

Trigger warning: This story contains discussion of historical and contemporary racism and homophobia, including slurs.

If He Ever Could Get Free

by Jackson Culpepper

There were times Branhan looked out over their six acres of pine-dotted ranch field, bordered by neighbors who got drunk and loud sometimes and kept dogs chained to trees in the yard, not with hate but with unbearable loneliness. He'd thought about it. There was the vast West: sun-bleached, mystical New Mexico, or the tawny solitude of Wyoming, or Colorado where the mountains stood like ancient, mighty angels. He thought Texas, but then remembered how they'd been about gay people. Austin maybe, but Branhan had it in his heart to be a real rancher, not some culture cowboy.

He wanted the running and the sweat-smell of the horses. To know them and have the hard-won time to do it.

Or Branhan dreamed to forsake the horses themselves. Maybe he'd buy a motorcycle. Maybe he'd brew beer or hike the Appalachian trail or take a string of lovers. No more feeding twice a day, staying up nights with a colicked mare, no more self-subjugation to the needs of twenty animals.

But who would he be without them?

He could leave, though, any day he wanted to.

*

Demme wasn't Branhan's first lover but he was the one who lasted. While pitching hay, while driving home in the early morning, Branhan thought on how their being together was twice a transgression. "Love goes deeper than any of us can guess, and the only choice in falling in love is to fall along with it or pass it up." He wrote that in a leather journal his mother had given him.

*

Branhan found his father Frank laid out in an empty stall, his breathing shallow and welts covering his arms and face. Branhan gasped a yell. His father was dense, heavy and strong from a life lived working, but Branhan dragged him up into a fireman carry and into the house and onto the bed. In the light he looked worse. Branhan's breath couldn't fill him. He dialed 9-1-1 on his cell phone. They asked if his father was allergic to bees, to wasps, to hornets. He knew his father was fine with bees—they never stung him, even when he came close to the wild hives in the woods—but he didn't know about the others.

*

Branhan asked him, “What was it like back then?”

“Back then,” Arnie repeated. His eyes lit from the window like hot forge irons.

“In the old days. For us.”

“Us?”

*

Branhan rode in the ambulance. His father's eyes were closed but he breathed. The emergency room was a place of linoleum-echoed wailing, electronic beeps and whirrs. They brought Frank in with a rattle of gurney wheels. They took him away and told Branhan to wait. He sat and pulled his book, one about old-time loggers in Montana, out of his jacket pocket. The words on the page didn't do a thing. Branhan only sat holding it and worrying.

*

Rain spat from a black sky, drumming on the horse trailer and twinkling in the arena lights. Thunder cracked close by.

In the middle of someone's pattern in Branhan's class, a transformer popped two hundred yards away. The lights failed. The horse bucked its rider and cantered willy-nilly across the arena. Blackie, Branhan's horse, startled and bucked. Branhan pulled her head around and spoke to her. Frank stood

from the bench, about to leap forward to grab the reins.

They could still hear drunk riders yelling from the stalls.

“Anybody with sense ought to know it's wrong,” Branhan said

“You can't rely on people having sense. The horses should be able to handle a thunderstorm anyway,” his father replied.

Some of the men had looked at Branhan in that way he'd begun to recognize. He didn't understand how they knew. He sure hadn't seen any of them at Charlie's but maybe he had. And half of them were drunk.

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The skipped training sessions hovered in his mind; all those responsibilities. He repeated like a mantra his idea: he could leave anytime, anytime he wanted.

*

Frank hadn't been to church since Branhan's mother passed, but he still remembered his share of Psalms and Bible verses from growing up Baptist. Every now and then he muttered these under his breath while he shoveled horse shit, or he'd recite them to the horses while he brushed them. The only one he quoted to Branhan was the passage from Job, “Hast thou given the horse strength, and clothed his neck with thunder?”

*

“I want to understand.”

“What did you say?”

“I want to understand, sir.” Branhan finally met Arnie's gaze, mustering his strength.

Arnie watched him.

*

Branhan went out to work with the mustang Blackie one day under crisp white cloud and a sky

blue as it must've been the very day God made it. Branhan wanted to make a cutting horse out of her because she had cow-sense and knew to track. It might take a while.

The steam from her nostrils was white and new as the cloud above. Mounted, there was only the compass turning, that feeling that they had the same balance. The posts of her legs crushed into the soil. *You have more to you than these tame ones—you are like the wide prairie you came from.* Circles to the right, narrow to wide, circles back the way they'd come.

Branhan sank to the ground. His body felt heavier, reduced to human legs. Blackie was calm in all but the bedrock-gray depths of her eyes, that part he would never know. *Thank you. In whatever secret name you bear, I thank you.*

She taught him what horse training meant, what the depth of it was. To speak to something wild, a part of creation that could and might kill him, and to have it listen and speak back, was the most profound experience of Branhan's life. More profound than love. Perhaps as profound as loving through two transgressions.

*

There was the day when he was fifteen, Branhan filled his wallet with his cash savings, put it in the inside pocket of his coat, and began walking the seven miles to town, intent on catching a greyhound bus there or else a ride to the Amtrak station in Macon. No incident or abuse prompted this trip. No unkindness from his father, nor even bad behavior from the horses. His mother had been gone by then for two years. At some no-point in the road, above a ditch filled and jagged with cut-back pine limbs, Branhan stopped. He shifted his weight. Finally he turned and walked the five miles back.

*

Branhan felt loose as he drove past the reaches of town through fields of harvested cotton or fallow ones with bits of peanut leaves dried along the rows. He could leave it anytime he wanted.

*

They sat. Branhan couldn't seem to swallow. His father seemed okay apart from the big welts on his skin. A few times he made to scratch one of the sores and stopped himself.

“Where were you today, son?”

“I got in late—”

“What kept you?”

“I was talking to somebody.”

He nodded. Frank didn't know many of his friends because a lot of them were from Charlie's. He said, “The animals come first, son.”

“I know, sir.”

*

Branhan flushed. This wasn't at all what he'd imagined. He said quietly, “What it was like for gay people.”

Arnie glared. He had a way of looking at someone as though everything they said was the most stupid thing ever said. “You mean all us fags? One big, happy, family?” Arnie drew out a Pall Mall and lit it with a lighter from the pack.

“I suppose so. Sir.”

“Why the hell do you want to know that? You can probably get married today if you wanted to. If you drive far enough. Start you up a nice life with a three-bedroom house and crepe myrtles in the front yard.”

*

“Then why didn't you do it?” Frank's tone was harsh, disappointed. Maybe hurt. “You got to be there to feed, son. They can't take care of themselves.”

“I know, Dad—”

“Sir.”

“I know that, sir.”

“You never done that before. What was so important it made you start today?”

“I told you, I was with a friend.”

“A girl?”

“No, nothing like that. I was talking to a friend.”

“About what?”

“The past,” Branhan said. Then he looked at his father. Frank's face was tanned except for a line across his forehead where he wore his hat. Creases branched from his eyes. Branhan's father was the strongest man he'd ever known. What must it be like, Branhan wondered, to walk with confidence in the world?

Or what would it be like if he got cut off from him, and had to face the world alone?

Frank looked back at him. He said, “The past comes after the animals are taken care of.”

“Yes, sir,” Branhan said, and they talked about the chores he'd pick up if there was to be a hospital stay.

*

One night, but it could have been any night, Branhan looked over Demme's clothes. “You ain't been having to hoof it, have you?”

“No, no, I'm under a roof.”

“You would tell me.”

Demme smiled to himself.

They danced close, in the press of close dancers. Branhan feeling Demme's neck against his cheek, breathing into the warmth there, the reality of him who so often seemed like a dream. He dreamed of what it'd be like to wake up next to Demme at five when he usually went to feed the horses. Of knowing he'd be there night after night. They hadn't talked about family.

*

“They should have called it off.”

“You're right.”

“Then why'd we stay?”

Branhan and his father tromped through the barn putting horses safely in their stalls. In the house, his father poured himself a glass of whiskey distilled in nearby Americus and poured Branhan one too.

“I told you,” Frank said. Wind tussled the azalea bushes. “We gave our word. Because tonight was a special test, above and beyond the show.”

“What about the horses? Keeping them safe?”

His father hummed a noise. “I know.” He continued, “It was a test for them too, and they were brave. There are things that come along that aren't safe, and some of them are worth doing. Some are about the only things worth doing.” The old man took a sip. “Imagine the old war horses. Would a Kiowa war horse or his rider worry about riding in that tonight?”

“There haven't been war horses for eighty years, Dad. Not since machine guns.”

“There must be some. Maybe in the older places of the world.”

*

Branhan said, “I remember Bush's Defense of Marriage Act and I remember folks boycotting movies because they had gay people in them. I remember seeing those damn 'God Hates Fags' people everywhere on the news. I remember the line out the door of Chik-fil-a stretched a block. But it seems like things are changing. Maybe not here, but some places.” Now Branhan leaned in, not by much, but straight-backed as his father had drilled him to be. He said, “You lived through the harder times. I want to know.”

Arnie took a wet gulp of his beer. “You want to know about that, you need to buy me a real

damn drink.”

*

When he drove to Charlie's the first time, Branhan parked across the street and half a block away. He sat in his car, watching the neon sign like from an old honky-tonk, the way people crossed the parking lot like they couldn't be in the outside air long. Or like they couldn't breathe until they got inside. After a long time, Branhan rubbed a scuff out of his boot-toe on his jeans, put on his hat, and crossed the street.

Up front there was a coat-check and the man attending it looked Branhan up and down. Branhan nodded to him and entered the rest of the bar, half of it dance floor packed with line-dancers, the other half pool tables and booths, ringed by a bar of shellacked pine boards, all of it under Alan Jackson and slide guitar and neon beer signs. The people dancing wore clothes like the cowboy stuff Branhan wore but nicer and newer and better-fitting. When he went to the bar for a beer, the bartender walked away from flirting with, or being flirted with by, someone in a dress and boa and a close-trimmed beard and earrings.

Branhan didn't mind working a room, but he didn't know what to call some of these people, what pronouns to use. It wasn't just etiquette—he genuinely didn't know what gender some of them were. If any. So he leaned back by the pool tables observing and sipping beer, until a person—AJ—who seemed female-bodied except for a full beard, asked for a game of pool. Branhan played, talking with AJ about where they were each from, about his horses. AJ sunk the 8-ball, they clinked glasses, and AJ went away to a different group. Branhan never heard AJ use a pronoun to clarify themselves so he didn't either.

Later, after more beer, Branhan danced. He went back the next week, and the next, and the next, until he learned the names of the bartenders, until the coat-check guy finally nodded to see him. Branhan danced with a man there for the first time. There were many firsts.

*

Town faded and Branhan came to the black and poor part of town, past houses with dirt yards and projects. Brightly painted storefronts advertised pool halls and dance clubs, tire places. Branhan wondered if Demme had been to those kinds of clubs, or what it was like for him if he did. Demme was more out than Branhan, more obvious. He had a hard time picturing his lover in some of these places where the world got strict about what men were supposed to do and be.

*

Blackie was a mustang and she was being that and a half in the round pen. She huffed, she charged, and didn't seem to care when Branhan threw his lariat at her chest to stop her. He went and got a longe whip. That only pissed her off more. Finally Branhan cooled her with a walk and led her back to her stall. It took five whole minutes to get her to go through the gate without crowding him. Branhan's knuckles were white on the lead rope and he cussed her in a gentle, reassuring voice that, he felt sure, meant nothing to her.

He didn't have any lessons that day and had plans to work the string of horses he and his father owned but after the hornets and Blackie and that damned horse show the night before and the cold rain that came out of nowhere halfway through feeding, Branhan climbed into his truck. He beat his bootheels against the steel runner to knock the mud off and pulled out of the drive.

*

He could do it. He could leave anytime.

*

Would they be able to walk down the street together in Atlanta? Savannah? Somewhere like Wyoming or Texas, would Branhan need to carry and keep a shotgun by the door?

*

Blackie was a mustang, hardly domesticated, but mostly tamed.

*

Branhan had felt it, even if he didn't know what it was: the way some of the men at horse shows looked at him, the way he'd wanted to spend every free moment of fourth grade with Will Carson. Maybe the way he had begun to feel the horses more deeply than the other trainers—but then, his father had that too.

Finally—it felt like finally—he told his Aunt Rose some of this while they drank cheap pinot noir on her porch. She listened. Branhan spoke like he was trying to put two north ends of a magnet together, avoiding by habit and felt necessity the utterance that would change him, and his life, and his family. He breathed to calm his shaking hands. If Aunt Rose had looked at him too knowingly, too accommodatingly, Branhan felt he might have shattered. Instead Aunt Rose's look was easy, it was kind. Like a friend's over wine, which they were. They sat while a train rattled along the tracks across the street. Aunt Rose began telling Branhan about Charlie's, as easily as a friend would recommend a well-loved novel.

*

One of the bars looked open. It was 11:00 am. Branhan pulled into the lot. He left his hat in the car and ran his fingers through his hair.

There were four people in the bar, five counting the bartender. An old man in a driving cap and sunglasses sat by a jukebox. Two younger guys in baggy jeans sprawled in a booth. They wore flat-bill caps at angles and sat before open tallboys. The first looked up at him in utter confusion and his friend turned around with the same reaction. A guy in a cream-colored blazer at the bar didn't seem to care one way or the other. The bartender looked up once and went back to wiping down the counter. He said, “What you want, Garth Brooks?”

The young guys snickered. The old men kept smoking.

Branhan walked to the bar. His boots sounded like horses walking. “High Life tallboy, like

them.”

The bartender bent and dug into a cooler for the beer can. He opened it and placed it before Branhan. He took and drank a solid guzzle. One of the young guys said in a kind of stage whisper, “Damn, Garth Brooks wanting to get drunk.”

The other, in country twang singsong: “It's five o'clock some-where.” They snickered more. The well-dressed man cracked a smile.

The bartender peered at Branhan. He wore a thin mustache that fit his narrow face. “Go easy, Texas Ranger. I got a policy about getting drunk here.”

The jokers: “Texas Ranger. Bruce Lee go'n come in here and kick his ass.”

“Anybody want to buy a bowflex?”

Branhan said, “I ain't getting drunk.” He studied the worn hardwood bar.

“Um, sir, I believe you have tracked cattle manure into this establishment.”

“Dude been walking on cow pies.”

The bartender hung by Branhan, perhaps thinking he'd leave quickly. Branhan, not disagreeing, took large gulps of his beer. “How long you been here?”

“You mean me, or this bar?” The bartender spoke softly, just between the two of them.

“Either.”

“I was born in Valdosta, lived here thirty years. Bar's been here since 1947.”

“That long?”

“That long.”

“You don't get many white folks here, I suppose.”

“Nope. Every now and then. Funny how it don't look too different from the days of Jim Crow when it started.”

Branhan peered at the bartender and gave a solemn nod. He took a last guzzle of his beer and

left a five on the bar to cover drink and tip. As he passed the jokers, he said “It'd be horse shit, more likely.” They had nearly forgotten about him, turned instead to their cell phones. On his way out Branhan heard one sing, “Like a horse-shit cowboy. . .” and the other break into a fresh laugh.

*

“Let me drive,” Demme said.

“You ain't been out there.”

“You can tell me the way, can't you?”

“I don't know what Dad would do if somebody like you—”

“I'm the same as you. Or did you forget?”

Branhan paused. Thinking hurt. He said, “I mean, he ain't never said nothing but, you know, he grew up here.”

Demme gave Branhan that look that went through him. “I'll take my chances.”

Branhan slumped into the passenger seat of his truck while Demme pulled onto the highway.

Branhan said, “It's that you're black as much as it is gay.”

“Oh it is? Is your daddy racist?”

*

He took the highway, spinning the dial through country and Christian stations which were hard to tell apart. Willie Nelson sang and Branhan remembered another lyric: *the dream of every man is to know how freedom feels*. Maybe the old man could bless him to leave, but how would Branhan ask? His family tree contained little now but the one stout branch of his father. Without him, Branhan would be rootless, drifting as a wanderer. Maybe being that kind of person, a man with no name, would be better.

*

At first Charlie's was exhilarating. But Branhan, from time to time, felt a gut-twisting shame.

He couldn't abide shame. Did that shame come from his own heart or from the world? His father had told him, two things you don't take from anybody you don't trust: shame and praise.

Branhan only wanted to be there with these who were, he supposed, his people.

*

The bar was open but dreary. Natural light didn't suit the place. Only a handful of older folks hung out there, not unlike the old men at the Black folks' bar. Branhan recognized Arnie, a spindly man who tended to be drunk by the time everyone else got to the bar and too drunk once the dancing started. Branhan and Demme and their friends had laughed at him. Now he looked like a familiar face. Branhan got two beers and sat at the booth with Arnie, passing one over.

Arnie was thin, his long limbs dark from working outside. The darkness of his face highlighted his gray-green eyes. When he looked into those eyes now, Branhan feared he had made a serious mistake. There was something he had never noticed, something dangerous about Arnie. The man said with coldness, "To what do I owe this courtesy?" Branhan broke his gaze. He couldn't have held it. "Well, young man?" asked Arnie, leaning and drinking without taking his eyes off Branhan.

*

"What do you want?"

"Dry Beefeater up with a twist. You tell him all that." Then, "Fuck it, get two of them."

Branhan went to the bartender, a sleepy bearish guy, and told him. The man cut his eyes to Arnie but made the drink and poured it in a plastic cup. While he did, Branhan bought a pack of yellow Spirits from the machine and lit one the moment he got the pack open.

Arnie had finished his beer and he took a deep sip from the martini. He didn't look at Branhan but out the textured-glass window.

"You know about Stonewall?" Arnie asked.

"I do."

Sun from the window lit Arnie's face, casting shadows off his sharp features. He said, "Queens in drag made a kick line against New York cops in riot helmets. Like some queer-ass Pickett's charge."

Branhan listened. Arnie continued, "You couldn't be out back then, that's for sure. Not around here. Nobody called themselves queer. It was something you got called. Before they beat you, sometimes. The *hoi polloi* and the sheriff both.

"The churches didn't talk about it until the sixties and they didn't get really ugly about it until the eighties with all that Reagan and Graham bullshit. The problem was, they all thought us gay folks were coming from San Fran or New York to corrupt the young people. They thought we all showed up during Civil Rights, and that made 'queer' just another word for 'n-----lover.'" Arnie turned to him with that look that had been, Branhan realized, intentionally filed and sharpened. "I mean 'n-word lover,' excuse me." Arnie paused, measuring Branhan's response. He'd seen Branhan and Demme together, Branhan realized. Of course he had.

"The people didn't realize, or they couldn't believe, that we'd been there all along. Hell, my first time was in a movie theater in Tifton." Arnie chuckled, then laughed as though something had caught him. It went on for a minute, dry laughter like branches cracking, and a tear rolled from Arnie's eye. He collected himself, as much as it seemed like he ever did, and drank down the rest of the first martini and a sip of the second. "That was a long time back. But people knew. It's taking them a while to get used to us being out in the open about it. But they've known for a long time."

Branhan's mouth was dry. He asked, "How'd your folks take it?"

"Oh Lord."

"If you don't want to—"

"No. Hell, I'm spilling my damn guts anyway." Arnie lit a new cigarette and took a solid gulp of his drink. He said, "I told my momma first. She about had an aneurysm and the next time I talked to her she asked me if I had the AIDS. That's what she called it, '*The AIDS*.' I don't think she believed me

when I told her I didn't even though I checked it eight times that year. She started telling me all the terrible mess the radio told her, how it meant I was an atheist and wanted to have sex with kids and all that—I think those damn radio preachers are the fucked-up ones. All I do is like men instead of women and they're the ones coming up with this shit that'll make your skin crawl. You know some of those crazy-asses in Uganda or wherever, those places they'll fucking put a gay man in front of a firing squad, it's because the preachers there tell everybody that gay people eat shit and fuck infants. And American missionaries go over there and tell them, great job, great job! I hope *they* goddamn eat shit. I don't believe in hell or none of that but when I think of those people I hope there's a damn hell, fire and brimstone and all.”

Arnie took a long draw. He finished his martini. “Get me another beer, young man.”

Branhan did so.

“I had to have this conversation with my momma that no, I didn't want to have sex with children, and me and the Lord were fine, and I even went to that MCC church in Augusta when I was up that way. After probably a month of proving I hadn't turned into some kind of ass-chasing Frankenstein, I got to tell her my side of the story. I sent her some of my books. Next thing I knew, momma wanted to come with me to Pride in Atlanta. She was converted.”

“What about your dad?”

“He passed away.”

“I'm sorry.”

“It's all right.” He sat for a while, quiet. “We never patched up. If that's even what you'd call it.”

Arnie said that easily enough. His shoulders rose with a deep breath, one Branhan recognized as the type you can never breath out all the way.

*

Branhan came through the dark lot into the glowing heart of Charlie's and drank four shots in

his first ten minutes. A young guy in a new straw hat laughed at the first two and quit laughing at the third. Branhan joined a line dance. He played pool and missed half his licks on the cue ball. At some point he switched to beer and lost track of how many he drank. It wasn't more than five. It wasn't much less.

Demme rushed and found him in a booth toward the back.

“Branhan—”

“I texted you.” The words rolled out of Branhan's mouth.

“I know, you've been texting like hell. How many have you had?”

“I had shots of whiskey.” The room became a wash of woodgrain, blue neon, and people moving in blurry shapes past them.

“How you feel?”

“I got the spins.”

Demme held him. Branhan's head lolled onto his shoulder. Demme said, “What the hell made you do this?”

Branhan said, “Bees,” and then lost all memory.

*

There was the time a few years before his mother passed when they built a fire in a low place of the pasture and sat out on aged quilts and wool blankets, one of them his grandfather's from the war, Branhan and his father and his mother, to watch a meteor shower. Lizzie set potatoes and onions in tin foil to bake in the coals while his father set a steel grate over the coals to grill shish-kabobs. They wrapped themselves in one blanket then, late into the night and cold, but the fire warmed them. Even the cold at Branhan's back seemed of a piece with it. They ate with their hands in the dark, breaking off portions of baked and salted potato or, once it cooled, eating from the spud. Carefully they slid steak and peppers and Vidalia onions off hot skewers. After they finished, Frank grinned and snuck a steel

flask out of his pocket to glint in the firelight. “Frank,” Branhan's mother said. “It's the Lagavulin, Lizzie. Boy's old enough to know what good whisky's like.” She looked at Branhan. “You can if you want. You don't have to.” “I'll try it.” Frank produced two enamel mugs concealed for the purpose and poured with great care. Branhan's mother said, “Hell, pour me one too.” Father and son looked at her. Lizzie looked back. “Yes, I mean it.” The stars fell overhead, to the silence and the crickets and the horses clipping grass and blowing. The three of them around their fire together, their own small star.

*

Branhan woke with his whole body reeling. When he finally made sense of the motel room around him, he sat up to an instant, jarring headache.

“What time is it?” Branhan asked.

“About seven forty-five,” Demme said. “And good morning to you too.”

“Aw hell.” Branhan made to get out of bed and didn't make it. His second attempt succeeded but not without a fresh wave of nausea and pain.

Demme said. “You sure you're ready to go?”

Branhan went to the bathroom. He was there a long while. Demme sat drinking his fancy coffee drink. He'd bought Branhan a black coffee but now it seemed like a foregone conclusion. Coming back out, Branhan said, “I got to go home and feed the horses.”

“Can't your old man take care of that?”

“The animals come first,” Branhan said, looking for his boots. “Anyway he's laid up and he can't.”

Demme watched him. After a while he nudged Branhan's other boot toward him with his foot. “You go'n drive all the way back like this?”

“Got to.”

Branhan saw where Demme had set his hat on the door handle.

*

Then Arnie's look again, although Branhan felt it differently, as though it was the hilt of the dagger held toward him now and not the deadly point. "They still hate us. They'll kill us if they can, make no mistake. The South has the heart of a snake. You might can back it into the rocks, but that fucker'll bite yet."

*

There was the day, and there were many days, when among the horses' snuffling and gentle champing and the darting swallows and the golden sun just pushing through the sky's blue-gray bedclothes and no earthly sound but them that Branhan felt something, felt it bodily and in that inner quiet roominess, that could rightly be called holy.

*

As soon as Branhan and Demme got to the farm, Branhan went inside. His father was in bed and looked happy from the medication. "You look awful," he told Branhan, who indeed felt awful.

"I didn't sleep real good."

"I'd say not."

"How do you feel?"

"Doped up. Better though. You go'n ride the mustang?"

"Yeah, here in a minute."

Branhan asked him if he wanted anything but since they'd told him he couldn't drink coffee the answer was no. Frank didn't seem to notice Branhan was three hours late.

Branhan's stomach and body and head felt like hell but the work came to him as some sort of healing. The sounds of grain pouring into steel, of hooves on the hollow-sounding earth, the weight of buckets in his arms—they settled into a rhythm, a familiarity. He felt better.

Demme helped feed and petted the horses on their foreheads, which only the Appaloosa liked.

The horses put their heads over the fence to look at him. They liked him. Demme sang, making fun of the country station on the barn radio. He seemed to have forgiven Branhan for what he'd said and maybe for drinking like an idiot.

*

Branhan knew Demme had arrived before he saw him. Looking up, he saw Demme for a moment as a new man, forgetting for a blink that they were together. As Demme came into focus in his mind, that burst of attraction bloomed into the realization that Demme was his, and he was Demme's, so that the two feelings, first of desire running ahead even of sight, then of knowing and grateful belonging, settled in his mind. His neck muscles eased. Perhaps it was because of the transgressions that Branhan knew it was love he felt.

*

Demme asked, "Is your daddy all right?"

"Yeah. Still groggy on the meds but he's good."

"I'd like to see the house."

"You see it, don't you?"

"I'd like to go in and see it. I'll fix lunch."

"We ain't got much in the fridge."

After some arguing they drove out to the gas station to buy enough food for lunch. Branhan wanted Demme and his father to meet, even though the thought wrapped his guts like a colic. Even though he wanted Demme to see his own room and his grandmother's quilt he used as a bedspread.

*

They were pouring feed along the fence under a blade of orange cloud that crossed the sunset like it was bigger than the world. Branhan and Frank hadn't said much about Demme's visit, only talked chores, Frank's meds and getting around their effects. Frank had flushed the last half of the painkillers.

Steam blew from the horses' nostrils. Frank gently scolded the ones who pawed. Without looking up at Branhan, he said, "I feel like I've known for a long time. Since you were young."

Branhan froze. "What did I do? Was I—"

"It wasn't anything you did, son. It's who you are. It's your heart." Frank stood and leaned against the wood-rail fence. "And you've got a good heart, son."

Branhan stood near his father, neither of them looking at one another. His legs didn't tremble but felt airy, like he could, and might, sprint away and keep sprinting.

That night Branhan and Frank drank the Lagavulin and Frank disappeared into the attic for a moment, no idea why, until he returned with a wood tennis racket. "Hornets my ass, that's what this means," he said, and Branhan broke into a laugh like he hadn't in years. It tickled Frank too. They laughed and toasted destruction to hornets and Branhan thought to himself, this is it, if only for this moment. This is how freedom feels.

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Around Blackie, Demme became quiet. She didn't have all the mustang out of her yet, which made Branhan wary of her around new people. Demme rubbed caked mud from her cheek and she let him. There is a connection sometimes between a person and a horse, a kind of love at first sight. Branhan watched them. Demme and Blackie, they had it.

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Would he ever understand the whole of Demme? Branhan knew the knowing of him. The curve of his hip, how he refused to sip coffee through a plastic lid. What his real laugh sounded like. Them wrapped together in hotel sheets on a night that felt stolen. Them walking together through a swamp forest of ancient cypress and oak; them in the silence and awe of a world where they seemed scarcely to matter. But he felt he barely knew Demme's blackness. By way of family, Branhan had only met one cousin Demme brought to Charlie's whose cousinage was dubious anyway.

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The screen door clattered behind them. Demme took in the cherry paneling, the framed horse show pictures, Frank's old '70's recliner.

His father was awake and in decent shape. "Morning. I'm Frank," he said, and stuck his hand out to Demme.

"Demetrius," Demme said, and they shook. Branhan worried about what Dad might say, but the gentleman in him didn't fail. While Branhan spread chicken salad on toasted bread, Demme only got the barest details of his life in before the old man started in on his rodeo days and the crazy-sounding reining circuit. Frank talked more to Demme than he had to Branhan in a month. Branhan had seen this before, back when they still went to church, when he was a boy and his mother was with them. Once, then, his father had driven out well before dawn to barbeque chicken for a fundraiser. He and a few men grilled hundreds of halved roasters on massive cookers. Around noon when folks came to pick them up, Frank did all the selling. The man didn't talk much in his daily life but when it came to something important, he knew how to make people feel welcome.

The three ate together at the kitchen table, passing plates to one another. Sweet tea, chips from the gas station, and chicken salad with pickles. Once, while Demme rinsed the dishes at the sink, Frank turned to him with a look of some kind of understanding. Whatever it was, there was a blessing to it. And Branhan knew, in that deep part of him, that there was so very much blessedness to it, to all of it.