

THE OLD COWBOYS

by Lisa Guenther
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It's a warm July evening. The sun has started its slow descent behind the western hills, the light slanting at that angle that bathes the prairies in gold. Almost like magic. The air is still, a rarity for the Cypress Hills. Jack whistles "Navajo Rug," feeling the best he has in the months since his bypass, as he walks to the barn to check on Old Ranger.

He pauses to touch the logs of the barn wall. The barn was built from nearly petrified trees, charred by a 19th century forest fire. He's been secretly fascinated by the logs since he was a child, when he would run his fingertips along them whenever he thought no one was looking. Of course, often someone was looking. An aunt or uncle, his mother or father. They'd usually smile to themselves, but never say a word about it to the shy child, not wanting to embarrass him. When his grandmother caught him staring at the logs, as though trying to decipher their secrets, she told him about the fire, up on the Bench, and about how his grandfather harvested the logs with his team of Percherons and built the barn.

Molly and Jake. Those were the names of the Percherons. Noble looking horses. Jack's Grandpa Ben had drawn them in detail, along with scenes from roundups on the Bench, the old chuckwagons that fed the branding crews, bucking broncs at ranch rodeos. Horses pulling hay

rakes and stone boats. When Ben died, Jack found boxes and boxes of sketches recording pieces of a culture that had been lost with the years. Jack had suddenly felt old, though he'd been in his late twenties at the time.

But Jack's eighty years lie lightly on his shoulders this evening. He isn't thinking about his heart attack last Christmas, about how close he'd been to death. He'd even seen the proverbial light, though afterwards he reasoned it was probably some paramedic shining a light in his eyes. Or a foggy memory of the light hanging over him during the surgery. Certainly not the afterlife or heaven or God or any of that nonsense.

Jack is feeling so good he doesn't bother opening the corral gate. He scales the fence, swings his leg over the other side as easily as a man in his thirties swings his leg over a horse. Jack had been a fit man before the surgery. He'd still roped at brandings, and he was the best roper in the Cypress Hills country, too, dammit. He just had to watch that he didn't get too hot, had to drink lots of water. He would have roped this spring, too, but his kids wouldn't let him.

His son, Bill, had said:

“Jesus Christ, Dad, when are you going to realize you're an old man? I'm an old man, and I'm your son. You need to be careful.”

Jack, remembering his wife Katie, quoted Dylan Thomas' “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night.”

And then stormed out of the room.

But he didn't rope at any of the brandings this year. He brought his lawn chair and a cooler of beer with lime (His granddaughter Laurie had introduced him to the drink, and he had to admit it was good), and sat and bullshitted and drank with the other old people. He had to admit, that wasn't so bad either.

And besides, his horse was in no shape to ride, anyway.

Old Ranger is a buckskin Quarter Horse-Thoroughbred cross, nearly 16 hands tall. The son of a perlino Quarter Horse stud of the neighbours that jumped the fence and impregnated Jack's favourite bay mare. A grandson of Faux Pas, the black RCMP stallion that stood at Fort Walsh and sired Queen Elizabeth's favourite mare, Burmese.

After Jack's granddaughter introduced him to "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon," Jack liked to joke that he and Ranger were only a few degrees away from royalty.

Ranger was among the last group of colts that Jack broke in, nearly thirty years ago. Ranger had been a snorty, hot four-year-old and he'd persisted in his attempts to buck Jack off for the first thirty rides. But there's a lot of ground to cover on a Cypress Hills ranch, and eventually Ranger learned he was better off conserving his energy than burning it up in the first five miles. He proved himself a smart, tough cowhorse, and soon he was Jack's favourite mount.

Jack won lots of local roping competitions on Ranger, and one neighbour offered him three grand for the horse, good money in those days. Jack told him no. Any of the other horses could be bought, for the right price, but Jack and Ranger had the kind of rare bond that Hollywood likes to romanticize.

It wasn't a bond built on magic, but one built on respect and sensitivity, and that elusive quality horsemen call "feel." Jack only had to think, "whoa," and Ranger, picking up on a slight weight shift, slammed on the brakes. If Jack turned his head to examine a cow, Ranger put an eye and ear on it. And as soon as Jack picked up the reins, intending to cut out that cow, Ranger was turning towards it. Jack never had to haul on the reins or boot Ranger after he was broken in. They both became light as a feather and focused as a laser beam.

It was a year or two after the neighbour's offer that the accident happened. Jack's wife, Katie, had succumbed to cancer that summer. Jack was edging towards bitterness. Katie had missed the birth of her first grandchild, a little girl named Laurie, by mere weeks. Jack couldn't see the baby without thinking about what his wife was missing, so he spent more time than usual in the saddle. Checking cows, checking pasture. His fences, always in good shape, were near perfect that summer.

One hot August afternoon Jack and Ranger rode out to check the cows and bulls. They found the herd grazing along Pine Coulee's edge, about five miles from the yard. One cow was limping slightly, and looked thin, so Jack decided he'd better bring her in. They'd just cut out the cow and her calf when, from the side of his eye, Jack saw the bull coming at them. Ranger's left ear swiveled to the bull, but he didn't have time to even snort before the bull slammed into him with the force of a freight train. Jack's left leg shattered under the blow.

Jack and Ranger rolled down the steep coulee, through rosebushes and shrubs. The rolling seemed to happen in slow motion, but Jack couldn't do anything except try to protect his head and kick free from his stirrups. His right leg came out after the first roll, but his left leg

wouldn't respond to his brain, and remained trapped in the stirrup. Every few yards Ranger would roll right over him and his shattered leg. Ranger was thrashing, trying to regain his footing, and Jack was tumbling into panic. And then, suddenly, everything went black.

Afterwards, the first thing Jack was aware of was searing pain all through his left leg. Then the smells of piss, shit, sweat and blood.

He opened his eyes slowly. His vision was blurred, but he could see Ranger standing above him. Snorting, but not moving. His left foot was still in the stirrup. His lower leg was snapped into a chevron.

Ranger, realizing Jack was conscious, turned his head to look at him with both eyes. Jack looked back at him, blinking hard, and his vision slowly sharpened.

Get us out of this, Ranger seemed to be saying. The buckskin's hide was scraped and raw, and he had a long gash on his left flank. But he was standing evenly on all four hooves, and his legs were free from wounds. He was okay, Jack thought. Ranger was okay.

Jack managed to prop himself up with elbows. They were nearly at the bottom of the coulee, in a small stand of willows that must have stopped their fall. The light had changed from the strong glare of mid-afternoon to the mellow glow of early evening. Jack glanced at the sky. A strong wind herded thunderheads above him.

Carefully, slowly, he began to pull on his left leg. But his foot was shoved clean through the stirrup, and he couldn't flex it enough to pull it back through. The pain was too much. Jack

leaned over and vomited into a rose bush.

Ranger snorted and turned away, looking down the coulee.

It was that moment, as Jack was throwing up, that he realized how dire his situation was. No one was at home to notice he was gone. He was due at his son's house for supper the next night, but that was an eternity away. And even once they started looking for him, they likely wouldn't find him right off. There was a lot of prairie to cover, and he was well hidden in the coulee's fold. They might ride right by him.

He was fifty-eight, not old, but too old to come out of this well.

And how long would Ranger stand there? He knew where home was. Would he stop if Jack said whoa, or would he drag his owner to death through the brambles and over the rough ground? Though a willing partner, Ranger wasn't what Jack would call a quiet horse. Even after years of riding, he would bolt and buck with an inexperienced or overly cocky rider. And though he'd stand for Jack, it was only because Jack wouldn't let him get away with the jigging and dancing that impatient horses often resort to.

Jack began to pray. He ran through the Lord's Prayer, and then pleaded on a more personal level to God, or Jesus, or Satan, or whoever the hell was in charge to spare his life. He realized he sounded irreverent and bitter, but it was the best he could do under the circumstances.

Then, with a loud boom, the sky cracked open and rain poured down. Ranger jumped and began trotting for home.

“Whoa! Whoa!”

The pain was like nothing Jack had experienced, nothing he could have imagined. Black dots swam on the edge of his vision, then solidified and thickened. Jack flailed like a hooked fish beside his frightened horse. Ranger’s eye widened, white showing at the edges, and Jack realized he was about to break into a run.

Miraculously, the left rein hadn’t broken in the long tumble. Jack, through some sudden resurgence of coordination and strength, managed to reach forward and snag it. Just as Ranger broke into a run, Jack started to pull his head around.

“Whoa, boy, whoa.”

At first Ranger threw his head, trying to escape the curb bit. Jack felt a little guilty for wrenching on the horse’s mouth with the curb, but he had no choice.

“Whoa, Ranger, easy boy.”

Ranger flicked his ears back, and turned his head towards the thing pulling on his left rein. And then, as though remembering it was his old buddy Jack, he stopped dead.

“Whoa. Good boy, easy boy. Easy,” Jack panted. He loosened the rein, but didn’t let go. Ranger kept his head turned to Jack, breathing hard. They’d come to a stop in a nearly-dry creek at the bottom of the coulee. Rain pounded Jack and revived the spring creek.

“For the love of Jesus,” Jack cursed. His oilskin slicker was tied behind his saddle’s cantle, just out of reach.

He wished he had some way of reaching his son. He wished Katie was still alive. She would surely be worrying about him by now, leading a search party to find him.

He missed everything about her. He missed her funny stories about the high school students she taught. He missed the way she'd read him poetry. Dylan Thomas, Patrick Lane, Susan Musgrave. Her smooth voice turned the poetry into music.

He missed her level-headed fearlessness in any debate or full-on argument, whether it was with him or a neighbour or even the local MLA.

More than anything Jack missed the way Katie's brown eyes always lit up when she saw him. Right up to the end.

You died too early, Katie. I hated to see you go. But I don't want to join you yet, he thought.

Ranger didn't take another step all that night, even when Jack passed out again. And early next morning, when Jack's neighbour, Earl, stopped by for coffee, he realized something was wrong. Jack's old border collie, Sammy, had messed in the house in two different spots.

And besides, Jack wasn't in the habit of going riding before seven am. Without exception, Earl had found him drinking coffee, his breakfast plate pushed aside, reading the paper or one of his wife's books. Lately it had been Katie's dog-eared volumes of poetry. Dylan Thomas. Canadian women writers named Lorna Crozier and Susan Musgrave. Those books made Earl uncomfortable for some reason that he couldn't put his finger on. Maybe it was the

way Jack had to almost tear his eyes from the page. Maybe it was the trace of red in Jack's eyes.

Earl knew his friend was grieving, but neither of them wanted to talk about it, and that silence seemed to balloon the grief until it was too big to be contained by the little ranch house. It hung heavy over the whole yard and seeped into the surrounding pastures.

But although his friend hadn't been himself lately, Earl knew Jack should be here, at his kitchen table. He knew Jack was in trouble. Hands shaking, he picked up the phone and called Jack's son.

Jack glided in and out of consciousness all night and through the morning. When he was awake, he tried to focus on every detail around him to block out the pain. The coulee smelled fresh after the rain, and Jack filled his lungs with it. If he craned his neck, he could see dark pines lining the hill further down the coulee. Lodgepoles, he was pretty sure. The moss on the rock beside his head was beautiful. Delicate and grey-blue. Or was it lichen? He suddenly wished he knew more about the prairies around him.

A mule deer emerged from the brush up ahead, tip toed up to the creek to drink. Jack held his breath, hoping she wouldn't notice him. Ranger's head shot up and his ears perked forward as he watched the deer. Suddenly he neighed. The doe whipped her head at them and bolted. Ranger snorted in satisfaction.

"Christ, Ranger," said Jack.

And then they heard another horse neigh in response.

Ranger blasted a shrill whinny that bounced off the steep sides of the coulee. He almost stepped forward, but Jack tugged on the rein very softly. Ranger pawed the ground, neighing again. The other horse neighed again, and Jack heard Earl call:

“Jack, you old bastard! Where the hell are you?”

“Down here, Earl,” Jack called. His voice was weak and hoarse.

Fifteen years later, when Jack delivered Earl’s eulogy, he would tell the mourners about how his friend found him. How he gently freed Jack’s leg from the stirrup and unsaddled Old Ranger (who, though only eight years old, earned the “old” prefix that day). How Earl stayed with him while the others brought the truck. How Earl visited him every day while Jack was cooped up in his house, recouping from his leg surgery. How Earl teased him mercilessly about his limp after that, and always asked after “That good ol’ red bull of yours,” which Jack’s son had shipped promptly after the accident.

Jack thinks about Earl, gone for over seven years now, as he steps into the barn. The early evening light instantly switches from gold to grey. Jack grieved nearly as much for Earl as he did for Katie, truth be told. But he would never admit that to anyone. They’d think it strange, he’d decided. Old Ranger, twenty-three by then, got him through that rough patch, too.

He no longer dawdled at breakfast, waiting for Earl to come have coffee. Since then, he'd gotten into the habit of wolfing down his breakfast and heading straight out to check his horses.

Even in his late twenties, Ranger still raced and bucked in the pasture like a horse half his age. He was the first one to the fence to greet Jack in the morning, running up and sliding to a stop like a well-schooled reiner. Jack always haltered him and led him into the barn for oats and grooming. The other horses followed behind Ranger, submitting to his status. Sometimes a young horse would start to pull ahead of Jack and Ranger, but one hard look from either of them sent the youngster scurrying to the back of the herd. Jack loved his horses, but he wasn't a soft man, and they knew it.

Ranger was the only horse Jack had left now. Laurie had two other nice Quarter Horses out in the pasture, but Jack had decided a few years ago that when Ranger was done, he'd be done riding, too. He didn't have the patience anymore to get another horse going just the way he liked. He'd ridden Ranger through last summer, roped off him at brandings. Neighbours couldn't believe the gelding was twenty-nine. Ranger hauled calves like a horse in his prime.

"You won't be putting us out to pasture anytime soon," Jack liked to joke.

Jack hates keeping Ranger in his stall so much. He hopes to turn him out with the other horses soon so the old guy can regain his kingship. But right now he has no choice.

Ranger was in good shape going into the winter. The fat was layered over his ribs, and his coat was so thick he looked like a teddy bear. Jack felt pretty good too, other than being a little tired and creaky.

Then, right before Christmas, the heart attack and bypass. Weeks recovering at his daughter Jacqueline's place in Saskatoon. Jacqueline and her husband had tried to convince him to move into a home.

"I'm not dead yet," he'd snapped. "Conversation over."

Much to his consternation, Laurie took a leave from vet school to help him get settled in back at the ranch. As soon as they moved him home, he asked her to look in on his horse.

When she came back in, she would hardly look him in the eye.

"What's wrong?"

"He's not good, Grandpa. He's thin."

"Jesus Christ, hasn't your Dad been feeding him? I leave for a few weeks, and everything falls to shit."

"They have lots of hay."

Laurie moved Ranger into the barn, only turning him out for a few hours each day. She ordered the senior horse ration from the Co-op. She said he nickered for her every time she went out to the barn, but he ate little and rarely.

Heart-stopping temperatures kept Jack inside for the first 10 days. Since his surgery, he had a sudden intolerance for anything below -15 C. But when a Chinook blew through, melting the snow, he tromped out to the barn.

Ranger nickered and pawed, impatient to see him. Jack stayed out for hours, grooming his old horse and watching him finally eat. After that Jack visited him every day he could, and Ranger slowly put on weight again. But he was stiff and still too thin. He was suddenly an old horse.

Jack had hoped that Ranger would recover enough to start riding again this summer. He'd seemed to loosen up with the warm weather, and Jack had started turning him during the day again. He looked good.

Then, in late June, he went off his feed.

This time they called the vet. She took blood and urine samples.

"His urea and creatinine levels are very high," Julie, the vet said. She and Laurie started talking about numbers. 119. 13.7. It meant nothing to Jack.

"It means his kidneys are failing, Grandpa."

Jack looked at his horse. Ranger nuzzled him. His eyes were bright, his ears forward. Other than being a little thin, he looked good, Jack thought.

"He'll be fine. I'll bring him back. Just tell me what to do."

Julie was doubtful, but Jack had persisted. He'd kept Ranger in the corral, away from the other two horses, who, sensing the old tyrant's weakness, had started going after him. He made sure Ranger had lots of fresh water, salt and electrolytes. He even bought several squares of good timothy hay. But Ranger's coat dulled and he grew thinner. For a while, Jack thought the old

guy wasn't going to make it.

But then, this morning, Ranger seemed to turn a corner. When Jack let him out of his stall, he loped around the corral for a minute before trotting over for an ear scratch. Jack left the barn door open so Ranger could come and go at will through the day.

Jack was still whistling as he walked up to Ranger's stall that evening. He stopped mid-tune.

Ranger lies on the stall floor, breathing hard. Jack carefully steps around his legs, crouches down to pet his neck. Ranger's hide is soaked in sweat. The gelding raises his head with a grunt, and nickers softly at Jack before laying his head back down. Jack scratches his ears, then strokes his muzzle.

Ranger's eye is dull. Cloudy.

Jack cries. He cries as though Katie were dying again. He cries as hard as he'd cried the night Laurie's little brother, Alex, was in a car accident and nearly died. He cries as he'd secretly cried for his good friend, Earl, seven years ago. He cries for himself because he knows he'll never ride again.

Jack massages Old Ranger's neck and back. He rubs the old horse's head, trying to memorize the shape of his skull and the feel of his coat, now rough. He inhales the horse's smell.

Is there anything as warm and earthy and beautiful as the smell of a horse?

“Goodbye old friend. We’ve had a good run.”

He stops crying abruptly, as though he’s flipped a switch. He strides back to the house, glares at the sky. The nerve of the weather. It could at least rain. The wind could at least howl. Anything would be better than this still beauty that makes the hills seem like heaven.

The gun is an old Colt revolver. His uncle had brought it home from World War One. Jack wasn’t sure how his Uncle George had got his hands on it, and he didn’t want to ask. He’d had mixed feelings about inheriting the gun. It seemed to carry some dark secret. But it was a piece of history, and so Jack had accepted it. Besides, it had its uses on the ranch. Much easier to handle at close range than a rifle.

Laurie sits at the kitchen table, reading an anatomy textbook. She looks up as Jack walks by, sees the gun.

“You don’t have to do that, Grandpa. Please. Let me call Julie. She’ll come right away.”

“No. He’s my horse. I should do it.”

Laurie stands up to follow him.

“No. I’ll do it alone. You don’t need to see it.”

Laurie watches through the window as he marches across the yard, into the barn. There’s one loud shot. It comes much sooner than she expects, and she flinches. Her two horses, hearing the revolver’s bark, rear up and gallop across the pasture, then circle back, heads high, nostrils

flaring. A few minutes pass before her grandpa emerges from the barn.

He shuffles, stooped, across the corral to the adjoining pasture. He leans on the fence, and the horses are wary of him at first, as though they smell death.

But he's always had a way with horses, and eventually they sidle up to him, and let him rub the itchy spots between their eyes and behind their ears.

He stays that way as the golden light loses its warmth, fades to silver. As the last light follows the sun behind the hills, Jack turns towards the house. He stops to run his hands along the petrified barn wood, and then continues shuffling to the yellow circle thrown out by the porch light.

The Old Cowboys
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