabbed him. “Damn you woman. We’ve got to figure something else out.”

“I’ve figured it every which way I can, and it keeps coming back to you. I hate it, but that’s how this damn stew pot is boiling over.”

Clayton smashed a cluster of wheat with the heel of his boot. “It ain’t going work out.”

“By god you’re about the sorriest excuse for a father I ever met.”

“I never claimed I’d make a good father.”

“No, and I’m guessing you never will.”

#

Two years after his quick stopover in Rybeck, Eloise’s sister and grandmother piled back into the green Chevy Nova they’d “borrowed from a friend.” Calving season forced them to bring the boy to him and he was shocked they obliged. Even though the sister made it seem that breaking parole was more of a nuisance than a risk the women were heading home before an hour had even past. Without so much as even hugging Jesse goodbye they drove off. The boy, content playing with dirt clods curdling the ground inside the small corral next to the bunkhouse, did little more than glance up.

The rattletrap with rusted wheel wells, missing tailpipe, and bald tires shook and sputtered as it crawled down the long lane of the big, sprawling Texas Ranch Clayton had hired on with during the bull riding offseason. As the car picked up speed, black exhaust fogged into the dusty cloud being churned up. Clayton bet they wouldn’t even get past the county line before the Nova broke down.

After they drove out of sight, he tore open the envelope the grandmother had handed him as soon as she stepped out of the car. “Christ, now what?”

He unfolded the pages and muttered. “Shit, do I have to wash him, or can he do it himself?”

Clayton,

He's a little boy and he needs someone to look after him. I reckon hard love is better than none. I'm hoping you can do right by him, but I have my misgivings about this arrangement. Even so, you're his best chance.

- 1. He eats like a lumberjack and about as often as a slop hog.*
- 2. With your lifestyle school will be difficult, but he needs to learn.*
- 3. He's all boy. He likes cars, action figures, sticks, and anything that'll get him grubby or in trouble.*
- 4. He questions everything, which will be trying for you, but it's a phase as most things are with children.*

Well, this list could go on for pages upon pages and you've skimmed it at most. I assume there're many women in your life. A consistent female influence could help ensure he grows up to be less gruff than his father. My mind runs wild about what he'll be like after spending time with you, yet all I can do is cling to hope. That's harsh, but I don't care because he's such a loving boy.

Please tell him about me when the time is right. You know little more than my name, but just tell him that I wish I could've had a whole life time with him. I've loved him since the day I found out about our miracle and I'll never stop loving him (don't you ever tell him he was a mistake). I'll be watching over him from Heaven and praying for both of you.

My body will be placed next to my father's plot in Ryebeck's smaller cemetery. The map on the back of this letter will get you there. I hope you bring him by on occasion so I'm more than a name.

Sincerely,

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Two nights ago, as late as possible, Clayton parked his trailer among the new fancier rigs lined up in the large grassy expanse behind the stadium arena. Jesse and he had travelled all day from Denver to get to Ogden for the finals. He had only qualified to ride in the finals because another rider had broken most of the bones in his hand during a bar brawl while celebrating his placement. While Clayton jacked up the tongue to unhitch his travel trailer and Jesse hooked up the electric, he noted how much things had changed over the last ten years.

Even in the oncoming darkness the names in cursive reflective stencil on fifth wheels bigger than buses shined like sunfish on bright mornings. The numerous colorful lights running along the sides annoyed him more than the flickering glows of T.V.'s that lit up the tinted windows inside every one of them. Everything had advanced: savvier Sunday crowds, higher stakes, larger, more aggressive bulls—everything except him.

The following day, after two solid postings, Clayton wanted to sit and rest in his recliner, but the boy stood by the sink shuffling the dishes around instead of washing them. The trailer was littered with takeout boxes, whiskey bottles, dirty clothes, and greenish yellow blades of grass tracked in from outside. Jesse made no attempt to explain why he had ignored his chores.

Clayton popped the top off a post-ride beer and tossed the cap at the waste basket. The lid bounced off a crumpled paper bag on top of the overloaded receptacle.

Clayton said, "After doing the dishes, you need to at least pick up the place and get rid of the trash."

"This is bullshit. I'm not your maid."

"You got to earn your keep."

He slammed a handful of utensils into the sink and turned to face Clayton, fists clenched.

“Not for you, not anymore.”

“What’re you going to do boy? Get a job? Head out on your own? I ain’t about to stop you.”

“I can do everything you can, even more.”

“Can you?”

“Screw you. Maybe I’ll join Zeke and those guys. They like me.”

“Pfft, rodeo clowning, that’s your grand plan?”

“Better than being a washed-up bull buster or bronc jockey.”

“Do whatever you think is best, but I’m warning you...bull riding is dangerous, no doubt about it. Clowning? Now, that’ll get you killed.”

“Great, then I can be as semi famous as my old pops.”

“Get out, get out here now.”

Jesse stormed out of the old travel trailer and screamed he was never come back. The door banged shut with a thwack. The same thunderclap from when Clayton slammed his own father’s door rang out. Not much older at the time, he joined the wheat harvest crews the following morning. What in the hell was the rash punk going to do? Would he join up with Zeke and Darryl as their newest clown? They needed another and had for some time ever since Billy Collins shattered his hip. The odds of them letting a sixteen-year-old join their ranks seemed low.

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Sunday night he got ready for the last ride of his career, whether he won or not. Eloise’s letter drew his attention away from packing his green, canvas gear bag. Wedged into the upper

corner of his full-sized mirror on the sliding closet door, the whitish paper had turned yellow. Tattered edges and dark stains made her handwritten words seem older than a decade. A partial view of the map made him guzzle over half his pre-ride beer. Why had he never taken Jesse to see her? Pride, disdain, or the excuse he'd used every time the subject came up: they were too busy?

His image distorted by a large crack angling across the mirror also slowed his routine except his drinking which sped up and led to another one. Deep wrinkles from years in the sun made him appear older than his age. Too much booze, too little sleep, and vying for a top spot in a sport for young men had broken down his body. Soon, irritation and a ticking clock pushed him out of the tiny bedroom-bathroom combination. The beers had him more buzzed than normal because downing two before a ride was unusual.

When Clayton finished getting his stuff together, he sat down on the couch because it was too soon to head to the chutes. The trailer was messier than ever before because Jesse kept his word and stayed away. Clayton smiled at the boy's resolve. Then the past forced its way into his mind. Filthy, hot days of harvesting led him to the back-breaking work on different ranches across the American landscape, more often in the South than the North or Midwest.

On a languid Saturday afternoon with the chores completed, he and the other hands began drinking whiskey on a five thousand acre spread in Oklahoma. Soon, the owner came by the horse shoe pits and joined them for a drink and a few tosses of the shoes. The short, stocky old timer challenged them to ride Dempsey, a retired pro-circuit bull: his most prized animal flesh. Most Saturdays he offered the same challenge, and nobody ever took it on. This time, he upped the ante with a hundred-dollar bill for anyone that could go six seconds or longer.

Two other hands failed to go more than a few seconds before Dempsey launched them

into the large patches of Mexican sandburs swathed across the rarely used practice corral. Clayton lifted his hat in the air and whooped after he jumped off Dempsey's back. The owner strolled over to him and pulled the hundred dollar bill out of his billfold. Before he handed it to him he worked the chaw in his cheek with his tongue and took off his hat.

The owner said, "How long you think you was on there?"

"Seven maybe eight seconds?"

"Over twelve. How'd you know how to kick your heels and keep your left hand in the air? You playing me, boy?"

"No sir. Seen it enough I guess."

"You might be in wrong profession."

From there, with the owner's help, things took off and bull riding—almost overnight—became his main way of life. Fast living followed. A blur of women's faces, booze, and squandered prize money made him clench his teeth.

All alone in the dimly lit trailer his past seemed like someone else's memories, someone else's heartache. The multitude of people he'd met and the places he'd been were immersed in vapid daydreams. He swatted the tinfoil pan of a T.V. dinner off the arm of the couch. The goddamned choices stood out more than anything else. Choices, good, bad, or indifferent were open sores always festering and eating away at his future.

He stepped out of the trailer with his bag in hand. The night was dark and airless, familiar. The bag's bulkiness made it uncomfortable against his hip. Rosin powder, bull rope, and leather gloves were stuffed in with his button-down, long sleeved western shirt for the after party, along with dozens of other odds and ends like ace bandages, a mouthguard he never used,

and three or four packages of gauze. In the trailer he'd already put on his spurs and competition vest breaking further away from his ritual.

He hobbled past rows of those plush RVs and pricey trailers, the limp from his training days worsening every year from hard living and rough riding. The roar of a Sunday crowd rose with each painful step he made toward the arena.

His right shoulder still throbbed from the first two rides and soft, powdery dirt worked through small holes in the bottoms of his lucky boots. Halfway to the chutes he paused. He took a deep breath and tried to work the kinks and soreness out of his shoulder and leg. Then he shuffled into the frenzied excitement near the back of the chutes.

The loud speakers hailed out John Jared's score of eighty-six point two, five. One of the announcers continued, "That young man from Texarkana can ride with the best of 'em. That puts him in third place. Kenny Jenkins has the lead with his second-round score of eighty-eight point seven. The other riders are gonna' have one a heck of a time catching him with this line-up of rambunctious bulls. We haven't seen a number near ninety in quite some time, eh Jim?"

"Oh, it's been a while Cal."

Clayton's mind cleared, and he tried to focus on the next twenty minutes. When was the last time one of his rides scored above eighty-eight? Holding on the full eight seconds for much of the year had proved difficult and more like luck when it happened, until yesterday. His first two rounds had given him a slim chance for one last taste of glory. His final ride would have to score above ninety to take the title.

His draw for the third round could've been worse, but few riders considered Jackknife a great bull for scoring. One of the gate men called over to him, "man your bull is a goosey orange-brown wrecking ball of fluttering butterflies."

Clayton snorted. “That’s one way to put it.”

He tossed his bag onto the ground at the back of the gates. As soon as he glanced up, the chute man gave him the two-minute signal. His bull rope, snake-like, slid out of the bag as he freed it and the can of rosin from the tangled mass. He thrust the rope up into a sea of hands. He wasted no time trying to figure out who had grabbed the most important piece of his gear. One of the chute workers would ensure to strap it around the bull’s girth and pass him the correct end.

He bent down to deal with the rest of his stuff—glove, chaps, and latigos. Buckling the chaps only took a moment or two, the same with the tying the latigos around the tops of his boots. The glove snugged his hand and grew warmer the more he rosined it.

Then he clambered up the fence and onto the platform above the chute. His pain vanished. Exhilaration was a powerful analgesic like chugging a pint of two hundred proof grain alcohol. He salted rosin on his glove for the bull rope and then dropped the small plastic canister down by his bag.

The world drowned out as he assumed the position on top of Jackknife. He locked eyes with the same chute man who’d given him the two-minute warning. The lanky man’s calm, regimented demeanor was meant to ease a rider’s anxiousness. It was a strategy that worked on the rarest occasions, at least for Clayton.

Voices of familiar commenters echoed out of the loud speakers. The pent-up power of Jackknife flowed out from the beast’s flanks and into his legs, like the bridled energy before a high magnitude earthquake. He crushed everything into a ball of hardened steel that sat in the pit of his stomach and waited.

The chute man nodded again; Clayton had the green light to give his signal whenever he was ready for the gate handlers to release them. He tightened his grip on the bull rope and took a

deep breath. His left hand rose into the air from tempered instinct. The gate swung open and the buzzer sounded.

Jackknife surged out of the chute whirling into the arena in a dizzying series of spins and bucks. The crowd roared: a din no louder than a murmur in his ears. Jackknife became the furious bucking bull selective breeding had intended.

At first the bull's erratic rhythm jarred and jostled him. He almost flew out of the saddle but held on as the bull thrashed beneath him. Then, like a storm front dying away, its spins, twists, bucks, and hops became smooth. He kept his arm up higher than ever before and his heels pumping like pistons. When the horn sounded, he had to fight the urge to let out a yeehaw.

He tried to dismount, but his glove had bound up in the bull rope. The tangle of leather and hemp held him to the side of the wild bucking brute. His tiptoes tapped the churned dirt every second or third time Jackknife bucked.

Jackknife continued his spinning rampage and Clayton dangled off the bull's side. His shoulder popped when it tore from the socket. He could no longer keep any space between him and the solid, muscular side. After a few jolting hops Jackknife reared his head back and Clayton's faced slammed into its poll. The impact stunned him, but he remained semiconscious. Blood seeped from his nostrils and trickled down his upper lip. For minutes, he flopped and flailed until the bull rope released. He crumpled to the ground.

Things were happening around him, but they were slow and fuzzy. The hooves of a one-ton bull churned up the dirt inches from his head as Jackknife continued to buck, spin, and search for him. Dazed and unable to move, all he could do was lay there hoping the bull's hooves kept missing him, missing his head. Then the shadowed figure of a rodeo clown appeared. Jackknife's monstrous form moved away, and Clayton's body relaxed.

“Zeke, is that you?” Clayton’s voice was weak and hoarse.

“No Dad, it’s me.” Jesse’s face, painted sad clown, loomed above him. “Are you okay?”

“Where’s the bull?”

Jesse glanced over his shoulder and then back down at Clayton. “Relax, we’ve got him.”

“Where’s the fucking...”

The long horn of Jackknife caught Jesse’s baggy pants and swept him off his feet. A quick powerful twist of the bull’s head flung him up in the air. He landed a few feet away from Clayton in the musky dirt with a thud. The loud snap of a bone breaking preceded Jesse’s screams.

The crowded arena went silent. Raucous fans sat in their seats rigid and muted, a common courtesy to respect to the injured men. Jesse writhed and Clayton tried to get up to help him. He was still too dazed to do more than loll his head. The bright arena lights created halos and distortion. For a moment the young boy he’d met in Ryebeck lay beside him.

“What’d you break, a leg?” Clayton inched his arm closer to the boy.

Jesse gasped and groaned like the wind had been knocked out of him.

Clayton said, “Be tough, help’s coming.”

“Unhhh.”

“Jesse?”

A rush of people cut off more words. Two cowboys lifted Clayton to his feet and the crowd erupted. A score of ninety point five zero echoed through the din. His fist rose into the air and he soaked in the adulation from the deafening rumble. A half dozen cowboy hats, two or three baseball caps, and a pink bandana landed at his feet. His gaze followed Jesse being hauled off in a stretcher. For a moment he stood fast, unable to move or react.

When he tried to run to Jesse, he stumbled and collapsed to his knees. The cowboys who'd helped him were quick to get him back on his feet, but he shook out of their grasp. He stumbled forward, this time keeping upright as he plodded toward the station wagon style ambulance parked in its designated spot at the far end of the arena.

“Wait, that’s my son.”

The announcers’ voices called out through the starry night and muted his words. “What a spectacular finish. His final ride in a long rocky career and he takes tonight’s title. Ya gotta’ feel pretty bad that he and one of our heroic clowns got beat to hell. They’re telling us it’s a nasty injury, but the clown should pull through. Jim, do you even know that guy?”

“No Cal can’t say I do. If he keeps protecting our hard riding ‘boys like that, then he’ll either have one heck of a career or a darn short one.”

“You ain’t kidding. Okay folks let’s hear another round of applause for our big winner Clayton Donbrooke.”

Before Clayton could holler again, Jesse was loaded into the ambulance, the driver already behind the wheel. He kept moving forward, forcing himself to remain on his feet. With each step he grew steadier, stronger, yet he hadn’t even reached the center of the arena when the ambulance flipped on its light and sirens, then sped off.

End