from The Blind Coral

Ralph Beer

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"Fancy this," Harley said. He took hold of the cheekstrap on the bridle and the roan quivered between my legs. A war I'd never made had kept me away seven years. Some missing teeth and the splotch of scar tissue on my jaw, a streak of white hair over my right ear, and a shrapnel riddled memory were about all I had to show. I handed my grandfather the reins, and as I swung down, I saw that he was pleased.

The roan's chest was lathered around the edges of the martingale; he held still for a change as I loosened the cinch and rolled off the saddle, then spread his legs and shook himself to raise his hair, very casual, as if he understood that he was the center of something.

"How are you, Harley?" I asked.

"I'm still here," he answered, and jutting his whiskered jaw, boney now and square as the blunt end of an anvil, at the scar on my cheek, he asked, "How about yourself?"

I dug a ragged piece of metal from my watch pocket. "Here you go. A keepsake for you."

He inspected the fragment a moment, turned his grey eyes back to mine, and we shook hands under the horse's nodding nose. In the Great War he had been a breaker of horses. Like me, he'd never gone overseas, but he'd sure seen some things. He looked brittle now, but his hand was hard, his watery eyes sharp and steady. When he moved he moved with a deft quickness rare in large men. What betrayed him was the dewlap of skin above his buttoned collar, and the way his shirt bagged about his shoulders. Although the meat of him was gone, he seemed as strong and sure and careless as ever when he touched the horse. His eyes lingered on the roan's front shoulders, where the hard muscle rounded toward the chest. He ran his hand over these muscles, wiped away the froth, and rubbed the lather between his fingers. I'd seen Harley's calming influence on horses before; he claimed it was his smell. Whatever it was, the roan stood easy, like he'd been on the place all his life.

"Let's get out of this wind. Take him down to the calf pen. Put him in where he can shelter up. I'll start some coffee." He slid his hand down the horse's throat, letting it linger again on the muscled chest, feeling, I supposed, the great beating heart.

"Watch yourself he don't step on you," I said, taking the reins.

"He won't step on me," Harley answered. But as we passed, he smiled before turning toward the house.

I hung my halter and bridle on a stanchion header in the log barn. When I opened the east door for light I saw that the hay barn outside had fallen
sideways into a heap of broken beams and twisted iron that looked like the nest of some terrible meat-eating bird. Sheepsorrel, rye, timothy, barley, and nettles grew wild and too green around the grey wreckage. The hay barn had stood thirty-five feet high, big enough to hold one hundred tons of loose hay. I didn't see how I could not have missed it when I rode in.

What I had seen was that not much else had moved since I'd lived here last. The piles of warped lumber, mounds of scrap iron, scattered lengths of corrugated red tin, and hulks of rusty machinery lay in the same places, rotting and rusting in the same slow patterns of neglect. The partly-fallen chicken house, that seemed would never come completely down, and the antler-littered portable homestead cabin both leaned toward an unseen magnetism off south. The milkhouse, the newest building on the place, erected during the brief prosperity of Prohibition, had lost most of its shingles. And resting in a rock pile, like a long abandoned ark, was the paintless, forty foot houseboat where my brother and I had played pirate when we were children.

Through a dusty, web-hung window I watched the roan roll in the flakey soil outside, all four legs pawing air as he turned over on his back. The squall came in harder, the snow melting as fast as it hit the dry ground. On the bow of the old wreck I could just make out the name MABEL. The boat had some significance for Harley, but what it was I couldn't remember.

In the oat barrel, half a dozen leathery mice lay tits-up on the iron bottom. I latched the lid anyway. Above me, driven into the log purlins, I noticed the steel hooks, from which with chains and wide leather belly bands Harley had supported his starving work horses the year he'd come home from the army. That year was remembered for one season; it was still called the Winter of 1919.

*Once they got down on you* . . . He'd been all alone, snowed in with starving stock and dying horses and the hard-frozen graves of his parents. . . . *they stayed down.*

The roan stood and shook himself and looked about with interest at his new home. I decided to let him pick around in the weeds by the creek and fend for himself. There was no sense spoiling him with grain.

The year the United States put the Columbia Space Shuttle in orbit for the first time, the Montana Power Company ran the first electric line down the creek. The first thing I saw inside the house was the new Romex run-
ning up the log walls and along the broad-axed ceiling beams to naked 200 watt bulbs. Harley jerked a pull-string on, off, on. "Now I can see what I'm doing," he explained.

I smiled to see him proud of electric lights, but he'd lived alone a long time, and a life alone in the hills makes odd things special.

"Got running water too," he announced. He turned a tap above an ancient porcelain sink and stepped back. The faucet released a blast of air followed by spastic jets of water that splashed from the shallow sink and sprayed onto the floor.

"That's swell, Harley," I said and had to turn away to hide my grin.

Harley twisted the tap closed and winked. "No more packing water or frozen pump handles. Should of had this years ago. Now take a look at my system."

He kicked back a throw rug, exposing the trap door. I took hold of the iron ring and lifted the door open. Cobwebs stretched and broke as the underside of the door turned upward. A barn spider the size of a shrew waddled off onto the kitchen floor, and the flat odors of damp stone, mold, and dead air rose around us.

Harley went down three steps, pulled a string, and the cellar lit up. I followed, ducking to stay clear of webs and the flies and millers they'd caught. Against one stone wall a small pressure tank rested on half a fifty-five gallon barrel. Black plastic pipe ran from a break in the wall to the tank. Harley pointed at this pipe. I could see he was going to explain how it worked, and he did.

Carefully, with his fingers, he traced the route the water took.

I looked around as he talked. The wooden bins of sand for storing potatoes and carrots had fallen apart, spilling the sand onto the uneven stone floor. Crocks that had once held waterglass for keeping eggs stood upside down on mildewed boards. A set of four, new-looking antique car tires lay piled in one corner; cases of canned goods lined shelves along the wall beside the stairs. Off to one side, some dust-covered canning jars held blue and purple fruit. The fruit had been there as long as I could remember.

I looked back when Harley said the old well had gone sour. "Pump stem fell down the hole, and I said fine. Got on my new telephone and called Lindsey. Had him drill me one. Hundred feet deep, too." Beyond the crocks and car tires, the back wall had sloughed in, covering the floor with a couple feet of rotten rock. Harley had dug the original well by hand. And like the cellar, he'd dug it through solid hardrock with a single-jack, iron drills, and powder.

"What's this in these bottles?" I asked and picked up one of the canning jars. I shook the stuff inside; it looked like laboratory specimens of large, malignant growths.
“Plums,” Harley answered. “Nasty looking, ain’t it?”
He took the jar from my hand and placed it back on the shelf where it had been. “How long you going to be around?” he asked.
“Couple weeks, maybe, at the outside. I have an immigration hearing at the border soon, should be up there now, I guess.”
“Well, Pilgrim, I’m going to need a hand the next ten days or so. Got to fix up those corrals and bring in my cows.” He put his big hands in his overall pockets as if embarrassed. “We’ll work on it together. I just need some help is all.”
I took a cigarette from my shirt pocket and looked at my hospital soft hands. Harley looked at the Camel then at me. “You knew we put Summerfield down beside your grandma?”
“Yes. It wasn’t fair.”
“Not fair?” Harley leaned toward me as if he hadn’t heard me right, until his finely shaped aquiline nose was six inches from my eye. “You mean the way you took off when your brother was coming home in a box? Or the way you joined up before we could get him under ground?”
“He was my brother, Harley. Not yours.”
Harley’s face turned the deep red of cheap wine. He opened his snaggy old mouth but only air came out. I saw that the anger stinging my eyes had hurt him too. “I’m sorry,” I said. “Forget it.”
“I won’t forget that,” Harley answered, and although he was in his eighties, I saw he still had me on height. It seemed right; I hadn’t been back an hour and we’d had a scrap. Smoke said the way Harley and I got along was because we were too much alike, but I’d never been able to see it.
“Am I working for you or not?”
“Yes, you are working for me,” my grandfather said, yet his face did not relax. My brother Summerfield had been four years older, and Harley had taken pride in him. Summer had an undershot jaw like a bull trout and the round-shouldered strength of a bull rider. We’d done a lot together, and he’d shown me many things, including the boreholes cut by Harley’s twist-drills, which still showed in the cellar’s granite walls.

Mr. Spock calms an overwrought Captain Kirk

Upstairs, I opened the door to the room Summer and I had shared and dropped my saddle on the floor beside the east window. Harley claimed
he put us on that side of the house so the sun would wake us first. And usually it did; we’d be up and out most mornings before Harley stirred. But then a lot of nights my brother and I fell asleep listening to the sounds of Harley working in the big shop.

The room appeared to have been shut a long time. A heavy layer of dust blanketed the bunks and chairs, the table where homework most often waisted untouched, and the uneven shiplap floor. To one side of the room, Summer’s weights and press bench stood as he must have left them the spring he enlisted, still organized for the workouts he’d left behind.

I stripped the lower bunk, swept a shopping bag of dust and dust balls from the walls and floor, and with one of the rotten sheets, dusted down the furniture. On Summer’s half of the table, a framed, color photograph of a slender, red-haired girl rested beside a new telephone. The girl, sitting on top a haystack, looked familiar, but the picture wasn’t very clear. I took a folded paper from my wallet, spread it on the table, and dialed the long number. Outside, I could see the roan walking from the creek toward the barn, swishing his tail lazily in the late sun which had followed the little storm. A familiar, muted voice said hello in my ear.

“How’s the gimp there girl?”

“Braindamage? Where are you?”

The roan stopped and I saw a black cat walking toward him from the tin-sided shelter shed. The roan pointed his ears at the cat, cocked his head, and backed a step. “I’m at my grandad’s place in the hills. I’m going to have to stick around here for a while. Just a little while.”

“You sound great!” she said. “How are you doing?”

“I’ve been working on a colt — well, not exactly a colt. But see, the old man isn’t well, and I promised to stay and help him out for a couple of weeks. I’m sorry.” The leggy cat advanced across the barnyard until the roan shied out of his way. The cat looked straight ahead as he passed.

After a pause, she said, “I’ll call Mr. Kittredge and let him know you won’t start work right away.” Then, almost in the same breath, “Jack! The bonegraft is working. I can walk!”

“And I can talk,” I laughed.

“We’ll be walking-talking fools,” she answered, laughing too. The roan, slinking forward, one slow step at a time, was following the cat into some weeds.

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I hung the dish pans on the wall behind the Monarch range, switched
off the overhead light, and lit the Aladdin lamp on the table. Several days worth of month-old papers lay piled in the kindling box. I pulled one out and scanned the headlines. The PLO had killed some children; the IRA had killed some bystanders; university students from Missoula had been arrested for protesting a Minuteman missile installation. One article caught my attention, a front page story titled: "Big Sky Endures, Despite Dark Clouds," which told how removing sagebrush for an Arnold Palmer Associates golf course in the Gallatin Canyon had proven much tougher than planners first expected.

I glanced in at Harley, bent forward in his Lazy Boy, absorbed in a Star Trek rerun. The last of the Charlie Russell cowboys, he'd lived into an era of satellite TV, Big Macs, and ICBMs. He had become a relic of his time, when dry grass had been good as gold, when men were ranked by the way they handled animals. I walked into the parlor and sat down beside him.

"What are you going to do for hay this winter, Harley?" I asked. "I see the barn is down."

"Barn's been down two years. This year I won't have to feed. We're going to ship the whole mess to Butte." He turned the sound down, so we could talk, but he kept his eyes on the spaceship, intent on Mr. Spock, who calmed an overwrought Captain Kirk. The Enterprise warped sixed into lines of light and disappeared. Harley slapped his leg.

I remembered noticing that none of the hay meadows had been cut; the timothy, browned and headed-out, stood bowed under its own slender weight. I'd seen that too, when I rode in, and it just hadn't clicked.

"Lost fifty percent of my calves last winter, and it was an open year." Harley leaned back in the recliner. "I've run cattle fifty years, but I ain't going to keep on if I can't do it right." He looked over at me. "I'll settle on a time with Laramie and Ted and Amy. You brace up those corrals. I got to line up trucks and inspectors too, and you need to learn that horse of yours to turn around inside of twenty acres."

I hadn't expected black whirlies, just sitting there chewing the dog. But when they came I hung to my chair and pretended I understood what Harley was saying. As if explaining to a little boy what he maybe couldn't quite explain to himself, Harley said, "There are other things too. Lots of changes around here. Dahls, I guess you know, sold out while you were gone. Sold to a big outfit from out of state, land and cattle company called Tanner. They put some cows on the range for a couple seasons — way more than the grass could stand."

Harley rubbed his whiskered jaw. "When their cows got shelly by fall they decided the range wasn't any good unless they had it all." Harley laughed, but his voice was mean. "So they started in hassling us who own land this side of Casey Creek."
Harley drew a line across his palm with his index finger. "That splits the summer range in half — besides ruining the country — and just generally puts the screws to the rest of us."

"But now that I'm back . . ." I said, feeling the dizziness easing off. Harley snorted through his nose. "We expected you back four or five years ago." He tapped his fingers on the recliner and watched Lt. O'Hura mince around the control room in her miniskirt.

"What about Ted and the Fords? And Amy?"

Shadows from the Aladdin's fluted chimney fluttered on the hewn ceiling beams. The Enterprise fired balls of energy into deep space. "Last July, Tanners parked a half-dozen horse trailers at Rocker Gulch and twenty of those jailbirds they call cowboys took off in every direction, counting brands and taking pictures." The enemy craft burst into particles of phosphorescent light. "And since they claim to own over thirty sections out there now, and I only have two, they said — their lawyers said — I've got to get my cows off their grass.

"Don't their cattle graze your grass too? If this outfit wants them off, let 'em fence them off."

"That is just exactly what I told them." Harley turned in his chair and the thin leather squeaked under him. "But come to find out, they don't give a damn about grass. They're after land. Any land they can lay hands on, any by Christ way they can."

"So let them shit in one hand and wish in the other."

Harley grinned. "Sure. Like you say, they got to fence my cattle out, if push comes to shove."

I sensed a punch line that I couldn't quite see. I fumbled with my makings, spilling the fine cut tobacco on my knees.

"Then I hear at Duncan's how some of their jailbirds had been in spouting off about how the range was going to get cleared one way or the other. Don't take much imagination to see how a few drunks with .22s could put you out of the beef business in one moonlit night."

I pulled a fresh paper and started to roll another smoke.

"I'm not getting a range war started at my age. Seventy-five is too old for that nonsense."

Harley'd turned seventy-five when I started college. Somewhere back then he'd just drawn the line.

"Why don't you all get together? You and Schillings and Fords and fence your sections into one big unit?"

"You think about that a minute," Harley said, "and don't light that weed in here. I've got enough trouble with my wind without breathing your smoke."

"If you would all fence your ground," and as I said it, I saw it. Harley's punchline. "There isn't any water out there."
"You’re pretty sharp," Harley said. "For a pilgrim."

I took the cigarette apart, folded a new paper, and began again, willing my hands steady. Each morning, I remembered, for a week in October, Harley and Summerfield and I would leave before dawn and lead our horses home in the dark. All day we rode the brushy bottoms and browngrass hills, bringing in one small bunch of grass-heavy cattle at a time. Harley hadn’t turned seventy-five then, and he rode all day too, making sure we didn’t run his cows, keeping an eye on saddle sores and hooves. What an outfit we were: Summer, usually riding a green-broke colt for somebody, Harley on the buckskin he called Chesterfield, and me, with one horse or another nobody else wanted, riding a saddle no one else would use. And Harley, in charge, telling us how, when the country was young, he’d caught the bands of unbranded colts in the bald hills, and sold them branded within a week, broke to ride.

The Horses Running

The corrals consisted of one large circular arena with pole gates opening east and west into runways, holding pens, and chutes. The big central corral had first been built by spiking rails to convenient trees in a rough circle. The rest had been added piecemeal over the years.

From the pole gate on the north side of the arena, two barbed wire fences fanned out through the trees for a quarter of a mile, making a hidden, funnel-shaped lane. Animals pressed down this narrowing trap entered the corral before they even saw it.

Most of the original trees had died and been cut down. Great fire-blackened pitch posts had been set in the ground between the stumps, but by now, most of them had rotted off too and were held up only by the sagging rails.

I spent a couple days sawing up rails and cutting the rotten ends off the posts when they fell over. I dug new holes, planted the posts again, and tamped them tight. The soil was decomposed granite, good digging except for pine roots. My hands blistered on the iron fence bar, and my shoulders ached from its weight. They’d leave in the moonlight. I was always up to watch them go. They would move out quiet, like shadows leading horses.

The loading chute’s main upright posts, which had been actual trees, sawed off high, had rotted away too. The old chute swayed as I walked
up the plank floor, but the sides, made of twelve-inch, rough-cut fir lumber, were still sound. Harley’s idea had been to shore up the weakest panels, set a few posts where needed, and get the gates to open enough to slick us by. But everytime I pulled one thing loose, something somewhere else fell down. Harley finally couldn’t stand watching from the house any longer. He backed a brand new Chevy pickup from the shop, drove down, and looked around. “Won’t have anything left pretty soon,” he told me.

I shrugged, wiped the dryrot dust from my sweating face, and sawed on. The fastest way was the right way, and the work kept me from thinking about where I ought to be. I’d help my mother milk, separate the cream, and clean the separator; I’d split enough kindling and stove wood for a week and pack a couple buckets of water up from the spring pipe. When I couldn’t find anything else to do except get in the way, I’d climb a rock behind the barn and I’d listen and I’d wait.

Smoke shut his logging operation down for a few days and showed up with his hay truck. He had the semi loaded with sixty green lodgepole rails, some fourteen-foot oak switch ties for gate and chute posts, and my Ford truck, chained down over the back wheels. He got out, looked around, shook his head and said “I thought you were in a hurry to get out of here.”

I helped him shake the chain binders loose along the side of the semi trailer. “What’s with my pickup?” I asked.

“Friday night,” Smoke answered, the famous grin flashing on his handsome face. “’So come on wheels, take this boy to town.’”

“Another hot date?”

“You got that right, Jackson.”

“Well, Emmylou Harris she’s not.”

We began carrying rails to where we’d need them. Smoke packed two at a time, the muscles beneath his T-shirt swelling, the sinews in his heavy arms corded and hard. I carried one at a time, in another direction.

When we’d unloaded the truck, Smoke brought a canvas waterbag to where I sat on the railroad ties. He took a long drink, poured some water on the bandana, and wiped his face.

“What I wouldn’t give for a frosted mug of beer.”

“Drink water,” Smoke said, handing me the Desert Bag, “you’ll piss just as far.”

“Two more weeks and I’ll be home, drinking beer and pissing foam.”

Smoke cocked his head. I heard it too, the rolling, thudding impact of distant incoming, muted by the timber around us. I stood, felt myself tighten.

Smoke glanced at me. “They’re working this way,” he said. “Sounded like war up Crystal Creek yesterday.”
I wet my face, neck, and arms with the dripping bandana. "What's this land and cattle company deal?"

"Tanners? Oh, they're movers and shakers. Lots of money. They've been buying up land here and west of the Divide, which is funny, really, the way the cattle market has been."

The spaced detonations came again, and I could imagine the rounds landing in the woods, the yellow-white flashes tearing earth from under trees, the singing-hot slivers of iron meeting wood.

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Smoke worked that day and the next, as steady and strong and enduring as a mountain mule. With drawknives we peeled two sides of each pole and took turns nailing them in place. The seven-inch, ringshank spikes drove hard in the fire-tempered posts; Smoke's late night in town didn't show in the way he swung a hammer.

The roan, loose in an acre of enclosed grass and weeds below the corral, stood at ease under a barn eave and watched our progress. I'd been riding him a couple hours each evening. He was coming along. I'd even tried him once bareback, going up the meadows along the creek and past the old teepee rings, where the graves of my family lay in a sheltered park among some bull pine. Summer's grave had grassed over too, and except for the government stone, it looked like native prairie.

When Harley saw the new panels of fresh-peeled poles and the newly braced chute and the solid posts anchoring the gates, he acted like the whole design had been his idea.

"See?" he said to me. And nodding to Smoke he added, "Right, June?" His nickname for my father had to do with late spring calves, but I never really understood the whole significance.

Harley puffed up the slight incline inside the main arena, until he had to stop his inspection to catch his wind. He stood with his back to us, looking toward the fallen hay barn, as if planning something in that direction.

"Jesus, he looks rough," Smoke said under his breath. I held up a rail so he could spike it home. The shock of his hammer blows traveled up my arms and seemed to dead end in my teeth. "We've got to be real careful he doesn't get hurt while we're working those cattle," he whispered. "Harley will want to get right in there with us, and he'll get mad if we try to keep him out of the way. Keep your eyes open. Watch out for him, so he don't get run over."

Harley turned and started toward us, pulling on a pair of yellow rag
gloves as he walked. "So how's this girlfriend, Smoke?" I asked.

"She's a lot more fun than logging, kid. You can't believe . . . ."

Harley picked up the light end of a rail without waiting on us. Smoke took the other end and together they lifted it for me to nail.

"This is lodgepole," Harley said.

"Yeah, lodgepole," Smoke answered.

"Well, why didn't you cut fir? This crap won't last fifteen years!" With a sudden flash of anger, as if it had been working in him a while, Harley faced my father and said: "And why, for sweet Jesus sake, don't you cut your damn hair?"

★

Sunday afternoon, as I was putting the finishing touches on a squeeze chute gate, I heard a truck pull in at the house. Amy and Annie Stevens climbed out and took some boxes inside. The plank gate had swollen, and I planed wood from the outer edge until it closed snug. We would clip every brand when we brought in the cattle. We'd need good luck and gates that worked to get it done. You would hear the men first, yelling and swearing. I'd double-check the gates, run, and squeeze down a crack in the rocks out of sight. They'd hit the flat this side of the Veracruz and you could recognize each man's voice: Lester Cotkey, Uriel Reed, the Skows and Flavvens, and Harley. It would get quiet again when they entered the trees behind the bluff. Then all at once, you heard them. The horses running.

I put my tools away, brushed off my jeans, and emptied my cuffs. It looked like a different place now, and I guessed it was. No unbranded colts ran the Bald Hills, and the horsemen who had taken them were gone.

When they came, they came fast, down through the rocks and trees as hard as they could run — and they could run — raising dust that hid the riders behind. By then they knew they were between fences, and when they saw that open gate, they'd grunt and buck on through like they were home free. They were horses like you don't see any more, every color and cross, but almost all part workhorse. They were range horses, and among them some dandies. My job was to close the gate behind the last one without getting run down by the riders. I was seven, eight, nine years old.