

## Roger's Dad · *Don Kurtz*

RONNIE WAS ON HIS WAY into wrestling practice when he ran into his cousin Roger. Roger called out to him from across the parking lot, and Ronnie squeezed between a couple of cars and over to a group of boys clustered around a customized Mustang. Their jackets had the FFA labels torn off and “Cosmic Plowboys” stitched across the back instead. He and Roger talked a little bit, but Ronnie felt out of place even standing in that part of the high school lot, dressed nice, with his little PE bag in one hand and his books in the other.

Anyway, that must have been how his aunt knew that he would be alone for the holidays, and why she felt like she had to invite him out for Thanksgiving dinner. It wasn't like he had a lot of other plans, but he'd been looking forward to having the house to himself while his parents were gone, cooking a TV dinner and watching the ball games, maybe having the guys over to play pool later on.

Instead he was leaving town on the old highway, which, after it passed under the interstate, he didn't really know anymore. There was the wide-screen, the miniature golf, a meat packer, but it pretty much scattered into farmland after that. Most of the fields were already plowed, deep black and empty. When Ronnie turned right at the Russiaville Road, he could see four different elevators out ahead of him, and the band of trees that ran along the Middlefork. He wondered if any of the guys would be up for driving over to Bloomington later that night.

Roger's dad's house was up on a rise, about a mile across the fields from the main road. Seeing it, Ronnie was absolutely certain that he didn't want to be out there. The next spring, in '71, he'd graduate, but until then he knew he'd still be spending half his time seeing people he didn't want to see and doing things he didn't want to do. Relatives were the worst. They wouldn't be watching the ball games or anything; that's the way things were out on the farm.

Since the last time he was out there, they'd put up a big equipment shed next to the barn, and a Harvestore just beyond. The house looked the same, cold from a distance, but as he edged his dad's Buick up the lane and around past the hog pens, he could see the shades all open and the rooms brightly lit. Roger's dad and another man were poking around in the shed.

Ronnie waved out toward them and went up onto the glassed-in porch, where they had their freezer and some cardboard boxes stacked up. He knocked once, and when he walked on in the kitchen was warm and bright, new linoleum on the floor and cooking in the air. His cousins Carol and Judy looked up from where they were working at the kitchen counter, and his Aunt Jean hurried over to see him.

“Ronnie, it’s so good to see you. Look how tall he is, girls. Remember your cousin Ronnie? You wait here, Ronnie, let me call Roger.”

Roger was already there, though, slouching and smiling. He looked like he’d just come in from outside; his jacket was on over a couple of sweatshirts, and the broad welts of acne on his face were red and raw. His wet eyes never really settled on anybody, a habit he didn’t have when they were kids.

“Hey Roger.” Ronnie took off his glove and they shook hands, laughing self-consciously. “You been outside.”

“Yeah, Dad’s determined to load some hogs today, so we spent half the morning fooling around with the pen.”

“I don’t know why he has to do it today,” Aunt Jean said. “But help him, honey, okay?”

“Sure,” Roger said. They stood in the kitchen looking at each other. “Come on, Ronnie, let’s go up to my room.”

They went through the living room, past the furnace, and up a narrow stairway to Roger’s room. It was in the attic, which meant they had to bend down except in the center of the floor. Roger had it fixed up his own way—an old couch on one side, his unmade bed on the floor, an orange crate by the window, with a stereo on top and records packed inside. On the wall he had pictures of the Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix, and Fillmore West posters.

Ronnie stood with his jacket on and his hands in his pockets while Roger put on a record and dropped down on his bed. He could see his breath as he exhaled. Neither of them said anything.

Roger looked directly at Ronnie for the first time. “Want to get high?” he asked.

“Sure,” Ronnie said, and Roger laughed, pulling a cigar box from behind the bed. He rummaged through it, found his papers, and rolled a joint, stopping occasionally to blow on his fingers. He patted his jacket pockets for a match, a smile on his face. Ronnie stood and waited.

As they passed the joint back and forth a seed flared up and popped, and they both laughed. Ronnie sat down, and then when they had finished most of the joint he lay back on the bare wood floor with his head on the edge of Roger's mattress. Some kind of hurry he had been in earlier seemed less urgent then, and he began to relax. He rode his gaze around the room, onto posters, past the records, over to a case of trophies Roger had won from the 4-H. He leaned up on one elbow and began flipping through the albums.

"So how are things?" Roger said.

He looked at Roger and they laughed. "You know," he said, and couldn't think of what else to say, so they laughed again. "Too much," he said at last.

The music was loud and began to curl around him, cutting him off from Roger. He let it come and then went with it, floating, his face feeling flushed and alive. There was a space between songs and he noticed that his muscles were still tensed from the cold. He tried to relax them but they didn't want to go, and by then another cut from the album had taken him away.

He would have gone even further, but a memory suddenly came to him, something about this attic room when they were little, before his family moved into town, back when they played together all the time. He looked over his shoulder at Roger, who was lying back on his bed in his jacket and dirty jeans. His hands were clenched at his sides and his eyes were closed tight. Ronnie pushed aside the curtain behind the crate and looked down at the empty front yard, a lone shiny purple ball on a white pedestal out at the end of the front sidewalk. He leaned forward to look out to the gray horizon.

"What?" Roger shouted. "What?" and Ronnie wheeled around, his heart pounding. "Okay," Roger was yelling toward the stairway, and he turned to Ronnie. "Mom says they're ready to go. You want to go for a ride?"

The descent through the dark stairway was still part of the adventure for Ronnie, but the friendly living room gave way to a bright kitchen where peering, familiar faces all turned his way. The men were at the table drinking coffee, and Roger walked between them over to a rug by the refrigerator, where he'd left his boots. Ronnie wanted to follow him, to stay right behind Roger until they went out the door, but he sensed that

the faces wanted to talk to him. He found Roger's dad sitting to his left, looking at him intently.

"Ronnie, it's good to see you. How's school?"

"It's okay."

"You still going to college next year?"

"I don't know. I guess so. That's what my folks want."

"I wish you could get this boy to go too." He looked over to Roger, who was kneeling down to lace his boots. "He's been talking about going over to Viet Nam with those other boys."

"I'm doing a report on Viet Nam for my history class," Ronnie offered. "Everybody picked a crisis to do, and I picked Viet Nam."

Roger's dad looked at him blankly, then nodded, and leaned back, his one hand gripping the arm of his chair. He tapped his fingers two or three times. One of his sleeves was empty, folded in and pinned to the side of his shirt.

"It's for current events, really, it's just a part of the history class," Ronnie said quickly. "I got a history honors class this year, so we get to do current events." He looked at the people spread out around him in the bright kitchen. Roger had finished lacing his boots and leaned against the refrigerator, arms folded.

"Lorene's Doug is over there right now, isn't he, Judy?" his Aunt Jean said. She was standing behind Carol, with her arms around her, while Carol leaned back into her mother's chest. "He was working in town at Delco, and they took him."

"If he'd stayed home and helped with the farm, they wouldn't have gotten him," Bernice's husband Bill said. "It doesn't make sense to me."

"Hey Bernice," Ronnie said, seeing his other cousin for the first time.

"Hi, Ronnie. Nice to see you again. You know Bill, don't you?"

"Sure. Hi, Bill." They shook hands. Ronnie knew everybody there; after all, they were his relatives. He started to gain confidence.

"Well, do you boys want to ride with us, Roger, or go on your own?" Roger's dad asked, standing up. "We're going over to the other place."

Roger pushed himself out from the refrigerator. "I know where we're going," he said. "We'll come in my car."

The highway was the longest way, and that's where he and Roger headed, cutting over toward it along the county road. A red snow fence ran along

the far side of the ditch, where fall weeds lay bent over from a freezing rain the weekend before. Roger lit a cigarette and hit the gas pedal hard, throwing them back into the bucket seats.

High and happy, Ronnie was glad to be outside. He watched Roger fish the remnants of a joint out of his pocket, and they shared it as they flashed along past empty yards and open fields. With the eight-track playing loud, King Crimson, they shot past a car in the ditch before they even saw it.

Roger slowed down, his mufflers rattling. "That's old man Faucett," he said, stubbing out his cigarette and tossing it out the open window. They backed into a crossroads, and glided back to where a fat, red-faced man in overalls and a heavy corduroy jacket stood looking at his car, hands in his pockets. It was a big green Pontiac, one side buried deep in the ditch.

"Hey, Mr. Faucett."

"Hey there, Roger. Goddamn, boy, I'm glad you came by. I thought I'd have to walk back from town."

"You think we can push it?"

"Hell no, it's stuck. Give me a ride back to my place and I'll call Jimmy to come out and get it."

Ronnie got out and climbed into the back seat. Faucett settled up front. He exhaled heavily, filling the car with the sweet smell of liquor. His pink ears poked out from under an orange hunting cap, their blood vessels swollen large and broken. He scratched his neck.

"Roger, what the hell's gotten into you? You look like a damn girl in that hair."

Roger didn't say anything, but shifted forward in his seat, tapping on the steering wheel with his ring.

"You look like you just got back from that concert down in Caterville, back from that music concert." He turned halfway around in his seat and regarded Ronnie with dull eyes. "Yeah, I reckon you both been down in Caterville."

"It's been two years since that festival," Ronnie said, and in the silence that followed, his words and his laugh seemed to be bouncing loudly around the car with nowhere to land. Faucett regarded him silently.

"Well, you look like you both been down in Caterville," he said. They turned off the highway and onto the blacktop road that ran by the reser-

voir. "You all getting together at your place this year, for a big meal?"

"Yeah we are," said Roger. "But first my dad wants to load some hogs over at the other place."

"Good year for hogs. Wish I'd gotten in heavier."

Ronnie was glad to be in the back, all alone. The sky had five different shades of gray, each bending in its own troubled arc to five different shades of chilly black. He could see the elevator at Homer off to one side, and a flock of crows taking off from the fence just ahead of them. The cry of the Crimson King wove in and out among the fence posts, the beat dropping squarely on each one. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back between the speakers, watching his eyelids and riding the bounce of the car. Spoken words came to him at a great distance. The car slowed to cross the tracks, and he sat up.

"What's your daddy think about that anyway, hair like that. Bet he don't like it."

Roger was driving slower, licking his lips and tapping his ring on the wheel.

"You know, your daddy is one of the finest men I ever met. One of the finest in the whole damn county. Don't forget that." Faucett seemed subdued, and he was breathing with some difficulty. "It's a damn shame what happened to him, especially with his own dad dead just a year and a half. Those combines are dangerous as hell." He held up his left hand, two fingers missing at shiny red lower knuckles. "Look here, it damn near ate me up too. I wasn't watching my business, and it got me. I pulled it loose just in time."

They drove past the edge of the reservoir, dull in the morning light. Quarry rocks were at the water's edge, and a chain link fence ran along between the road and the water. Faucett lived about a mile further on, in a large two-story frame house with a broad front porch. His yard was raked clean, the driveway freshly gravelled. Roger swung up close to the back door.

"Well, you all have fun at your dinner today. You have a real good time."

"You bet, Mr. Faucett. You have a good holiday."

"I have to get in, Roger, one of my boys might call me today. Bailey's out in California now. The girl's in Florida. You know Harold? Harold's still around. He lives over in Potomac. They're going over to his wife's place."

He'd opened the door and sat with his legs swung out, looking back over his shoulder at Roger. The yard was all short brown grass; a glider covered with floral plastic sat over by the sidewalk. A tire swing hung from one of two large oaks at the side of the house.

"My boy wanted me to go with them, but I don't like to be away on the holidays. Maybe next year." The cold wind rushed in the open door, and Ronnie wrapped his arms around himself in the back seat. Roger didn't say anything. Finally Faucett pushed himself up, said good-bye, and walked to the house.

By the time they got over to the other place, the men already had the truck backed up to the pen, and the ramp up. Roger's dad was trying to wire a railing along the near side, while Bernice's husband Bill and another man shuffled back and forth, heads down in the cold wind. They both looked up as Ronnie and Roger got out of the car and walked over.

"I thought you boys had got lost," the other man said.

Bill tried to catch Ronnie's eye to wink at him. "I figured they had better things to do, like go off and smoke a little of that loco weed."

Roger reached out to steady the railing. "We ran into Mr. Faucett, stuck in the ditch up on the Russiaville Pike. We gave him a ride home."

"You saw Harold Faucett," Roger's dad said. He looked up at them through frosty black frame glasses.

Bill laughed. "I reckon he was hard at it already. I see him weaving back from Tolliver's about every third night."

"Yeah, he was," Ronnie said. "I thought we could light up the air in the car if we wanted."

Roger's dad had finished the wiring and he put his hand up into his armpit to warm up. He watched Roger light a cigarette, cupping his hands around the flame and bending away from the wind.

"You know, Roger," he said, and stopped. Ronnie, loving the cold air and the sound of music still in his head, blew out little puffs of air, listening to the clanking of hog feeders from the farm across the road.

"You know, boys," Roger's dad said, "Harold Faucett is one fine man, and I don't think any of us would want the troubles he's had. I think it's best if we just don't talk about him."

Since they'd all quit talking about him anyway, nobody did anything. Roger's dad reached out and shook Ronnie's shoulder. "I hear you wrestle pretty good. You feel like wrestling some hogs?"

They didn't really need everyone for the job, that was clear, but they all got down into the pen except for Roger's dad, who stood at the chute. They spread out against the far fence and clumped forward over frozen manure and corncobs, herding the pigs toward the ramp. Backs up and snouts down, the pigs trotted in circles, their breath in snorts and steam. Bill and Roger's dad got the first one up after a while, and then it was easy, except for the last one.

"Doggone you ornery hog," Roger said, panting as the pig dodged back and squeezed past them again.

Ronnie resolved not to be afraid, and when they cornered the hog again, he lowered his body, so that when the pig darted at him, he dropped down to face it. He lunged to one side, smashing his knee on a clump of frozen ground. The hog swung away and they closed in suddenly, forcing it onto the ramp and up into the truck.

"I'm glad to get that job done," Roger's dad said, when he'd fastened the gate. "Thanks a lot."

When they got back home, they pulled over by the barn and just sat in the car, relaxing. Roger kept the car idling, the heater on. Ronnie's pants were torn, and as his leg thawed out it started to hurt, but he was embarrassed to roll up his pants leg to see what damage had been done. He unbuttoned his jacket and dropped his head back, eyes open. They listened to a tape Ronnie hadn't heard before. Roger pulled out a plastic bag with a little pot in it, and they smoked it slowly. It felt good with the windows open and the heater going full blast. When they finished, they rolled the windows up and settled back into their seats, listening to the music.

"What did you say?" Roger asked after a while.

Ronnie opened his eyes. "I didn't say anything."

Then they both heard a voice and looked up to see Roger's dad standing about fifteen feet away. Roger sat up quickly and rolled down the window. Roger's dad looked angry, but came no closer.

"Roger, dammit, I said your mother has dinner on the table, now you come on." He turned and went back into the house.

"That son of a bitch," Roger said, sweeping the ashes off his lap and reaching over to eject the tape. His hand shook as he lit a match trying to pull one last draw out of the joint. "I didn't hear him, Ronnie. Neither of us did."



They walked across the side lot toward the house, Ronnie's head floating about eight feet above his shoes. Inside, Roger's sisters were bringing bowls of food to the kitchen table—noodles, cut corn, plates of turkey. Ronnie looked at Judy with curiosity. She played the trombone in the band, but it was only the varsity band, so he never saw her, except when they played for basketball games.

"Ronnie, do you want milk or tea?"

"Milk, Aunt Jean."

"Roger, honey, you want milk, right?"

They gathered at the table, shuffling into places. Ronnie sat down and the girls laughed, so he stood up quickly and pushed his chair back in. He stood behind it with the others, red-faced and head down. They waited in silence.

"Are you going to say grace, honey?" Aunt Jean asked after a while.

Roger's dad looked up, surprised. His eyes seemed pinched and wet. "Oh, I believe we'll have Bill ask the blessing," he said, and Bill began in a deep preacher-like voice.

"Our Heavenly Father, be with us on this day of Thanksgiving . . ."

Ronnie had been doing fine with his eyes closed, but he began to feel dizzy, so he opened them. The peas, floating in butter and milk gravy, glowed electric, and the turkey rested quietly on its plate, deep-textured and alive. The mashed potatoes clumped cloudlike and absolutely smooth in a flower-patterned china bowl. He glanced over at Roger, who stood with his eyes open, blinking and looking down at the table. His hands, red and grease-stained, clutched at the back of his chair. Roger's dad stood staring out the window, his arm crossed across his chest and massaging the stump at his shoulder. Judy caught Ronnie looking, and winked at him.

"And be with the leaders of our world as they work for peace, in Jesus' name, Amen," said Bill, and they all said "Amen," sat down, and began to eat.

Afterwards, Ronnie and Roger went back up to the attic room to lie down, Roger in his bed and Ronnie on the floor. Roger smoked and looked through car magazines, while Ronnie lay on his back with the headphones on and the stereo turned up high. Music expanded inside his head, and warm currents pulsed up and down his body, each breath expanding around the full weight in his stomach. His muscles tightened as he

thought of the Belleville tournament on Saturday, and the crowd shouting "Move! Move! Move!" but suddenly he just relaxed, deciding that he didn't care if he ever moved again. With that much certain, he drifted away, into the friendly space far within.

Later, when he felt something at his shoulder, he opened his eyes to see Roger bending down over him.

"Come on," Roger said, "let's go outside for a while."

When they went down, Aunt Jean was still wiping up in the kitchen, and Carol and Judy were playing Yahtzee in front of the TV. Outside it was almost night and very still. The wind had stopped but the air seemed even colder, and a part of the sky had cleared up above the horizon, where two bright stars stood out. Ronnie blinked his eyes and thought about practice the next morning. He wasn't so sure he wanted to keep doing it anymore. His lungs felt warm and fragile, and he breathed shallowly.

They walked between the barn and the new shed and out along the lane that ran past the back hog lots toward the woods. A couple of hogs rooted at the frozen ground; the rest were in the barn. The row of trees that ran along the river was lost in darkness, and mercury lights from the farms scattered around them shined brightly.

"It feels good to get out a little, don't it," Roger said.

"Yeah it does. I'm coming down a little, out here in the cold."

"Good smoke," Roger said. "I bet you all get your share of good smoke at school."

"Oh yeah," Ronnie said. "We get good smoke."

Roger nodded. "I thought you probably did."

They walked all the way to the end of the lane, near what was left of the woods, and then came back again. At the corner of the field, they saw Roger's dad standing alone, looking out into the darkness.

"Hey Uncle Bob."

"Hey boys . . ."

Roger and Ronnie stood where they were for a couple of minutes, Roger finishing his cigarette and throwing it down before walking out to join his dad. They talked in low voices, Roger's dad with his head down and nodding as he kicked at the ground. Roger stood with his shoulders hunched in his Cosmic Plowboys jacket, looking this way and that. He had to be blinking his eyes and licking his lips, Ronnie thought, and he knew that the cold weather had to be hard on that rough sore face. He saw

Roger nod a couple of times, and then nod again.

Ronnie dropped his head back and turned a full circle under the dark sky, feeling the cold on his cheeks. His teeth ached when he inhaled through his mouth. He imagined being long gone, on a freighter in the North Sea, or up in Alaska somewhere. When he turned back to look the few yards out into the field he strained to see Roger and his dad, still out there talking. Finally Roger's dad, looking away, reached out his one hand and shook Roger's shoulder. Roger kept nodding, looking off in the other direction.

Ronnie was ready to go, but he still went back into the house for a few minutes when they got back, while his Aunt Jean loaded him up with leftovers to get him through the weekend. He had to leave quickly to keep her from rounding everyone up to say good-bye. The seat was cold when he got into the car, and he sat in the friendly glow of the dashboard while the engine warmed up, before he headed down the lane to the county road, over to the state highway, and back into town.