

The dead horse lying in the field was faintly illuminated by the light of a single lantern. The stars were out in full, but in a couple more hours it would start to get light. Sam and Beau plunged their shovels into the hard ground hefting out heavy scoops of cold dirt. The hole grew slowly; the two men had been digging together for over two hours and were still not half-done.

Beau stuck his shovel into the ground, sat down and lit up a cigarette. He puffed away in the dark and coughed until he hacked up a huge ball of brown phlegm.

“Time for you to quit,” said Sam.

“Don’t start,” Beau said, “Little late for that. I’m not depriving myself of the few earthly pleasures still left to me in the time remaining.”

“I meant, time for you to quit digging. I can finish up,” said Sam. “You know when I worked at Ocean World in Portland I used to have to do this kind of thing all the time. See, whenever one of the orcas, the killer whales, would up and die, we’d have to move the body out to a field and use a bulldozer and a crane to bury the thing. One time a couple of families, kids and all, spotted us at work just as we were lowering the thing into the hole. We got into a bit of trouble for doing the burial during daytime hours when the park was open.

“See, in amusement parks, there’s no such thing as death as far as the public is concerned. Animals never die. So when one of the big animals would kick the bucket and a keen-eyed season-pass visitor would notice that that particular animal wasn’t around anymore, all the tour guides would have to say, ‘That animal has been moved to our park in Ohio,’ ‘cause that’s where the other Ocean World was located. And of course, whenever an animal in the Ohio Park died the tour guides would have to say, ‘That

animal has been moved to our facility in Oregon.’ It became a standard joke, like we’d say, ‘Hey, my granddad turned ninety-eight. He’s fixing to move to Ohio any day now,’ or ‘One more smart crack like that and I’m gonna send you to Ohio.’

“I appreciate your coming in spite of everything,” said Beau.

“Weddings are just one of those things family can’t say no to.”

“Like funerals.”

“How do you like him, our future-brother-in-law?”

“Nice guy... nice guy... Mom and Dad sure love him.”

“The successful son they never had.”

Sam looked over at the dead horse.

“Hey, what’s round on the ends and high in the middle?”

“What?”

“o-HI-o.”

“That’s the kind of joke that got you kicked out of the family in the first place.”

“You think?” said Sam. “So I understand why you want to get this thing buried in a hurry before Avery wakes up, but if you want my opinion, it wouldn’t be a bad thing to just let her see what’s happened and use it as an opportunity to teach her about the cycle of life and death. Kids are more resilient than you think. I mean when we were growing up, we had to slaughter our share of hogs and chickens. We knew where our food came from without glossing over the hard facts of life and we were better for it. We understood real life.”

“Except for that one thing of course...” said Beau with a grin. “You didn’t have much of a handle on reality about that.”

“I was wondering when you’d find an excuse to bring that up,” said Sam. “Okay, so since you mention it, Becky and I, we made it our parental policy to never lie to Sean. I mean, we don’t come out and dump a whole mess of ugly truths on him or anything like that, but when he asks a question it means he’s ready for the real answer without a lot of sugar-coating.”

“You’re sounding real Oregonian right about now,” said Beau.

Sam kept on. “When he was five years old he asked us if Santa was real, and I told him straight up no, Santa’s not real. To a lot of parents that might seem mean, but I say, kids have enough trouble telling fact from fantasy, and we don’t need to be confusing them any more than they already are. Kids are entitled to know that there aren’t monsters hiding under their bed and that when someone gets shot on T.V. that’s all just pretend; no one really got hurt. It doesn’t spoil the fun. They can just go on pretending even when they know it’s not real. And when they grow up they won’t have to look back and think that their trust was betrayed by their parents telling them a bunch of lies.”

“Aren’t you just being kind of a drama queen about that whole thing?”

“Whenever I asked Mom and Dad about Santa they’d swear up and down, ‘No Sam, he’s real, he’s real, swear to God he’s real. Don’t pay attention to those other kids and don’t listen to your brother; they don’t know what they’re talking about.’ So I kept on believing and keeping the faith year after year in spite of you and the other kids at school laughing at me the whole time.”

“You were the baby,” said Beau, “and I think they wanted to keep you little as long as possible. It’s not their fault you made it all the way to high school without putting two-and-two together.” Beau laughed until a coughing fit forced him to stop.

“Well, by the time Christmas rolled around that year, kids were asking me if I still believed and I had to play it off like I’d actually stopped believing years ago and was just pretending all this time. But inside I was so humiliated, and I never forgot it.”

Sam paused, wiped his brow and took a long drink from his water bottle. “So, that’s why I’m an atheist today. I wasn’t going to fall for any more cock-‘n’-bull stories about benevolent old men with long white beards watching me, making a list, checking it twice to see if I was being naughty or nice.”

“That’s a bunch of horse-pucky. That’s not why,” said Beau. “It’s just in your smart-ass, over-educated, college-boy nature to be cynical. Anyway, you’re proud to be a non-believer. It’s a badge of honor for you. I mean, here you’re talking about telling my seven-year-old daughter that there’s no Santa, and that her favorite horse just keeled over and died and “why don’t you just go outside and take a good long look at the carcass? It’ll be good for you.”

As Beau took another drag on his cigarette, Sam snatched it from his mouth and threw it in the hole.

Beau turned to Sam. “Isn’t that just like you; determined to close the barn door after the horse has bolted? In another six or eight months you can come back here and give me all the ‘I-told-you-so’s’ you want, and I won’t have to listen to it Thank God.” Beau lit up another cigarette, took an especially long drag and popped out smoke rings.

They both stood shovels-in-hand studying the stars. It was a minute before Sam spoke again. “I’m just saying that if you don’t tell her soon, all Avery will know is that her Daddy just all of a sudden up and left her without a proper good-bye.”

Beau coughed his way through another fit and stood up, cigarette dangling from his lip. “Come on. Let’s get this done. No more loafing.”

When the hole was finally big enough, Sam and Beau hitched the dead horse up to the truck with ropes and chains and dragged it into the grave. Then they proceeded to shovel the dirt back in. They managed to finish up just as the sky was turning red.

“What do you think it’s like in Ohio?” said Beau lighting up another cigarette.

“Never been,” said Sam. “It’s one of those states nobody ever thinks about unless it’s an election year. Probably a bunch of ugly strip malls back-to-back.”

“Not *that* Ohio,” said Beau.

“Oh, it’s probably chock-full of snow-topped mountains, green grass and forest-covered hills swarming with rabbit, elk and moose with targets painted on their sides; with big hump-backed buffalo roaming the plains where the deer and antelope play. And all you have to do is dip a naked hook into one of the crystal-clear rivers, wait a couple of seconds, yank out a hundred-pound bass and flip it directly into the frying pan.”

“That’s more like it,” said Beau. “See, now that’s the kind of thing a man wants to hear about the place he’ll be moving to in the near future. See Sam, you want to get along with Dad, that’s all you have to do. Let people have their illusions. Go along with everything he says, nod your head yes and think otherwise inside. You never could do that though, could you? Always had to have the last word; always had to be right. Well, when you insist on being right, that’s all you get to be.”

“Yeah...” said Sam, thoughtfully stirring the dirt with a stick, “I suppose.”

“Of course I’m right. For such a smart guy with a string of letters after your name, sometimes when it comes to horse sense, you’re downright challenged. You act all

righteous about telling people the truth. Well the truth is, sometimes you just use the truth like a big stick to beat people over the head with. In that way, you're ornery as Dad. And whose mind you gonna change anyway – a seventy-year old guy who didn't even graduate high school?"

"You mean I have a tendency to keep beating dead horses."

"What'd I just tell you about jokes like that? All I'm saying is, you ever heard that it's more important to be kind than clever? Just rein it in man. Now help me up and let's hoof it back home. Digging that hole has done me in for the day."

Sam put Beau's arm over his shoulder and helped him to his feet. They got into the truck and Beau started driving across the field back to the house.

"Well, I guess your big brother still has things to teach you, doesn't he? So, what are you gonna do at the wedding tomorrow if Dad starts talking politics?"

Sam made of motion of zipping his lips, locking them and throwing away the key.

"That's right," said Beau and he broke into the worst coughing fit yet. "Pass me another coffin nail," he said after he had recovered his breath.

Sam obliged, even lit it for him.