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The day's haul had been a good one. Dad muscled his way into some of Rebik's best offerings, out-thinking and out-bidding the wizened pig farmers and unemployed farm hands who usually played the game a lot tougher. The Mexicans that had driven over from San Luis went home empty-handed, their Impalas with the pink fur in the back window riding a lot higher than they had in a long time.

His performance had been elegant. Perched on one of the dusty wooden bleachers that lined the auction ring, Dad worked the crowd and the auctioneer like a veteran conductor directing an orchestra. I sat beside him, a pink lemonade and a fist full of lot numbers keeping me company. I tried to think of what we would do with a half dozen used tractor tires or a safe with no door on it. My thoughts didn't really matter though. We were getting the stuff cheap and Dad was having a fine time.

You could say that junk was our business. That and the fifty -odd head of cattle we kept on a produce dump a couple miles outside of town. But junk was most important. We bought it, sold it, and traded it. We searched for it wherever we went, mostly in places that other people had forgotten, or knew about and just didn't care to go. We were hungry for junk. It fed us, clothed us, and pro-

vided our chief source of entertainment. Without it we were lost, with nowhere to go and nothing to do.

The rest of the family was pretty normal as far as that goes. Mom worked in town as a school teacher and did really well at it from what I understood. Levi and Vera were still in school. Levi played baseball and, when I got the chance, I used to go to his games. I liked to watch my little brother play ball and I liked to remember the time, long ago, when I used to play. Every once in a while he'd smack one out of the park. I'd see myself holding onto the bat as I watched the ball travel over the fence. Then he'd start trotting around the bases and I'd be there, kicking up the dirt behind me and smiling arrogantly at the pitcher as I rounded first.

Old man Rebik, the proprietor of Rebik's Auction, was getting a little frustrated that his sale was becoming a one man show. "You fixin' to buy us out, Carl?" He glared down from his throne, a dilapidated barber's chair set up on a wood platform, with a stripped oak table and an outdated P.A. system that served as his auctioneer's booth.

"Hell no, Clint. I'm just tryin' to keep you in business. Somebody's got to pay your rent." Dad turned to me and winked. He grinned this big, satisfied grin and sat back on the bench.

The last item of the day was an electrician's tool box. It looked like it contained all of the stuff necessary to fix a light socket or work on a generator. The guy who owned it was there and he didn't look at all good. He was sitting way in back of the crowd, staring off into space, not at anything in particular. His chin rested in the cup of one hand. A cigarette, forgotten, hung from his fingers. His other hand rested limply on the bench beside him and appeared as if it could use another finger or two. His shaggy hair framed a face that seemed to have endured a lot of pain for a long time. He looked beaten. His tool box was for sale and everyone around him wanted it pretty badly. But the

way he looked, the way he stared off into the nothingness of the hot afternoon, made it pretty clear that he needed the box a lot more than anyone else in the sale barn.

The bidding on the box began and went back and forth for a while. Rebik looked to really be enjoying himself, caught up in the furor of the last sale of the day. Eventually everyone but Dad and an old guy from Winterhaven got knocked out of the bidding. Rebik looked at one and then the other of them, accepting their bids and jacking up the price of the forlorn box with every nodded head or raised hand. All the defeated bidders studied the two combatants with the same concentration as a crowd at a tennis match, back and forth and back again.

"Gimme fifteen and a quarter," Rebik said.

"I'll take it." Dad nodded his head.

"Raise a half." The old man tipped his grimy tractor cap.

"That's sixteen to you, Carl. What do you say?"

Dad stopped for an instant, a very brief one, then raised his fist and pulled it down like a trucker honking his diesel's horn. "Seventeen and a half and that's as far as I go."

The old man threw up his hands in a half mocking, half irritated "what can I do" gesture of surrender.

"Sold, at seventeen and a half, to Carl Parker." Rebik congratulated Dad on his new tool box.

"This could lead to all kinds of possibilities. Maybe I'll open my own shop—"Parker's Electrics."2 I can almost see it now." Dad smiled, holding aloft his new find and wallowing in the glory of the moment.

Everyone else smiled too, playing along with the joke and knowing they'd probably have a chance at that same tool box at next week's auction. A lot of Rebik's business was based on repeat customers and repeat merchandise.

The box's former owner hadn't changed position or expression since the bidding first started. The cigarette dangling from his fingers had burned almost to the end.

The smoke from it wafted like a lazy spirit around his head and on up into the shaky rafters of Rebik's ancient barn. Even if he did lose his box, he was seventeen-fifty richer—minus Rebik's ten percent cut—and there's no telling what he would be able to do with that money.

Dad and I cut through the crowd and headed toward the slat-board office to settle the reckoning and collect our spoils. He handed me his keys and said, "Go get the truck."

I branched off and walked in the direction of the cow pens in back. The truck wasn't hard to spot—big, blue, at least twenty years old, with rusted bullet holes in the cab and oak sidings surrounding the flat bed. We used the truck for everything, hauling cattle and junk, pulling trailers, even sleeping in the back sometimes.

I drove the truck around front to where all the junk was. Rebik owned two big Dobermans that roamed around his property at night, protecting all the worthless things that comprised his, and a lot of other people's, livelihood. They stared at me from behind the chain link of the shabby front yard as I got out of the truck. I don't like Dobermans at all, then or now, and these two especially scared me. I wasn't exactly sure why it was they frightened me so. But they gave me an awful feeling.

It took us quite a while to get the truck loaded and everything tied down. I didn't realize how much Dad had bought until we got all of it on the truck. It had been a huge day. We would have our work cut out for us to get all this stuff sorted and arranged before the afternoon ran out.

Rebik came out of his house before we had a chance to leave. "See you next week?" he said from behind his fence. The Dobermans surrounded him, snarling fiercely and baring their teeth at Dad and me.

"What do you think, Clint?" Dad kicked the truck's running board, scraping mud off his boot. I could see he was tired. Drained from a day spent haggling over stuff

that really wasn't worth anything to anyone but him and Rebik and those other lost souls who showed up here each week. "You take her easy. Call me if you get wind of anything big."

"Will do." Rebik might call him, but it wouldn't be about anything big. It might be about a half burned hay stack that we could have for nothing if we'd just go out and haul it away. It might be about an epileptic steer that was dying and that Dad could buy real cheap, then turn around and sell to a restaurant down in Mexicali. It might be about a lot of things, but it wouldn't be anything big.

One time a farmer called Dad about a load of packaged carrots that he couldn't sell and needed to get rid of. They brought the carrots out to the pens where we kept the cattle and the junk, and dumped them there in a big plastic, orange heap. Vera and Levi and I spent three days sitting on top of that pile, tearing open bags, pulling the carrots out, and tossing them in another heap. Dad called it the carrot festival and told us it was necessary because the cattle would want the carrots. If they ate the bags the plastic would line their stomachs and kill them. We believed what he said because of course it was true. So we kept tearing open the bags and dumping out the carrots until there were two piles—one of plastic bags and one of rotting carrots that were turning brown and white from the water and muck that seeped up from the bottom of the pile.

We got into the truck and headed up the packed dirt road that led away from Rebik and his dogs. There was a ditch that lined one side of the road. The water in it was feeding a hay field that looked close to cutting. Up ahead I saw a man standing by the ditch. He was leaning on a shovel and wearing the long rubber boots that men wear when they are irrigating a field. As we got closer I saw that he had half a melon in his hand, the fleshy juice making his fingers shine and glimmer when he gestured to us.

He waved and then pointed at the back of the truck where all of the junk was. He started to laugh. It wasn't a mean laugh or even a laugh that seemed to care very much. It didn't really make much sense.

We passed him and I looked back. He was still there, clutching the shovel and pointing and laughing. Juice ran down his arm and dripped onto his boots and the ditch bank. I looked at Dad. He was fiddling with the radio and hadn't seen the laughing man. I was glad that he hadn't seen him but sorry that I had. I was even sorrier that he had had a look at us, driving along in our blue truck with a pile of junk in the back.

We made it to the highway and hooked a right, the truck bouncing off the graded dirt road and onto the black top. The engine rattled as Dad kicked it into high gear and we picked up speed.

"It looks like we did all right today." Dad had lit up a cigarette and was smoking it reflectively.

"Yeah, you really showed them who runs that place," I said. "We going up to San Jacinto tomorrow?"

"I don't know. We've got a lot of work to do around the ranch."

"Oh," I said. I had a tough time understanding how he could call the place where we kept our junk and our cattle a ranch. To me, a ranch was a big, sprawling tract of land with a lot of good looking cattle and horses, a red barn, and maybe even a bunk house for the help. Our place had none of those things. It was nothing more than a set of ragged cow pens, a rusting water tower, and a fenced field where the cattle ate melons and cabbage and whatever else the packing sheds sent out to us. Junk was everywhere. There wasn't any junk on a real ranch.

The window was open and my hand dangled out, playing in the wind. All around us there were fields, colored in green and gold, the hues of prosperity and promise. These fields passed by us, row after row, like a great train. I won-

dered what it would be like to walk through one of them, picking up a handful of dirt and inhaling its pungent flavor, knowing it was yours and knowing that what it produced meant something, really mattered, to you and to a lot of other people. It was a strange thought for me to have. For just a wonderful second the thought actually came to life. I could feel myself standing there, looking out over my hay or corn or beets. My field. But just as suddenly, the idea was gone. The possibility of such a thing happening lingered for a while after, but eventually it was gone too. I was left with that empty feeling you have when you wake up in the morning from a good dream. That was the exact feeling I had, sitting on the truck bench next to my dad, the fields flying by and the purple and brown mountains surrounding us in the distance, locking us in like a big prison.

The cattle weren't excited to see us. They were standing under the shades we had built out of baling wire and palm leaves, trying to stay cool in the choking afternoon heat. A few of them wandered back and forth to the water trough. Every now and then one would rub up against the fly bag we had rigged up for them. They all seemed pretty content, which is the best thing you can hope from a steer until you send him to the packing house.

Rifle was standing off by himself. He was the best steer we had. Most of the cattle we owned had something chronically wrong with them—ringworm or severe warts or a bad eye. Something that made them undesirable to other people. Rifle's affliction was a little more unique. He had five feet. We called him the five-footed steer. He was a good looking animal—big, filled out, with a thick set of horns, and a shiny hide. But he had five feet. Four normal feet and then an extra one stuck on one of his back legs just above the real hoof. It looked like God found a spare foot that he didn't know what to do with, so he gave it to Rifle. Dad was always calling circuses and carnival side shows,

saying he had an oddity that would make them a mint. None of them ever took him seriously so Rifle stayed with us.

I used to like to get drunk with my friends after school and sit on the hay bales, watching the cattle. They were entertaining, better than a football game. I had this one friend, Timmy Honda, and we went out there one day with some beer and a bottle of saki to celebrate the Emperor's birthday. We sat in the car listening to the Japanese national anthem over and over again, getting good and drunk on the beer and the saki. After a while we got out and wandered into the field where the cattle were. I started picking up melons and throwing them at the cattle, just for fun, to see what they would do. Well, they panicked, scattering around me in wide, broken circles. I kept throwing the melons, trying to hit one of them. They all got away from me except a little runt of a calf with a swollen jaw and a gimpy leg. I took careful aim and fired away. The melon hit him square in the head and he stumbled and fell. I was satisfied and so was Tim who was watching from the fence. "Good shot," he said. The calf couldn't get up. He was dazed and his leg hurt him so he just lay there on the ground, panting and slobbering all down his deformed jaw. His eyes were wild, rolling back and forth in his head. They looked like they weren't sure what to do.

At that moment, standing over the calf, I felt a terrible evil within me, like I had done something wrong that I had no control over. It scared me. I wondered what it was that had taken me over, snatched my senses away from me, and caused me to do something that was so low and so mean. The calf was looking at me, his hide shivering. I tried to help him up but he wouldn't move. I left him there and we got in the car and drove away, back to town.

I was afraid to go back the next day. Afraid that the calf would die. Or worse, would still be there, alive, in a puddle of his saliva. Neither of those things happened

though. He was up, shuffling around the pens and doing his best to stay away from me. I had spooked him, but I was spooked in a different way than he could ever be.

Dad backed the truck up to our immense junk pile and we started unloading the day's take. We did our best to sort things out into reasonable categories. We had a pile for car parts and one for household goods. There was a big area for farming type equipment and several groupings with various other themes. The biggest pile by far was the one we called "Miscellaneous." This pile was for all the stuff that didn't quite fit into any other category.

As we worked on the junk the sun began to work on us. "I'm going to be ready for a cold drink when we're done with this," Dad said.

"That sounds good."

He stopped, wiped the sweat and dirt off his face with his arm and then wiped his arm on his pants. "I appreciate your help," he said.

"I know. That's why I'm out here helping you, because you appreciate it." I wished he hadn't told me that. The junk surrounded me and suddenly I felt confined and helpless. "I just wish it wasn't this, Dad." I looked at the junk and then out at the field, where the cattle were. "I wish we didn't have any of this stuff. People are laughing at us, Dad."

"This is the best we can do. We can't do any better than this," he said.

"Remember when we used to go to real auctions and trade real cattle? A lot of people respected you."

"That was a long time ago," he said. "This is what we have now."

I sat down for a long time and looked at the heat shimmer off the dirt pasture. I felt drained and beaten by a bad force. No matter how hard I pushed against it, it would hold firm. Dad had started unloading the junk again and

a hot shame welled up in my throat. It hurt. This whole mess hurt.

I got up and we finished our work. The sun was going out of focus in some low clouds that clung to the western mountains. A breeze started up and felt good after the stillness of the day. The cattle looked content, out in the pasture, welcoming the cooling relief of early evening.

We walked into the field, Dad and I, and stood there, watching the pink sky and the headlights up on the interstate. "Let's get on, son," he said. "We've got a lot of work to do tomorrow."

"O.K." I said.

We left the field, got into the truck, and headed for our home, mine and his.