

SONNY CRISS

Sonny Criss was named after his father, William Henry Criss, called Sonny for the obvious reasons, and lived with his mother, Delpha Mae Criss, and his father on a fifty-thousand-acre spread halfway between Chugwater and Wheatland, Wyoming. His best friends were his horse, Spider, a 15.3-hand chestnut quarter horse, and his blue heeler dog, Red. Sonny was lean-legged and slim from the waist down, but his top half was thick and broad like someone had sewn the bottom half of one guy onto the torso of another. Sonny was in his forties, had never dated girls, though he himself could not say why, and had developed diabetes two years back: fell into a coma one afternoon baling hay in the shimmering heat—turned pale, crumpled, and met the ground hard. He recovered, got his blood sugar under control, and was, more or less, healthy again. But some residue, or premonition, he couldn't tell which, lingered in his mind, and Sonny couldn't shake the feeling that everything he was accustomed to and took for granted was now tentative and flimsy. Though he had always been a good son, he was kinder to his mother and more patient with his father. He patted his horse and dog more.

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Spider was copper-penny colored, had a sloppy wide blaze that veered over one nostril, and was narrow shouldered with a big rump—best cutting horse Sonny ever owned, but spooked at water. Even a rainbow trout could set him off, and when it did, Spider twirled so fast Sonny flew over his shoulder into the rocky churn of the Laramie River.

“God dammit,” Sonny said. He grabbed his soaking cowboy hat and slammed it against the thigh of his wet jeans. Red waded into the river and barked his head off, adding to the commotion. Sonny looked over to a copse of cottonwoods where Spider ran to get himself out of that water, and Spider gave him a white-rimmed fearful eye, a look horses have when they're both scared and disdainful, and when Sonny slooped through the water and grabbed the reins, Spider widened his eye more and sidestepped. Sonny had to stroke his neck, right up under his mane, to assure him he wasn't that mad, so they could carry on. He led him back through the river, talking the entire time, saying how there was just some nice tasty fish in there and a few rocks underneath—nothing big or scary—to the far side where the other

cowboys, Colin and Moe, sat on their ponies, forearms resting on the saddle horns, laughing.

“Just shut it.”

“Didn’t say a thing.”

“Heard you thinking,” Sonny said and swung a soggy leg across the worn saddle.

They rode on, over the hills to where the cattle grazed in the scrub brush. Red went first, nose in the dirt zinging this way and that, looking to scare off rattlers; but they all looked down and ahead, careful to rein their horses through the perils and potholes, and avoid the cactus spines and sun-bleached bones of animals killed by wolves, coyotes, diamondbacks, forked lightning, and plain old hard luck.

48 The Criss Ranch was impossible to find if you didn’t know where you were headed. There was a black mailbox with their Circle CR brand paintbrushed in red and a barbed wire gate—that was the first obstacle—then a long meandering rutted road, cattle grates, more barbed wire fences to yank open and get around, more cattle grates, sharp rocks, and deep potholes. The road was impassable part of each winter, and in the spring spear grass grew so high a regular car was a liability. City folks had a hell of a time.

The house was covered in tarpaper and chiseled into a fold of hills. Its roofline was so low Sonny stooped when he went through the door. The entire front was kitchen, and from the window, before dawn and again at dusk, herds of white-tailed deer loped across the far hills, to and from the river, springing, delicate, in single file—like reindeer pulling a sleigh. The backside of the house was built into the hill, and the bedroom and parlor had no windows. There was a wood stove for cooking and another for heating, and the tiny house was airless and hot all winter. The only plumbing was cold water piped in for washing up. They pumped drinking water from an outside well, kept it in a wooden bucket in the kitchen, and drank it from a ladle—the water was cool, tasted of granite, best water in the world.

The bedroom had a twin and a double bed, a dresser, a treadle sewing machine, and a closet with a curtain for a door. The space between the beds was so narrow a person had to step sideways to get through. When Sonny turned ten, he moved out onto the sofa bed in the parlor to get away from his mother’s snoring. In the summer months, to get out of the heat, he slept on a quilt on the patch of lawn. Under the moon-and-star speckled sky, Sonny’s

sleeping form looked like a giant cocoon, shed on the grass by an alien creature. Red slept curled at his feet, gave the creature a seahorse tail.

The Criss Ranch ran Herefords, more than a thousand head, had six dairy cows, three horses, including Spider, and the two ranch hands, Colin and Moe. Sonny did all the cowboying. He looked after the beef cattle and let his dad milk the cows. Fifty acres was irrigated, and they grew sugar beets, field corn, alfalfa, and wheat each summer.

Delpha Mae Criss was in her mid-seventies, a few years younger than her husband, Will. She wore size twenty-two dresses and underneath, flesh-colored laced corsets ordered through the Sears catalogue. She was impervious to the cold, had a stern expression but a generous heart. Delpha had a manly face, little squeezed eyes, and wore wire-rimmed bifocals bought off a rack in the Coast-to-Coast hardware store. Her big rough hands could break a chicken's neck, harness a horse to plow, pump water, milk cows, dig graves. If they were short-handed, she could still saddle and ride a horse, wore a funny kind of apron over her dress when she rode.

Will Criss was a head shorter than his wife. He had small hands and feet, and his hair was white like a toddler's. His people came from Missouri, and he retained the speech patterns and charm of a Southern gentleman. Twenty years earlier, he'd been trampled by a bull in a stockyard. His hip ached when the barometer fell, predicting rain and weather changes with remarkable accuracy. Will had no teeth, poured his coffee into his saucer, blew on it until it was cool and then sipped it in. Six days a week Will wore bib overalls and a flannel shirt buttoned up tight. Sundays, he wore his dress pants, white shirt, suspenders, and a grey sweater with patch pockets to read his Bible. His health was frail, and he'd fallen ill many times to pneumonia and infections of one sort or another. Delpha got him through it all. When he was down, she did his work and her own like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Sonny Criss took after his mother. He had her fleshy face and bulbous nose. His hair was tight-curly and peppered with grey. His ears stuck out like a bat's. He was not a good-looking man, but like his mother, kind and formidable.

That last winter Will's hip got worse. It hurt something fierce in the cold, and the ice and snow were a treachery for an old man with a cane. Navigating was just too hard for Will now. He could barely get out at all, had to pee into a Mason jar he kept under the bed. He worried about Sonny and Delpha

working too hard—milking cows twice a day on top of all their other chores. It didn't make sense. He made a deal to sell four of the cows to a farmer, Pruitt, who lived down the road.

"Pruitt wants the cows but he won't take them 'til spring. He's got a nice barn and all those kids, could use the milk," Will said.

"You sure about this, Dad?" Sonny knew how much his father loved those cows. "Which ones?"

"Just the babies." Will meant Queenie's offspring, though not Bosie.

"Don't seem right selling Queenie's girls."

"Like to give your mom a rest, let her watch her program in the afternoon."

Delpha had a little black-and-white TV, a Christmas present from Sonny, and watched a soap opera in the afternoon, when she could. She sat in the parlor on the sofa, attentive and still for thirty minutes, before resuming her chores.

"Can't use all that milk," Delpha told Sonny. "Half of it goes bad now, and in the summer, with the heat, just goes to waste." She'd had more than one dizzy spell in the past year. She nearly fainted lugging a milk can into the creamery.

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"You could go out on a Saturday night if it weren't for the cows, stay out even."

Delpha wanted Sonny to meet a nice girl and stop being such a good son. She'd mentioned it many a time, but got no response then either. She poured Sonny coffee and set the mug down a little noisier than she needed to.

"Never spent a lonely day in my life," she said.

Sonny and Delpha did all the milking that winter. It was dark in the morning and in the evening when the cows started to moan. They milked by kerosene lamp, steam rising from the pails and the cows' moist nostrils. They wore fingerless gloves and warmed their hands with the lamp so not to startle the cows when they commenced.

Sonny trudged stiff-legged to the barn, shivered in a flannel jacket buttoned over his buckskin coat and two layers of long johns. He carried the lamp and steadied his mother's arm, while she looked into the sky and pointed out constellations and other planetary activity: comets, Orion's Belt, the North Star. Delpha wore Sonny's oilskin greatcoat, slung it over her shoulders like a cape or an afterthought—only because he insisted—and underneath, a short-sleeved dress. She never bothered to button the coat

or stick on a hat. She was the most rugged person Sonny ever met; he felt effeminate by comparison. He'd talked to his dad about it.

"Ever seen Mom cold?"

"Nope."

"Seen her sick?"

"Nope."

"Heard her complain?"

"Nope."

"How'd you get so lucky?"

"Praise the Lord." Will Criss believed his wife was a gift from God, though wasn't sure what he'd done to deserve her.

Delpha lived in a state of perpetual amazement. Standing in the snow, she looked like photographs Sonny had seen of opera singers, regal and grand, a Valkyrie with a long coat draped over her broad shoulders and her face turned to the night sky.

In the inky-black milk stall, the lamp cast a feeble halo, and the thick cold sucked it in. Sonny did the milking by feel, closed his eyes, rocked the wobbly milk stool side to side, rested his forehead on the cow's warm cinnamon flank, and more than once dozed off from the sweet creamy scent and rhythm. When Sonny was a boy, Delpha told him ghost stories while they milked. On the coldest, worst mornings, he still asked for one. Delpha told it in a singsong voice, loud, like there was an entire audience to hear it, not just Sonny, Red, the cows, the barn cat, Mopey, and her kittens.

The Crisses were accustomed to the isolation of winter. They hunched around the kitchen table by the wood stove, played cards, crazy eights mostly, penny-ante poker if they had company. Sonny read Zane Grey and old *Western Horseman* and *National Geographics* his mother collected from the church donation bin. They listened to the radio, got one scratchy station out of Guernsey. Sonny wasn't particular to country music, he didn't like the lyrics, but Delpha sang along in her gospel voice. Will was partially deaf, he couldn't hear the radio at all, but he heard his wife's sweet voice and closed his eyes and nodded when she sang. If it was an upbeat number, he tapped along with his cane. Delpha made quilts, sewed baby clothes with tatted lace collars, and produced paint-by-number pictures she was proud of: three landscapes lined the parlor wall, and her masterpiece, *The Last Supper*, hung in the kitchen.

Winter months on the ranch were like one long tunnel you couldn't get out of. Sonny worked and slept hard, dreamt wild dreams. He was asleep by seven, up at five—took his insulin each morning while he sat on the edge of the sofa bed in his boxer shorts, jabbed the needle into his thigh with a quick motion like he was throwing a dart. He ate slabs of fried mush and bacon drenched in sorghum, milked, shoveled paths to the chicken coop, then to the creamery, and down to the barn. He hauled round bales out to the horses and beef cattle—if the snow was too deep for the truck, he had to roll the hay onto an old barn door and drag it out to the field with the tractor. The cattle grew thick winter coats like woolly mammoths, and Hondo, the bay thoroughbred, got so skinny Sonny had to double-blanket him. He used two heavy New Zealands and ran a roll of duct tape around Hondo's belly to keep them on. Spider and Pal, Moe's pinto, grew so much coat they looked prehistoric.

52 At the end of the day, Sonny milked the cows once more, separated the cream and the milk, and lugged it into the house in big silver cans. When he stumbled inside, feet and hands numb, for his supper, Will Criss would be sitting at the head of the table reading old newspapers with his magnifying glass. Delpha'd be standing at the stove, eyeglasses steamed up. Will and Sonny'd go over things, and Sonny kept his father apprised of any heifers or steers lost to predators or the deadly chill of winter.

If it weren't for his mom and dad, Sonny feared he'd go crazy. When he stamped his boots on the mat and ducked through the front door, Delpha had supper ready, and they sat down to a roast or fried chicken, mashed potatoes boiled with onions and bacon, biscuits, and pie. Like God's heavenly bounty, Delpha cooked each day like she was preparing a feast. She slaved all summer to keep the root cellar full: slaughtered chickens and made soup with broad egg noodles, put up every kind of pickle—dill, bread and butter, watermelon, and sweet (she added a dot of food coloring, liked to make them bright green)—and whipped up batches of pickled beets and chow chow and picadilly relishes.

The garden she planted each spring burst with beefsteak tomatoes, sweet peas, cucumbers, strawberries, radishes, Grand Rapids lettuce, beets, dill weed, and the biggest, sweetest watermelons in the world. Rhubarb grew wild under the cottonwoods by the irrigation ditch, and Delpha turned it into compote, cobblers, and pies. Sonny bought a one-hundred-pound bag

of sugar each year, and Delpha made candy: divinity, fondant, pralines, sea foam, fudge, and nut brittle. Sonny couldn't eat any of it now.

In August, Delpha hiked along the Laramie River bank to collect chokecherries for jam and jelly and big ripe Bings she canned in syrup—in the days before Sonny's diabetes he ate the purple cherries for breakfast, poured a mountain of them into a bowl and drowned it with cream so thick it lay on the syrup like a snowcap.

The Crisses had a freezer locker in town full of beef but when they couldn't make it in and ran low, Sonny rode out on Spider, picked off a white-tailed deer, brought it home slung over the saddle. Hated to do it. Delpha skinned and butchered it in back of the chicken coop, tossing the entrails to the hens.

And then finally, come spring, Colin and Moe arrived, and they moved the cattle from one section of grazing land to another, spent the slow months of summer riding the range, camping out.

"Winter's the price we pay for spring," Will Criss liked to say.

Delpha took the call—party line, two longs and a short was them. Mrs. Pruitt said her husband would be over directly, and Will Criss started to cry before the farmer pulled up with his flatbed truck.

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Sonny suspected his mom knew this was going to be a hard day for her husband. She had made milk gravy, baking soda biscuits, and chicken-fried steaks. They finished their dinner, the midday meal, with a big piece of sugarless rhubarb pie and coffee. Delpha had to help Will from the table and walk him out the front door. Sonny sat a bit longer. He went out when he heard the tires crunch and watched the wobbly wooden sides of the truck shudder as Pruitt's rig came to a stop by the loading chute. It was like watching a hearse pull up. Sonny felt the meal he'd eaten fall in his stomach and drop somewhere into his bowels.

Will stood outside the corral, waving his handkerchief goodbye to Whitey, Roberta, Roberta Junior, and Daisy, while Pruitt tried to move them toward the rickety chute. Bosie and Queenie, the cows that weren't leaving, wouldn't get out of the way, wouldn't let Pruitt separate them. Bosie was Queenie's daughter, her firstborn, and the two ran the herd. They made the cow decisions: where to graze, when to lie down, when to get up.

Sonny stood by Will and watched. Pruitt held his arms out like a stick man and came at the cows. Roberta Junior sniffed the air in his direction. Bosie lifted a back leg, like she was going to move, then brought it to her ear

and scratched. Pruitt found a lead rope and slapped it lightly across Bosie's hind end. When Bosie turned to face Pruitt, she stretched her neck out and made herself bigger.

"Pruitt doesn't know a thing about dairy cows, didn't even ask their names." Will had both hands on his cane, feet wide apart for balance, and stood in the dry clay of a tractor tire rut.

"They'll never come when he calls them. He'll have to go out and lead each one in with a halter." Sonny made his father laugh.

The cows came when Will called them. No matter what time of day or where they were, when they heard his thin girlie voice stretching over the pasture, "Come on, come on now," they raised their heads and shuffled single file, resolute, near-to-bursting udders swinging, along the path they'd worn coming and going twice a day for years, into the corral. They stood chewing hay and looking at nothing, the way cows do when they eat, while Will milked Queenie and Bosie first—there was an order to it—and then the rest, in twos.

Sonny had tried it, tried to imitate his father's call.

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"Come on, come on now," he crooned like a lovesick castrati.

Nothing. The cows wouldn't even raise their heads. When Sonny did the milking he had to send Red to roust them.

Whitey wouldn't go into the chute, backed away from Pruitt with a haughty look on her curly face. The others followed, moved into a far corner, and fanned out like a squadron.

"Get a bucket of oats. See if that'll do it," Sonny suggested.

It didn't. The cows were in formation, like they'd suddenly acquired the ability to plan, defend, and conquer. Bosie shook her head fast like she had flies in her ears, and the others stood with their eyes fixed on Pruitt.

"Think they'll kill him?" Sonny said, not altogether joking.

Colin and Moe came from somewhere, probably the barn-board shack they lived in when they weren't out with the herd.

"Anything we can do, help out?" Moe asked.

Will took a few wobbly steps closer to the fence, hung his cane, and rested his hands on the top. Pruitt moved to one side and tried to creep up on Whitey. He acted like he'd turned invisible.

Whitey lowered her head and neck—she was half albino, front half—and went for Pruitt so quick that he lost his footing in the deep muck of the corral. He went down hard on his side. The cow stopped just short of gouging

him with one of her blunted horns when Red slid in. She circled on her back legs, threw her big head at the dog and stamped the ground, but Red kept coming at her, yipping, twisting, aiming to get at her hocks and tail. The stub of his tail swished so fast, you could barely tell it was moving.

Colin pulled Pruitt up. "Hurt any?"

Pruitt slapped at the muck on his clothes. "They always like this?"

Sonny called Red off Whitey, and now the dog had Pruitt's baseball cap in his mouth and was loping around the corral like he'd won a prize.

"Pruitt, got an idea," Will said.

Pruitt followed Will over to the lawn by the house. It took a while for Will to get somewhere. Pruitt was clean-shaven, a nice-looking young fellow with short, clipped hair. His dirty jeans looked city-bought, and he wore tennis shoes—new to farming. He had purchased the land, house, and equipment at auction two years ago and was growing field corn and alfalfa. He didn't know what he was doing. Sonny felt sorry for him. Pruitt had a wife and kids to feed and had one problem after the other with his crops—the land hadn't been properly rotated before he got hold of it.

Delpha came out carrying a tray with two slabs of pie and mugs of coffee.

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"Get squared away with them cows?" she asked.

She'd no doubt watched the whole fiasco but knew better than shame Pruitt further by letting him know. She wore the fancy dress with the pineapples on it that Sonny had bought for her birthday—he reckoned it'd go well with her sombrero—and a starched apron tied around her big waist. Will and Pruitt settled into the flimsy aluminum chairs.

After Pruitt drove off in his rattletrap truck, Sonny, Colin, and Moe came over and plunked down. Thunder sounded close by. There were windstorms and forked lightning every afternoon. The wind came across the prairie sudden, fierce—blew the lawn chairs clear across the yard, scattered the chickens, and caused the cows to clump together tail end out.

"Made a deal. Told Pruitt I'd keep the cows if he'd come over to milk. Says he can fix that old separator, get it working right. Glad he knows how to do something." When Will laughed, his shoulders moved up and down inside his bib overalls and his eyes grew shiny and wet.

"Sounds about right. Go on in Dad, we'll do the milking." Sonny helped Will out of his chair, though it tipped over in the process, and handed him his cane.

Sonny waited for the others to go ahead. He felt close to tears, like something monumental had happened that afternoon, but couldn't understand exactly what. Maybe I just need something sweet, he thought, and pulled a butterscotch candy from his jeans pocket and unwrapped the gold foil.

The cows stood behind the granary, out of the storm, blinking their white eyelashes and swishing their broom-like tails at the buffalo gnats.

"Let's go, girls," Sonny said. "Come on Bosie, Queenie, get this over with."

The cows strolled into the milk stall and poked their necks through the slots in the feed trough. Sonny dragged a milking stool over and sat down. Mopey and her kitties appeared like magic, sliding their fur along the wooden sides of the stall. Sonny aimed a pink teat and sent an arced spray of milk into a black and white kitten's mouth, and it rose up on its twiggy hind legs and pawed at the air.

"You're a crack shot. Regular Annie Oakley," Moe said and pulled a stool over toward Bosie.

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The Criss Ranch paid more than most, and the same Mexican family came back each year with more kids and grandkids. They brought Delpha a present one year, a big yellow sombrero. She wore it when she hoed the garden. But the Crisses had to cut back now. They couldn't afford migrant workers. They had to turn the Mexicans away that spring when they showed up in their rusted-out, muffler-less vehicles. Will tried to explain about falling sugar prices, how they weren't going to put in sugar beets and wouldn't be needing help with weeding and picking. He wasn't sure how much of it they got.

"A shame, just a shame." Will's eye sparkled with tears. "Y'all stay for dinner though, least we can do. Stay in the bunkhouse as long as you want."

The bunkhouse was a shack on the far side of the corral. It had glass-less windows, barn-board walls, no electricity or running water, a wood floor and two bed frames with rusty springs. The wind blew through. Delpha saved burlap feed sacks for them to hammer over the windows or line a corner where a baby would sleep.

The men took their hats off before they came in, and they crowded around the kitchen table, passing the babies back and forth while they ate. Will and Sonny took a turn too. No one spoke much. Sonny knew three or four Mexican phrases. The women were shy, their men small and thin. The older kids knew English pretty well but weren't much for conversation.

After dinner Sonny went out and peered at their cars. He helped change a flat and pounded out a dent in a fender—wished he could do more. They spent the night but left early the next morning. Delpha packed them sandwiches and pie for the road. Will shook his head as he watched them leave, felt so bad. Sonny had to remind him they were barely getting by themselves.

Moe was short for Maurice, not a true cowboy name, but Moe wasn't someone you made fun of either. He was wiry—five-feet-five tops—with rock-like biceps that made his shirt sleeves bulge. Moe liked to show off. He mounted his pinto-horse, Pal, Indian style—grabbed the saddle horn and swung up without putting a foot in the stirrup. Sonny had tried it once, when he was alone, but swung short and kicked Spider in the flank. “Sorry, boy,” he said and patted him. He tried to pretending that it was an accident, like he stumbled somehow. On the next try, he got his foot over the saddle but without enough momentum and fell back hard on his butt. It was tougher than it looked.

Colin was lanky, with curly hair. He borrowed Delpha's flatiron once a week to press his shirts, wore scented aftershave, and did the campfire cooking when they were out with the cattle.

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“You'd make someone a good wife,” Moe told him more than once.

“Marry you myself if I was so inclined.”

Moe and Colin worked at a dude ranch near Douglas when Sonny didn't need them. They made good money and met lots of girls. Moe was especially lucky in the romance department but kept quiet about it. Colin bragged for him.

“Do better for a short guy than anyone I ever met.”

“Ain't short 'cept when I'm standing.”

“Moe tells them the jackalope story, works every time.”

Jackalopes were taxidermied, moth-eaten, jackrabbit carcasses with antlers glued onto their little marble-eyed heads. The back legs and hooves of an antelope were attached to the torso, and it was usually propped up in some oddball pose. The worst one Sonny ever saw held a wooden rifle in his paws and wore a camo vest with an NRA button pinned to the pocket flap.

There were signs all over Douglas that said, “Welcome to the Jackalope Capital of the World.” Even the nicest restaurant, The Cattleman's Steakhouse, had jackalope in glass cases with printed placards full of jackalope lore.

Colin rode the liver-colored horse, Hondo, a hot-blooded thoroughbred some guy gave Will and was glad to be rid of. Hondo had raced in his youth and was so eager to go out each morning that he sidestepped and pranced for the first hour. They had to let him go first or he laid his ears back and got so lathered up that he was useless. But if a cow wandered off or something caused the herd to stampede, Hondo could outrun anything, cool off for two minutes, and do it all again. Moe and Sonny wouldn't ride Hondo. Sonny was surprised Colin'd taken to him.

"Colin likes a horse that matches his hair color," was the way Moe explained it.

Colin and Moe helped Sonny move the cattle to graze in higher ground, helped round up calves for doctoring and, in past years, for branding. But Sonny had convinced his dad to stop. He hated the smell, hated the way the cows looked at them as they burned their Circle CR brand into their calves' tender flesh and fur. He hated the way the calves bawled and ran to their mother's side and licked themselves with their meaty little tongues.

58 "When's the last time you heard of anyone rustling cattle?" he said to his dad one spring, and Will nodded, knowing the truth when he heard it.

"Price of beef these days, barely give cattle away."

When Sonny, Moe, and Colin caught up with the herd, they were grazing on the north section where cottonwood and lone pine provided a few dots of shade. They needed to move the cattle back to the ranch for auction. It had been a long, hot ride and the horses and men were tired. They camped out that night and set off early the next morning. In the afternoon, they took a break by the river, letting the horses and cattle drink and rest a bit. Moe had a nap. Colin produced a meal. Sonny stripped off his shirt and washed in the river.

They mounted up again and headed through a gully. The horses had to walk on the slant. Sonny kept his weight uphill for balance. Red, never happier than when he moved the herd with purpose, tore around nipping at the back legs of stragglers. But he went too far, he took a bite out of a young steer, and off it went with Red scooting after it. Sonny let it be a minute, happy to sit. His back was sore from Spider tossing him into the river the day before, and his leg ached from pushing on the downhill stirrup. He wanted to dismount and stretch, but knew he'd be sorer getting back up, so he let the reins

hang on Spider's neck, untied his neckerchief, and slopped water on it from his canteen. He swiped at his face and neck and took a swig.

He heard barking, a short *yip, yip, yip*. Rattler no doubt. Red would keep at it until it struck, jump out of the way, just in time, and grab it by the neck. Then he'd rat-shake the thing until it drooped from his mouth like a thick strand of spaghetti. When Sonny lifted the reins, Spider took off at a gallop. He pulled his .22 from its case.

The snake struck as Spider came to a sliding stop. Red jumped in an arc as Sonny's leg swung over Spider's back. Sonny'd remember this: how his leg felt, sore from riding on the uneven terrain, how bright it was—he lost his hat in the gallop—how Red sprung up to meet the snake and whipped his muzzle back so it would travel past his mouth. But, the snake moved mid-air, changed its course like a heat-seeking missile, and drove its fangs deep into the dog's cheek. Red shook his head, flung it back and forth, desperate to get the thing off, and the snake's body gyrated in a nasty dance with a two-beat rhythm. Sonny was off Spider and on the ground running, grabbed the snake below its head and squeezed. He had both hands on it, one over the other, and through his buckskin gloves felt the scaled body and its fearsome, Biblical strength. It hardened like a piece of rebar, then bucked like a horse, used its entire length to build momentum. The second time it bucked it sent a shudder through Sonny's spine, sudden and hard, and then the white, bloodied fangs slipped out of Red's fur and the snake turned its hideous eye and mouth on Sonny.

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"Throw it," Moe yelled, and Sonny pitched it like a javelin. The snake sailed in the air, snapped its tail around like a bullwhip, and landed with a rubbery thud twenty feet from the dog. Sonny heard Moe crash through the sagebrush and dirt, heard a scuffle as Moe jockeyed around and got ready, then the shot that killed it.

Sonny hauled Red onto his lap. He worked quickly, picking through the fur, looking for puncture marks. The blood formed two small pools but there wasn't much of it. Red licked Sonny's hand like he was sorry, like he'd done something wrong. Sonny squeezed the skin to get the blood to flow but it didn't work.

"Got to get him to the vet's," Sonny said.

Spider hadn't moved through any of it. He stood with his weight on his hind legs, ready to spin and run. Sonny laid Red across the saddle and swung

up. He scooped Red and settled him across his thighs, and moved deeper into the saddle. When he lifted the reins, Spider took off in a flying start.

Sonny heard Hondo whinny as they headed back into the gully. He softened his shoulders and belly to absorb the motion, using his forearm as a cushion so Red wouldn't bump against the saddle horn. He stood up in the stirrups, as best he could, to let Spider's back muscles work and stretch. Spider drew his neck out, kept his topline low, found his own path, and lengthened his stride.

It was a half mile or so to the truck. Colin and Moe had been repairing fence posts, and the bed of the pickup was filled with lumber and tools. Sonny was off Spider before they came to a full stop. He laid Red on the ground, then reached up to unbuckle the noseband and throatlatch of the bridle. Spider's head nearly touched the ground, his sides heaved, he was lathered like soap. Sonny undid the cinch, yanked the saddle and saddle pad off in one motion, and left it tilted on the ground. He pushed Red under the lower strands of the barbed wire fence, then wormed his big body through. Red looked at him but didn't move as Sonny laid him on the cracked leather seat and pulled himself into the cab.

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Sonny drove into town without letting up on the gas, the lumber and tools banging hard. A shovel and two fence posts fell out as he sped through the town's only stop sign and turned onto Pine Road. The folks on the sidewalk that day stopped and swiveled their heads as the truck rumbled by. The sheriff, Wayne King, instinctively put a hand on his holster.

The vet was new to town, had only been there a year, did it all, little critters for the town folks, big critters for the farmers. Sonny had met him when he'd come out to see about some udder infection Roberta Jr. refused to give up. He was usually out on barn calls, but this day he was standing in his exam room with an orange cat on the slick table. Eye infection. Its owner was an elderly lady, Mrs. Smith, a cousin of Sonny's mother. Her husband, in a dark suit and string tie, was there too, sitting in a chair, when Sonny shot through the door with the dog hanging in his arms.

Mr. Smith jerked his head back—he'd been reading a magazine—and Dr. Lockman's hand was poised mid-gesture, about to apply some antibacterial goo to the cat's puffy eyelid. Mrs. Smith tilted her head sideways and then held her hands out, as if to take the dog or ward Sonny off, it was hard to tell. "Why, Sonny?" was all she said.

Lockman handed the cat to Mrs. Smith and made a sweep of the table with his arm. Sonny laid the dog on the cold surface. Red's eyes were open too wide and his breathing was wrong—he made *heh, heh, heh* sounds. His gums had gone from pink to ash.

“Rattler got him.” Sonny's legs didn't feel right. He hung onto the table.

Mrs. Smith took hold of his arm and Sonny felt Mr. Smith on his other side. Sonny had known them all his life, yet suddenly felt he knew nothing about them. They had no children. They always called each other Mr. Smith and Mrs. Smith. Was it a Southern custom? Sonny realized he didn't even know their first names or why they'd remained childless. And he was sorry he'd never asked his mother about them, sorry he'd never taken much interest.

Mr. Smith's three-piece suit gave off a whiff of cherry pipe tobacco as he reached into the pocket of his vest. He pulled out two pink Canada Mints and fed them to Sonny from the flat of his hand. Sonny's shirt was soaked through. Red's blood dotted the front, and the back was shredded from barbed wire—like a cougar swiped him.

“Treat him for shock, start an IV, get that going.” Lockman worked fast. He pulled an electric razor from a drawer, shaved the fur off Red's foreleg in one quick motion, jabbed a needle in and taped it down. He had Mr. Smith hold the IV bag while he filled a syringe with clear liquid from a tiny vial.

“Antivenin's only good if you get it in right away. Be awhile before we know.” He shot the fluid into the IV.

The orange cat was on the floor where Mrs. Smith dropped him and wove between the legs of Sonny and Mr. and Mrs. Smith, eyes closed tight as if in reverence.

Red didn't run cattle much after that, and when he did he looked troubled, like there was somewhere else he needed to be. He liked to stay with Delpha now, and she let him snooze in the kitchen on a bed of empty feed sacks—dropped him bits of this and that while she cooked.

Sonny hurt his back in the commotion, from the fistfight with the snake, getting thrown, bending low to get through the fence. He laid up on the sofa bed with the hot water bottle for two days, had to increase his insulin for the week.

Lockman called, a few weeks after the rattlesnake got hold of Red, about a litter of Border Collie pups that needed homes. Sonny took the runt—had a dark circle over one eye like a circus dog—named him Blackie. Red mothered

him and taught him to herd. He showed off for the pup. It made Red young again, at least for a while.

They had the year-old Blackie with them at the end of that last summer and he was doing a fine job. He came when Sonny called him, responded to whistles and hand signals. They kept an eye on him, didn't let him get out of sight much. Sonny put him up on the saddle part of the day to make sure he didn't get too tuckered out. The cattle didn't respect him yet, but it'd come.

That summer the Criss Ranch let their herd numbers fall to a hundred, and Sonny tried to lay off Colin and Moe.

"No way we're gonna miss your mom's cooking," Moe said. "Besides, Colin's got decorating ideas for the bunkhouse, make curtains or something."

"Get up to no good if we stay in town. It's you doing *us* the favor," Colin told him. Conversation was over.

And life as they knew it went on. Sonny, Colin, and Moe spent the summer on horseback, moving the cattle from one scrubby locale to another, washing in the river, eating Colin's cooking, and sleeping on the ground. The Criss Ranch was so vast they discovered new parts every year. They found an oasis, that last perfect summer, with willow trees that provided a canopy for their tents and a place to rest out of the wicked hot sun. With the reduced herd, that summer was the best Sonny remembered, less work, and more time to do nothing.

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Will found her, thought she'd fallen, rolled her over and then sat holding Delpha's work-calloused hand. He didn't speak when Sonny rode up on Spider, and later Sonny had no idea how long the two'd been out there. Hours maybe, possibly all day. Sonny needed supplies and was planning on going back out when he found them. He had Blackie slung across the saddle. Red ran to meet them, but barked funny, made that *yip yip yip* sound like he found a rattler, and twirled over and over again. Sonny kicked Spider into a canter and they loped into the yard.

He saw his dad sitting in the dirt, thought he'd fallen, then the overturned wash basket and his mother's stout legs. She went quick, efficient and perfect, if there is such a thing, dropped down on her knees as she was coming back to the house, wet clothes flapping on the line behind her, and lay down softly on her side in the summer grass. Sonny dismounted, set the pup beside Red, and let Spider's reins drop.

The funeral was at the Criss Ranch. Colin and Moe organized a cowboy tribute, and Delpha's coffin was on the picnic table, under a white tent the mortician had rigged up, piled with a mountain of white lilies, carnations, and baby's breath. She'd had a stroke.

The womenfolk commandeered the kitchen, set up card tables with freshly ironed tablecloths. There was plenty of good hot food for later. The sheriff, Wayne King, used his cruiser to bring Delpha's cousins, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, out to the ranch for the funeral. He abandoned his duties for the day. He went into the Coast-to-Coast that morning and spoke to Sam Granger, the owner.

"Anyone cause trouble today, tell them I'll shoot 'em when I get back," the sheriff said before he stomped out.

Sam was just about the only person not going to the funeral. He had to stay in on account of the store being the post office and the Continental Trailways bus station. He wore a black armband, felt awful about not being there.

Delpha Criss had been a big part of things in this small town: President of the County Fair and Rodeo Auxiliary, and she had organized the Ladies' Rest Room in an empty store so farm women had somewhere to sit and talk while their husbands bought feed and drank in the saloon.

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The cowboys trailered in their horses, had on their best gear and parade tack, and processed, hats off, heads bowed, sidestepping their horses in a continuous line the length of the tent and the seated guests. The beef cattle came in from the range, stood against the fence line, silent. It was an elegant, holy moment, man and beast paying tribute.

Will Criss wore his dark suit and grasped his fancy cane, the one with the silver top. He looked bewildered. His unshaven jaw trembled. Will Criss was suddenly smaller than he'd been; the shoulders of his suit stuck up, dwarfed his head and neck. His toothless mouth looked even more caved in, and his lips moved like he was trying to talk, but no one could make it out. His turquoise eyes darted from side to side; he didn't know where to look. He couldn't look ahead at Delpha's coffin, or to the line of cottonwood trees where they'd bury her after. He tried looking up, but didn't have the strength. His wispy hair floated in the breeze. Will sat on a folding chair between Mr. and Mrs. Smith; each had a hand pressed on his shoulder. Mr. Smith held his free hand to his heart.

Sonny stood behind his father's chair, chin out, stiff. He had Red and Blackie on lead ropes to keep them from running around. Red was worked up, knew Delpha'd gone missing. He'd been looking for her for the past three days. Sonny had to drag him into the house to get him to stop running and barking.

The service was conducted by the Baptist minister, who was so overcome with his own grief and loss that he had a hard time getting through it—Delpha had been exceptionally kind to him and his wife when their first baby died. He read the twenty-third Psalm, led them in the Lord's Prayer, and tried to talk about Delpha's life, but had to stop. He took a drink of water, looked down at his feet, then took a deep breath before he could continue. When it was over, he closed his Bible and stood before Will Criss.

"Sir, I truly am sorry..."

Will clasped his wrist and held on like a man about to fall off a cliff.

Sonny stood ramrod straight through the whole thing. He longed to say something, praise his mom, thank his friends, and curse the God that had taken his perfect mother away. He felt his throat was twisted up, feared he might strangle.

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They'd never prepared for this day. His father seemed certain of death's imminent arrival, and being a religious man, he had talked about his new life in the sweet hereafter. He had it all planned, said he was ready to go when the Lord wanted him. Delpha had never spoken of death, and Sonny never imagined she'd die at all, let alone go first. But she must have talked it over with Will. The morning after she died, Will pulled a sheet of lined paper from the Whitman's Sampler box that Delpha kept her special things in—photographs and birthday cards—and on it she'd written, in pencil, *My Funerel*.

Delpha Criss wanted to wear her pineapple dress on her journey to God's immortal home and the fake garnet earrings Will gave her for their fiftieth wedding anniversary. She wished to be laid to rest in the Criss cemetery next to her two babies: she had one stillborn and one sickly child before she gave birth to Sonny. She had dug the graves herself. Will told Sonny he couldn't do it for nothing, said it was the saddest thing he ever saw. He felt terrible about it still.

"Your mother was always the strong one."

As they laid her to rest, two women from the church choir sang "The Old Rugged Cross," like Delpha wanted.

Sonny dug the grave the night before, after it was dark. He wanted to do it alone, with the stars shining down, but Colin and Moe came out and helped. They used a pickaxe on the rocky parts. Will insisted on being there too. They had to hold him up to walk, take both arms and then sit him on a chair. Red and Blackie got involved. Sonny set up two kerosene lamps. The moon was nearly full. It took most of the night. When they finished, Moe built a bonfire, brought the lawn chairs over, and they stared up at the heavens where they knew Delpha would be.

“God must have needed her back,” was all Will managed to say.

A week after the funeral, Colin and Moe fixed up the bunkhouse. They put in a generator and tarpapered the outside. Sonny bought a cast-iron stove and plugged panes of glass into the windows. They all ate together in Delpha’s kitchen. Colin cooked. Will was quiet, hardly ate, claimed Delpha visited with him every day. The root cellar emptied out.

Sonny, Colin, and Moe had one last cattle drive—drove the dairy cows over to Pruitt’s place. It took most of the day. Pruitt had a nice barn with a hayloft. His kids learned the cows’ names right off the bat. Sonny told them to feed the cows watermelons in the summer, and they promised they would.

Red stayed in the kitchen nearly all the time, sleeping on the same old burlap sacks Delpha had put out for him. Sonny got a job driving truck and took the pup along for company when he was on the road. His paycheck supplemented his dad’s old-age pension, and they made out okay money-wise. Moe and Colin did the farm chores and looked after Will when Sonny was away. They’d do it until Will passed. Wouldn’t be long. Kept the ranch, that was the important thing.