

Roped In  
A commission for Aardvark (6000 words)

By Pappy Wolf

Hauser watched his dad's fingers tap at the steering wheel. The old man stared straight ahead; his face drawn as tightly as the flab would allow. He knew he'd be in for more silence unless he managed to break it.

He saw his opportunity painted on a dilapidated barn. It was a large circle over the door, empty on the inside but ringed with flourishes on the exterior that suggested petals. Or flames. "There's another one," he cried. "Coming up on your left."

His dad glanced through the window. "I see it," he grunted. Then he clammed up again.

Hauser pressed on. "They remind me of the Pennsylvania Dutch hex signs on the barns back in Cherrystone. Only, these ones look like they're turned inside-out."

His dad nodded, sternly.

Hauser refused to give up. "Isn't it weird?"

A sharp inhale of air from the old man. "I guess. I'm sorry if I'm not chatty, but I'm trying to find the interstate. I don't know how I managed to get off the damn thing in the first place."

"It's my fault," Hauser sighed. "I shouldn't have said all that about... y'know. I made you upset. No wonder you got all turned around on that cloverleaf. And now we're in the boonies with pretty much zero phone reception. That's my fault, too. God, I'm useless."

His dad's plump fingers drummed on the wheel. "I just don't want to hear you say things like that. And don't think I'm not wise to what this is really about. Your tuition at a nice college is not a burden for us, okay?"

"Okay." His tone didn't sound convincing, and he could tell by the old man's face that his dad didn't buy it. "I'm sorry," he said, again. He said "sorry" a lot, he realized. He couldn't help it. Anyway, the fact that they had to drive from Pennsylvania to Colorado at the end of his freshman year when they had flown the opposite direction at the start of it...! It seemed obvious that something was wrong. Maybe he shouldn't have applied to Heffernin College in the first place. It was prestigious but pricey. He was lucky to have gotten in. But the college town of Cherrystone was a ritzy enclave and nothing there was cheap. There was expense on top of

expense. He had started to wonder if his dream of becoming a painter was ruining his parents' lives.

His father yawned. "I hate to say it, buddy, but we may have to stop soon. No way we're reaching Denver before three in the morning. Joke's on me for thinking we could do this trip all in one day. I hadn't counted on that traffic jam back in Cincinnati."

"Or getting lost," Hauser added. "Sorry... shit." And then he was apologizing for cursing in front of his father.

The old man smiled for the first time in an hour. "Lord bless you, buddy. You gotta knock it off with the 'sorry' business. Maybe keep it down to one per day. Anyway, it's not all my fault. You see that signpost coming up on your right? No sign attached. I've noticed a fair number of those on this road. I wonder if there *were* signs directing people back to the interstate, except some smartass stole them!"

Hauser managed to chuckle at that. "I hope they didn't steal any signs that say, 'bridge out' or 'blasting zone.'" He'd meant it as a joke, but speaking the words made it seem like a real possibility.

At least his dad thought it was funny. Laughing, he patted Hauser's knee. "C'mon, let's stop and get some food and then we can see about a hotel or something. Start fresh in the morning, y'know?"

The Missouri hills huddled around them. The old highway wound through the ruins of old towns. Hauser glimpsed burnt out motels and cramped brick homes crumbling into rubble. Vines and graffiti ran riot over the remaining walls. There were vandalized chapels and plastic flower wreaths commemorating car wrecks. There were a few darkened diners and sketchy cinderblock taverns, but nothing that looked hospitable. Hauser noticed a remarkable number of home-based businesses. Among the beauty parlors and daycares were several palm readers and mediums. He realized that something was missing from this section of rural America: crosses. They were inescapable elsewhere, but in the last hour, he'd only seen one. And it was upside-down.

The gloomy surroundings would be great subjects for his sketchbook or his camera, if only it wasn't so dark out. If only they had time. And if only he still had any confidence that it wouldn't be a pointless exercise. Art school was tougher than he'd thought. The main thing he'd learned was that he wasn't as good as he'd imagined. His very first year had given him a grueling courseload. It was designed to weed out the posers and hacks. He'd made it through his first portfolio review. Barely. But he was shaken. His friends had told him he was poised for a breakthrough. But he only felt like a fraud.

He gazed at his dad driving with one of his hairy hands on the wheel and his gaze so focused on the road ahead that he expected laser beams to squirt out of his pale gray eyes. Even with his round face and triple chin, he looked like a serious person. A formidable person. His style helped, of course: bushy mustache, bristling stubble, aviator specs with transition lenses, a wardrobe of polo shirts and cargo shorts and a collection of massive wristwatches with multiple dials. He could be corny at times, like all dads, but he had the energy of someone who knew what he was talking about. Someone dependable.

Hauser wondered if his dad was ever disappointed in him. His creative bent made him forgetful and prone to daydreams. He wasted money on frivolous things like anime and vinyl records and vintage bowling shirts. And his nose ring. Oh, how his dad had laughed at the sight of that nose ring! Not the reaction he had expected. Somehow it was worse than outright anger.

Physically, he was different, too. Short and boyish looking with barely any hair on his body besides his pits and his pubes. He shaved every two days, unlike his dad, who shaved twice a day. In addition to his bowling shirts, he favored baggy jeans and combat boots. It fit his sensitive *artiste* style, along with his textured fringe haircut and his nail polish. The only thing about him that resembled his dad was his weight. Some hormone or other had activated his freshman year, adding nearly a hundred pounds to his formerly skinny frame. He secretly resented his dad for it, although he knew that was petty.

They drove for another twenty-five minutes, with nothing promising in sight. At last, a faint glow in the distance solidified into a certified *attraction*: a massive structure styled after the local barns, including the inscrutable symbol painted in the center of it. A few smaller buildings clustered around it, including a convenience store and gas station. A large electric sign indicated the place was called "The Corral." A scrolling LED sign beneath it advertised, "GREAT FOOD! COLD BEER! CHEAP GAS! COMFY BEDS! SATELLITE TV! QUALITY LIVE ENTERTAINMENT!"

The old man pulled into the lot and paused to stare at the obnoxious signage. The sparkling lights seemed to dazzle him; he grew silent for a long while. When Hauser asked what was wrong, he jolted back to attention and laughed, "That's a goddamn hard sell, is all." To the sign, he said, "Okay, already! We surrender!"

"I guess this is the place," Hauser offered. "This or nothing, huh?"

"Food's bound to be good, just a couple hours away from Branson." His dad's gut jiggled in his tucked-in polo as he waddled toward the entrance. Another reason Hauser chose untucked shirts for himself. "I guess they're aiming for overflow tourism. Say, maybe the highway is close after all!"

Hauser gazed at the black, furtive hills. And at the night sky, replete with thousands of glittering stars, undimmed by the glare of any manmade light. *I really doubt it*, he thought. But he didn't want to ruin his dad's fragile mood.

Roughly two dozen vehicles were scattered across the sprawling parking lot. He didn't pay much attention to them, but the longer they walked, the more they made him uneasy. He wasn't a car guy, so he dismissed the feeling. Still, almost none of them were recognizable to him as any specific make or model. All of them were black or gray, except for two. One was a semi-truck trailer, gleaming cherry red in the glow of the motel. Next to it was a vintage Ford Crown Victoria, a steamboat of a car, painted the exact same shade of red with dark tinted windows. Animal horns decorated the grill. Hauser had seen pictures of limousines with steer horns adorning them. These looked more like goat horns.

They entered a lobby with an unmanned front desk and a large door to the side that opened into the restaurant. On the wall behind the desk were numerous framed photos depicting old barns. All of them were abandoned and falling apart, tilting like drunks, doors missing, roofs caving in. They walked up to the desk to get a closer look. A lacquered wooden sign sat atop the desk. A slogan was carved into it: "You're more than our guests. You're our family."

A yelp alerted them to the host station inside the restaurant. A plump man in a theatrical farmer costume trotted over to the lobby desk and asked if they were looking for a room. The old man exhaled, then said, "Screw it. Yeah, one room, please."

With lodging secured, Hauser's dad explained that they also wanted a meal. The host hurried back to his station inside the restaurant, anxiously gesturing for them to follow. "Looks like you're a little short-staffed," his dad remarked, coolly.

"We're working on it," the host said. He had them sign their names in a book, which both Hauser and his dad thought was odd, but they were too tired to question it. They started walking again. "Good show tonight," the host remarked, pointing to an easel with a large sign advertising the evening's entertainment.

The act was called "The Magic of Roscoe and Rooster." Beneath an elaborate logo was the image of a handsome cowboy type in the modern country music mode: square jaw with generous stubble; a sleeveless Western shirt that showed off his biceps; and a black cowboy hat that cast his amber eyes in shadow. He held an acoustic guitar and smiled charmingly at the viewer. Lurking behind him was a fat, beady-eyed doofus with a bushy red mustache and muttonchop sideburns, wearing a fluorescent orange hunting cap and matching camo coveralls with nothing underneath them but his hairy, porcine body. Hauser shuddered at the thought of having to sit through their performance. Well, they'd probably finish their dinner before the fabricated yokels were done making asses out of themselves, and they could get the hell out of there.

A stage dominated the far wall on their left. Behind the rustic proscenium, a curtain hung. It was a shimmering vermilion with the barn's weird symbol decorating it in sequins. The few diners they saw were seated nearby. Hauser and his dad were given a table right in front of the stage,

dead center. Hauser glanced over at the other diners. They were a quiet bunch, endlessly chewing their food while staring at the stage with glassy eyes.

Another heavysset man in a farmer outfit handed them menus and poured water into their glasses. He insisted on standing there while they perused the menus, like he had nothing better to do. His dad opted for a chicken-fried steak, green beans, and mashed potatoes with country gravy. Hauser was ravenous, but unlike his father he was determined to take charge of his weight. He ordered a Cobb salad with dressing on the side.

As soon as their waiter left, the lights dimmed. Small spotlights swept deliriously over the deep red curtain, which creaked opened to reveal a painted backdrop of green hills and tumbledown shacks. A whooping yodel sounded from stage left. The cowboy, "Roscoe," bounded into view from that direction, guitar at the ready. A lasso was slung over one shoulder.

He grinned ingratiatingly at the audience and strummed a chord. In a warm, rich tenor, he sang, "I was totin' my pack along the dusty Winnemucca road, when along came a semi with a high an' canvas-covered load..."

"*I've Been Everywhere*," Hauser's dad said, "Johnny Cash. I can't believe I knew that one! I think I heard it in a commercial one time."

"Cool," Hauser replied, limply. He pulled his phone from his pocket and surreptitiously checked it. Still no signal.

Roscoe's song had started with a loping, lackadaisical tempo but it suddenly accelerated into a pattering list of places the hitchhiker had seen. The cowboy strolled off the stage and serenaded the diners, who regarded him with dull bemusement. A few swayed to the beat as they went on masticating their dinners.

It was a lengthy number, and it was a paltry turnout in the dining room, so he was obligated to circulate around the tables several times. On his last pass by Hauser's table, he sang, "Baraboo, Waterloo, Kalamazoo, Kansas City, Sioux City, *Denver, Cherrystone, what a pity...*"

He arched his eyebrows and grinned mischievously as he pivoted on one of his boots, swinging the neck of the guitar so that it almost smacked Hauser in the face. The next second, he was ambling back to the stage, singing the chorus again. "I've been everywhere, man..."

Hauser shot the back of Roscoe's head a withering look, then turned to his dad. "Are those really the lyrics? They can't be. They don't even rhyme!"

"Search me," the old man shrugged. "I never listened to the thing all the way through."

“But you heard it, right?”

“Heard what?” His dad chugged most of his limeade in one gulp and then looked around the restaurant. “Where the hell did that waiter go?”

The cowboy tipped his hat. “Evenin’, folks! My name’s Roscoe and it’ll be my unvarnished pleasure to entertain y’all tonight! Now, I don’t know where y’all are goin’, and I don’t know where y’all have been. All’s I know is, y’all are here with us tonight. And that makes y’all family! Settle into your seats, tuck into our good home cooking, and let’s get things started!”

Before Roscoe could say another word, Rooster bounded onstage, somehow already out of breath. “Roscoe,” he panted, “you’re back! Where in tarnation have you been?”

Roscoe turned to the audience and winked. Strumming his guitar, he sang, “I was totin’ my pack along the dusty Winnemucca road, when along came a semi with a high an’ canvas-covered load...”

Rooster shut him down by sticking his fat fingers in his ears and shouting, “No, no, no! We don’t got time for all that!” Fixing the audience with a knowing look, he added, “Again.”

Both men paused, presumably for applause.

Roscoe unfroze and peered at the redneck while stroking his chin. “You look like you have news! Suppose you give your cousin Roscoe the skinny.”

Rooster looked out at the audience and said, “Now, ol’ Rooster don’t know nothing about *skinny*.” He paused again and smiled expectantly at the silent audience. “All’s I know is, our long-lost cousin Hoss is in *this very room*.” Roscoe punctuated this announcement with a suspenseful chord from his guitar.

The cowboy hollered, “Yee-haw! That ol’ so-and-so is here? Get his sorry butt onstage so’s I can see him!”

A spotlight blazed to life right over Hauser. Just then, the waiter appeared with a pitcher. He poked Hauser in the arm and said, “That’s you, junior. Get up there.”

“I haven’t gotten my food yet,” Hauser said. A weak rebuttal, he knew. He turned to his dad, who was smiling broadly beneath his mustache.

“Get on up there,” the old man guffawed. “C’mon, son. Do it for me. I kind of need this right now.”

Hauser wasn’t sure what to make of that last remark. Maybe his dad was angry with him for choosing a pricey, faraway college. And now he was making him pay with a very public humiliation. Maybe he knew about this place all along.

“You don’t want to be a bad sport,” the waiter prompted.

Hauser opened his mouth to protest when Rooster’s twangy voice blared in his ears. “There he is,” the redneck shouted. Hauser looked at the stage to see Rooster pointing at him with a stiff, plump arm and his head tilted backwards like the aliens in “Invasion of the Body Snatchers.”

Roscoe had his lasso in hand, twirling it overhead. Suddenly, the rope had swung down over Hauser, cinching his arms to his sides. The cowboy pulled him up the steps to the stage. Hauser looked over at his dad, hoping for some kind of rescue. But no, the old man was slapping the table and laughing so hard he might as well have been dosed with nitrous oxide.

Roscoe made a series of “hmm” and “huh” noises while circling Hauser, poking and prodding him, never once looking him in the eyes. “You sure this is Hoss? He looks *funny*.”

“Well, I didn’t say he looked *good*,” Rooster pouted. “It’s that big city lifestyle, I’ll bet you. Wears a big, brawny grizzly of a man like Hoss down to a dang ol’ nub!” He patted Hauser on the head. “Poor little feller. He needs our help!”

Hauser gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the heat that radiated through his cheeks. He knew his face was bright pink, and then he was embarrassed about being embarrassed. His eyes darted out to where his dad was seated. The old man was tearing into a bowl of onion rings that had appeared out of nowhere and watching him with glittering eyes.

Roscoe slapped his forehead. “Aw, Rooster...! Please, tell me this ain’t gonna involve your cockamamie contraptions...!”

“Of course, it ain’t! I’m offended you even brought them useless things up!”

“Well--! I’m glad you agree, for—”

“What it *is* gonna involve is my *brilliant inventions*. They’re just what Hoss here needs!”

“Please, don’t.”

“Aaaaand I’m off,” Rooster cried, exiting in an exaggerated power walk while Roscoe played atonal “comedy” music.

Roscoe turned back to Hauser. “You *sure* you’re Hoss...?”

“Not really, no,” Hauser answered. He didn’t know what they expected from him. When he was a kid, his family had gone to a show in Las Vegas where an audience member was singled out. But that person had been taken backstage for five minutes before reappearing, so they were given some idea of what to do. This felt more like an ambush.

Conspicuous squeaking heralded the return of Rooster, now pushing a rusting wheelbarrow loaded with junk. “I got everything we need right here,” he declared. With that, he began rummaging through the pile, tossing the contents out onto the stage.

Roscoe was right behind Hauser now. Hauser looked over his shoulder at the cowboy and whispered, “Can you get me out of the lasso, at least?”

Roscoe’s answer hissed through his lustrous white teeth. “I’ll take the lasso off when it’s time. Besides, they ain’t no point in it when your ankles and wrists is already bound.”

Hauser looked down to see the cowboy’s bizarre argument was a solid one. Even though he couldn’t remember it, Roscoe had somehow restrained him further. He felt lightheaded. As Rooster continued his clownish performance, he heard himself plead with the cowboy. “I don’t feel very well. Can we cut this short? I think it’s my blood sugar or something... please, I just need to get some food in me.”

Roscoe squeezed his arms and leaned into his ear. “Oh, you’re getting fed, Hoss. Don’t you worry none about *that*.” He laughed, softly. And not kindly.

Hauser’s eyes darted wildly about his surroundings. More diners seemed to have joined the original crowd. In the dark, it was hard to see them in any detail. But they appeared to be vastly heavier than the rest. And either they were wearing flesh-colored apparel, or they were naked. He had an impulse to run, but he knew he’d only end up squirming across the stage like a worm. And besides, all his strength had fled. There was nothing left to do but stand there.

They didn’t even have to tie him up; that was the sad part. He’d read about scams and how they used something called “the social contract” to hook people who were too nice to speak up. And



that was him all over. Too nice. It was a depressing realization. Even thinking about escaping made him miserable.

*Just tell them to untie you,* he scolded himself. It felt like an impossible task. And instead of doing anything about his situation, he just stood there and analyzed it. That was another of his weaknesses: he was too much in his own head. Imagination was great for art, but not when you used it to ignore real-life problems. Sweat dripped into his eyes, making him blink. He always perspired when he was embarrassed.

“Found it,” Rooster yelled. He held up a trucker cap with “HOSS” printed on the front. “You know Hoss drives a big rig. I’m glad I found one of his old hats buried in all my other stuff.” He waddled over to Hauser and jammed it onto his head, then stepped back to scrutinize his handiwork. “Huh. Don’t look right to me.”

“You’re forgetting,” Roscoe said. “The way I recollect, Hoss had himself a mullet haircut. Too fancy for this old country boy, but then, Hoss always did go in for the finer things in life!” He paused once more, and again there was no reaction from the audience... except for his dad. His dad laughed his ass off.

“That’s an easy fix,” Rooster said. He snatched the cap off Hauser’s skull, and gripped the long, wavy hairs atop his head... and pulled downward. A thousand tiny ants crawled over his scalp. He could feel the hairs moving and shifting, growing out and retracting as his trendy undercut and fringe were transformed into something very different. Roscoe ran his hands over his head, almost lovingly. And he knew then it was a trashy mullet: short and bristling on top with buzzed sides and a luxurious growth of curling hairs on the back that hung down to his shoulders. He could feel the thick, greasy hair brushing against his neck. The cap was unceremoniously jammed back on his head again, with Roscoe pronouncing the results “Perfect!”

Hoarfrost materialized on his spine. It had to be his imagination. Or hypnosis. Yes, that was it. The unctuous bastards had mesmerized him. Maybe the audience, too. That would explain why they weren’t very responsive. He felt a little better.

“That’s an awful dinky belt buckle,” the cowboy observed. “Hoss is flashier than that!”

The redneck held up a cartoonishly large magnifying glass. “Lemme see!” He held it over the buckle for a moment, then pulled it away. It stayed as large as the inflated image, looking like a rhinestone-studded pie plate with an embossed image of a horseshoe.

“That’s so Hoss,” Roscoe said, in an exaggeratedly swishy accent. “What else, now?”

From the audience, Hauser’s old man shouted, “Get rid of that stupid nose ring!”

That shook Hauser. Was he drinking? He had never treated him that way in his life. Was he that dismissive of his own son? Was the mask off?

“I get your meaning,” Roscoe said, brightly. “Easy enough fix. Hold tight, cousin!” He pulled on the ring, which painlessly released itself from Hoss’ cartilage. Then he flipped it into the air like a coin and let it land on the back of his hand. After slapping his other hand over it, he pulled the hand away again to reveal a much thicker, heavier ring in its place. “Zero gauge,” he explained. “That’s what Hoss would rock. And I think we all know where.”

The cowboy’s eyes landed on Hauser’s crotch. The kid had a pretty good idea of what he meant, and it terrified him. Roscoe held up the ring and snapped his fingers. The ring vanished. He displayed his empty palms and said, “Nothing up my sleeve, folks!”

Hauser’s dad boomed them. “Fake! Let’s see it!”

Hauser yelped. “We don’t need to see it,” he cried. He looked at his father. He didn’t seem like himself at all. Was there something in the food? Were they all hypnotized?

“That’s for later,” Roscoe said. “Can’t give away the whole candy store all at once! Let’s move on. Rooster! Where in tarnation is Hoss’ tits...?”

From the audience, his dad roared. The fat waiter had returned with more appetizers they hadn’t ordered. He loaded up his dad’s plate with hot wings, jalapeno poppers, and a big bowl of spinach dip with an even larger bowl of tortilla chips. The old man shoveled the food into his maw, staring at his son with a coldly gleeful expression. Hauser’s eyes hurt, looking at him in the darkened dining room. The shadows were playing tricks on him, making his father look taller and thinner than he really was.

Rooster scoffed. “Tits...! I swear, cousin, that’s all you ever think about!”

“Leastways, I actually *seen* some in my day,” Roscoe shot back. To the audience, he smirked, “Rooster here is what you might call an *aspiring* fucker. Hell, more like *perspiring* fucker! That’s why he ain’t never done the deed yet. No self-respecting or *disrespecting* boy will *have* his stinky ass!”

That was an unexpected turn. Not just the swearing, but the gay-friendly character. Although he wasn’t gay himself, Hauser considered himself an ally.

“Can I just add the tits, already...?” Rooster sounded genuinely hurt. Roscoe gave his cousin permission to go ahead, and then the redneck strapped something around Hauser’s chest. It looked like metal salad bowls attached to a belt and connected to a bicycle pump.

Roscoe addressed the audience. “Hoss is naturally big all over, but Rooster here always wants to start with the tits!” He strummed a tune on his guitar and transitioned into a song. “That’s ‘cause he’s *crazy, crazy for lovin’ man titties...!*”

“Patsy Cline,” Hauser’s dad called out. “Hell yeah!” He held the bowl of dip over his mouth and scraped the remains into his mouth with a tortilla chip. There was food on his cheeks. That had to be it, Hauser thought. That’s why it looked like his mustache had acquired little curls on each end.

Rooster ignored this and busied himself with pumping. Hauser felt the metal bowls clamp themselves to his chest, through the silky fabric of his bowling shirt. His pecs were already a bit chubby from gaining all that weight. But now it felt like his flesh was being pulled outward. Suddenly, the pecs met with something cold and firm. The bowls, separated from his chest only by his thin shirt. The redneck unbuckled the straps and let the bowls fall. Hauser gasped. Two fat, bouncy boobs adorned his chest. On a truly obese or muscular man, they would blend into his general bulk. On Hauser, they looked like a woman’s breasts.

A strange light glinted in Rooster’s eyes as he stared at his handiwork. A bit of drool emerged from one corner of his mouth. His fat hands hung in front of his belly, the fingers flexing. Roscoe shoved him away. “Easy, horndog. You know damn well; Hoss would kick your ass for that.”

‘He ain’t Hoss yet,’ Rooster whined.

They were talking in notably quieter tones. Hauser had the suspicion that this dialog wasn’t meant for the audience.

“Just fix up his belly now,” Roscoe growled. “Kid creeps me the hell out, with that Dolly Parton rack on him.” He looked out at the crowd and said in a much louder voice, “Who among y’all wants to see us add a genuine redneck beer belly to this little city-slickin’ butterball, huh?”

Hauser’s dad hooted and hollered. Hauser couldn’t help thinking that his mustache looked wider, with definite handlebar curls. A dark triangle had appeared beneath his lower lip. Like a soul patch.

Hypnosis, he reminded himself.

A fat waiter appeared onstage carrying a tray with a beer bottle on it. Roscoe grabbed the tray and held it out for the crowd to inspect. "Ordinary bottle of beer, see?"

Although he felt more relaxed about the ridiculous situation that he'd found himself in, Hauser still wanted out of it. He told Roscoe that he didn't drink beer, hoping to short-circuit their act and get them to pick on somebody else.

But Roscoe only laughed. "*Bullshit*, Hoss! I know what you got up to at Heffernin – I'm sorry, I meant to say "The Heifer," as that was your favorite honkytonk. And I know for a fact, this is your brand!"

Hauser's eyes went wide as he regarded the bottle. It was a local IPA he got smashed on most weekends. He hadn't expected to see it in Missouri. If he was really seeing it.

Roscoe passed the tray to his cousin. "I expect you got some manner of plan for this," he sighed.

"I always got plans," Rooster said, proudly.

"Yeah, but you ain't never had *manners*," Roscoe replied. The cowboy and the redneck froze again for a moment. In the audience, Hauser's dad was jabbing his index finger at the stage while sucking down another soda. He knew he was imagining it, but it looked like his father had changed shirts. Instead of his polo, he was wearing a satin button-up number with French cuffs. A large cloth napkin had been tucked into the collar to protect the expensive garment from his sloppy eating.

The redneck removed his hunting cap and fished a welder's mask out of his garbage pile. After he put it on, he dug into his pockets with his free hand and eventually produced a small capsule. "Got me some honest-to-God hillbilly magic right here!"

"Looks like a rabbit turd," Roscoe opined.

"That's 'cause you aint' no scientist," the redneck sneered.

"Neither are you, you preschool dropout! I don't suppose you have one of them masks for me, do you?"

"Nope!" He dropped the capsule into the beer bottle. The bottle vibrated, then unleashed a series of popping sounds, a gargling noise, the honk of a car horn, the clang of a gong, and then a fountain of multi-colored sparks leaping ten feet into the air. When it was done, Rooster took a

pair of tongs from his back pocket and used it to hand the bottle to Roscoe. A sound like bacon frying cut through the air when Roscoe's skin touched the glass. With a yodeling howl, he tossed it into the air, and Rooster caught it again on the tray with no drops spilled. Roscoe snatched the tongs away and cocked his fist, like he was about to punch him. After testing the bottle a few times with his fingers, he seemed to determine that it was safe to touch again. He held the mouth to Hauser's lips.

"Down the hatch, big guy," he cooed.

It still tasted like his favorite beer. Mostly. This version was a bit sweeter. Under the hot lights, it was a relief to feel something cool running down his throat.

Rooster struck a pose where he bent one knee and gestured at Hauser with both arms. "And now, the magic happens," he proclaimed. The seconds crawled by with no result. He glared at Rooster, then addressed the audience again. "I *said*, 'And now, the magic happens!'"

A fizzing rumble in Hauser's stomach burbled up into his mouth. He belched. A horrid taste invaded his mouth. It wasn't just beer. There was an acrid, stale flavor of tobacco, a sugary vanilla reminiscent of snack cake frosting, and a dark, spicy taste, like cheap rum. He belched again, longer this time. A third belch slipped from his mouth. This one seemed endless. A tightness in his belly tempted Hauser to look down. To his horror, he saw his hated gut slowly inflating, stretching the baggy shirt to its limit, and causing it to ride up on his belly.

Roscoe strummed a bluegrass-themed fanfare. "Hell's bells, Hoss, you're looking more like yourself already!"

Rooster grabbed the bloated stomach with both hands and shook it. The gut continued to jiggle for a moment after he took his hands away. Then he thumped it a few times with the back of his hand while Roscoe leaned in, facing the audience, with his hand to his ear. "Sounds about ripe to me," he quipped. The pair froze. Hauser's dad clapped loudly. He looked even stranger now. Not only did he seem thinner, but more muscular. His handlebar mustache was a bit larger, along with the soul patch, which now extended to the bottom of his chin. Even his hair was different, looking a bit longer, and greasier.

It was a strange act. And an interminable one. He had to wonder who it was for. It felt like Roscoe and Rooster were amusing themselves more than the diners. He could sense himself detaching from his situation again, but he couldn't help it. Something in his subconscious was driving it. Rooster was doing something to his chest again. He looked over the fat fuck's shoulder at the pale blobs at the back of the dining room. They really did seem to be naked. And strictly male, like everyone else here. As he strained to focus on them, additional blobs materialized. They were multiplying.

“Ready, set, go,” Roscoe shouted. He strummed a chord and launched into another song: “I had tears wellin’ up cold, deep inside, like my heart’s sprung a big break...”

“George Jones,” Hauser’s dad shouted. “*The Race is On!*” He removed his aviator glasses and closed his eyes, like they were hurting him. A fat waiter appeared holding an empty tray. The old man placed the specs on the tray and resumed staring at his son with a cruel, detached air.

Rooster had unbuttoned Hauser’s shirt and attached plungers to the ends of his man-boobs, which now sat atop his mammoth belly. Holes had been drilled through the wooden handles and ropes tied to them. Rooster was facing away from Hauser with the ropes slung over his back, like he was going to pull Hauser behind him. Although Hauser couldn’t feel him pulling, Rooster made a show of leaning forward and grunting, like it was a heroic effort. Rooster upped the tempo until he got to the chorus. Then the plungers popped off Hauser’s body, causing the redneck to tumble face-first onto the stage. Hauser dared to glance downward.

His nipples were bright pink and swollen to the size of thumbs, with areolae the size of jar lids.

*Please, let this just be hypnosis,* Hauser thought.

Rooster sat up and shook his head, his flab making a rubbery noise. Roscoe pinched Hauser’s nipples, sending a surprising mix of pain and pleasure through his body. The cowboy smiled at the audience and said, “Did somebody order extra pepperoni...?”

“I’ll take some,” his dad yelled. Although he barely looked like his dad anymore. His weathered face was angular, square-jawed, and handsome. His hair was slicked back and definitely longer than before, with shiny curls dangling below the level of his ears.

Hauser felt then that he was hypnotized for sure. His father wouldn’t treat him this way, no matter how much he’d pissed the old man off. No, it was his guilty subconscious creating a cruel parody of his dad as a way of punishing himself. At least it couldn’t go on for too much longer. The spell would be broken, the show would be over, he’d finally get to eat, and they’d go off to their room to sleep together. *To sleep*, he corrected himself. It was a weird thought. But just a thought, certainly. His therapist had told him that the brain produces all kinds of random thoughts. Not all of them meant something.

Besides, why would he want to even sleep in the same bed as his old man? The two of them spooning, his dad’s fat arm wrapped around him, caressing his own fat belly, and maybe working lower than that, to...

*Hypnosis.* God willing, it was hypnosis.

Rooster busied himself poring through his collection of junk. Hauser took the opportunity to quietly plead with Roscoe to untie him. That would be a start, he thought.

Roscoe whispered back, "You's already untied, dumbass. I know you ain't goin' nowhere looking' like this. Like you and your pa could locate the highway anyhow...! So just shut your trap and go along, like a good ol' boy."

The ropes had vanished. All of them. Hauser gazed stupidly at his hands. It felt like he hadn't been able to move them in weeks. They fluttered about, the muscles spasming after being constricted for so long, and then they landed on his chest. The fingers grazed his freakish nipples, sending jolts of tingling pleasure to his crotch. For hypnosis, it felt depressingly real. He turned again to Roscoe, his mouth gaping, trying to find the right question to ask.

The cowboy ignored him, choosing to address his cousin instead. "Yo, Rooster! Hoss here is talking crazy! You got somethin' we can shut him up with until he's fixed?"

"You know it," the redneck said, gaily. He tossed a small object to the cowboy. It was a cigar, a fat one. Before Hauser could formulate an objection, Roscoe placed it in his mouth.

"You sit tight, Hoss," the cowboy said. "I got me one of your old cigar lighters right here." An odd, cylindrical implement with a flip-up lid was in his hand, blasting the tip of the cigar with a steady blue flame. Hauser tried to spit the cigar out, but it seemed to be glued to his teeth.

Roscoe leered at the audience. "Ain't that cute? Poor Hoss forgot how a cigar works!" He pinched Hauser's nose shut. Hauser fought against breathing in for as long as he could. But at last, he was obliged to breathe in the smoke. It was blisteringly hot and heavily spiced, and it felt like it was slithering down into his lungs like a living creature. His life drawing teacher was a cigar smoker, and he knew that cigar smoke wasn't meant to be breathed in so deeply. Not that protocol or even common sense mattered to a sadist like Roscoe.

The smoke penetrated his chest and burned inroads to his limbs and his skull, soaking into his brain, making him dizzy. Just when he thought he couldn't take any more, there was a sharp cracking noise and a flash of light and heat that blinded him. With his ears ringing, he saw the charred remains of the cigar still clamped between his teeth. Swearing in a deep, gritty voice, he spit the thing out.

"ROO-STER...!" The cowboy chided the redneck with a sing-song exasperation, and then paused for more applause that never came. Except for Hauser's dad, of course.

The old man was tearing into a rare steak with a frosty mug of beer in his other hand, stamping his feet and hollering, shreds of beef flying from his mouth. The satin shirt was now covered in

Western-style embroidery. His arms and chest were brawny with muscle, his belly shrunken to a reasonable size for a man his age, with the shirt hugging every contour.

Rooster assumed a conciliatory pose and whined, "Now, how's was I supposed to know the dang thing was gonna do that? But hey... at least he's got his whiskers back, now!"

"Whiskers, nothin'," the cowboy raged. "That's soot!" He rubbed at Hauser's cheek to demonstrate. But Hauser could feel dense, short hairs moving beneath Roscoe's fingers. "I'll be," the cowboy said, wonderingly. "Them's whiskers!"

"Finally," the old man called out.

That stung. There had been some tension between his father and himself, but he'd never felt like such a disappointment to him until tonight. He caressed the newborn stubble. It wasn't real, he knew, but it was nice to pretend it was. Plenty of his guy friends had beards, some of them very impressive. He'd dreamed about having some face fur to match.

Or at least, he thought he had. The smoke was still in his system, feeling like it was winding around his bones and muscles and arteries like a vine. It seeped into his thoughts, rounding off the edges of his memories, whispering new ideas to him.

Panic scratched at his soul. He had to get rid of the smoke, somehow. He tapped Roscoe on the shoulder and groaned, "Please, the cigar...!" He tried to say smoke after that, but his mouth wouldn't cooperate. And his throat still had a painful itch when he spoke, making his normally gentle voice sound gravely and irritable.

To the audience, Roscoe said, "I'm sorry, cousin! That's right inhospitable of me! Rooster, get Hoss here a fresh cigar."

Rooster started digging through his heap of trash again.

Hauser rubbed his stubble as he tried to think of what to do. A pleasant haze was drifting over his brain like a fogbank. It did seem easier to just stay on stage and enjoy the show. As he stroked the hairs, they seemed to grow and multiply. In seconds, the shadow of whiskers developed into a full beard.

An even longer, thicker cigar was thrust into his hand, along with the peculiar lighter and a cutting tool. Roscoe gave him no instruction. After a moment, Rooster chimed in, saying, "Go on ahead, Hoss! You fire up them things some twenty times a day!" He turned to the audience and added, "Y'know, we was gonna call Hoss 'Smokey' on account of how much he loves cigars, but



that name was already taken. By my ma.” His smile coagulated on his face as he awaited laughter.

Back at their table, his dad was accepting a similarly huge cigar and a light from a waiter. Broad sideburns had materialized on his face, running down from his temples to the hard edge of his jawline. Meanwhile, his slicked-back hair had grown long enough to hang past his shoulders.

Roscoe was strumming his guitar again, strutting around the stage, singing, “Well, I’m a sucker for fine Cuban cigars, the problem is I can’t afford them, but last year I went and got myself a whole box...”

“*Brad Paisley*,” the old man yelled. “Fuckin’ A!” His voice sounded funny. There was a twang to it, like he’d picked up the locals’ accent.

While Hauser puzzled over this, his hands moved on their own, and the next thing he knew he was puffing confidently on the huge cigar while Rooster played spoons on his knee as accompaniment.

When Roscoe finished and took a bow to a mostly silent reception, Rooster grinned beneath his mustache and said to the cowboy, “How do you like them apples? Hoss is lookin’ more like himself already!”

“I dunno,” Roscoe said. “He’s still way too puny. And I don’t recall Hoss ever goin’ bowlin’ in his life!”

Rooster called out to the audience, “Who wants to see us make Hoss huge?”

“Me,” the old man hollered. He took a long gulp of beer and wiped the foam from his gigantic handlebar mustache.

“Well, tough shit,” Roscoe laughed. “That part weren’t next! But you know Rooster, always spoilin’ things.”

“He ain’t wrong,” the redneck nodded. “Why, this one time, there was this carton of eggs I done left on the porch of my trailer in the middle of August...”

“Shut your trap and just fix the shirt already,” the cowboy shot back.

“Easy as rhubarb pie,” Rooster said. “Would you rebutton the subject, pretty please?” He rummaged through his pile while Roscoe buttoned up the bottom half of Hauser’s bowling shirt, leaving the top half to suggestively lift his bosom and show off his oversized nipples.

Hauser’s stared at the handsome man in the front row with the big handlebar mustache. He’d had the impression the guy was his father, but the smoky voice in his head explained that his dad didn’t look like that. No, he had to be a stranger. A very hot stranger.

“Found it,” the redneck announced. He advanced on Hauser, shaking a can of spray paint. “Lift your arms, Hoss!” When Hauser just stood there, dumbfounded, Rooster turned to audience and drawled, “He ain’t liftin’ his arms.”

The cowboy seized Hauser’s arms and raised them over his head. While Rooster went up on his tip-toes and flounced about with the paint can, Roscoe stood back and plucked a plaintive tune, singing, “You were there in my arms, alone in the moonlight, the trees played the waltz of the wind...”

The hunky stranger called out, “*Waltz of the Wind! Hank Williams*, damn fuckin’ skippy!”

Rooster danced around Hauser in circles in a crude imitation of ballet, spraying his shirt with the can. No pigment seemed to emerge, just moisture. But when Hauser looked down, he saw that his golden yellow bowling shirt had transformed into a red Western shirt covered in black embroidery. On the left and right sides were symbols like he’d seen on the barns in the area, and around these were goats, dancing on their hind legs. Botanical patterns concealing arcane symbols comprised the rest of the stitching.

Roscoe pretended to think for a moment, then shook his head. “Nope, still ain’t right.”

“Tell me how so,” the redneck demanded.

“Hoss always hated sleeves,” Roscoe grinned. And he yanked on Hauser’s sleeves, which immediately separated from the rest of the shirt and flopped down his arms onto the stage.

Hauser took the cigar from his mouth, breathing a great cloud of smoke, and caressed the delicate needlework. “That’s a right pretty shirt,” he growled. “I mean, it’s a... right... pretty shirt.” He hadn’t wanted to say “right” but he couldn’t help it. He wondered if he was just getting into the spirit of the show. But he felt out of sorts. Sometimes he felt like a volunteer, and other times it seemed like the obnoxious showmen really were related to him.

He clamped down on the cigar again. A hair tickled his tongue and glued itself to the roof of his mouth. He tried to wipe it off with his finger, but it stubbornly refused to move. A pungent

chemical smell had attached itself to his flesh. Diesel fuel. More hairs slipped past his teeth and brushed over his tongue.

At last, he realized his mustache had curled past his upper lip and was getting caught in his mouth. He pawed at it with his free hand.

Roscoe smirked at him. "Beard's comin' along just dandy! What do you think, Rooster?"

The redneck mugged for the catatonic audience and drawled, "I dunno... could be longer!" With that, he grabbed the bushy growth on Hauser's chin and tugged on it. A noise like tearing denim accompanied a tingling sensation as the whiskers were stretched out to over a foot in length. In his daze, Hauser marveled at the sheer mass of his beard. He could see it when he looked down and feel it rustling against his smooth, round man-tits. As he puffed on his cigar, he got lost in watching the smoke settle into it, scenting it, making it even manlier.

"Perfecto," the cowboy declared.

"I thought he smoked 'Romeo & Juliets,'" the redneck said. He doubled over with laughter and slapped his knee. With zero response from the audience, he looked over the crowd, abashed, and mumbled, "That's cigar brand... humor. Hoo boy. Um, how's about we fix his boots next?"

He dug a large polka-dotted handkerchief and a can of polish from his junk pile. Crouching down in front of Hauser, he miraculously pulled both of his laces off his boots in one swift motion.

As Roscoe launched into a rockabilly number about a shoeshine boy, the redneck slathered his combat boots in a dark paste and used the handkerchief to vigorously rub it into the leather. He shot Hauser a demented grin and whispered, "I could rub all kinds of things while I'm down here, big guy.

"Fuck the hell off," Hauser hissed back. He couldn't get over how deep and rough his voice was sounding. The cigars were to blame, probably. How long had he been smoking them? It wasn't clear to him. He tried to focus on the experience, but he could feel Rooster rubbing and tugging at his boots, all while grunting lustily. Was he getting off on serving him? It seemed that way, and Hauser wasn't sure that it bothered him. Finally, the fat fuck popped back up to his feet and flourished the handkerchief, which burst into flame and disintegrated. It was hard to see past his belly, but Hauser lifted a leg and saw that he was wearing garish red cowboy boots, embossed with horned skulls and leaping flames. His favorite boots, the smoke told him, and who was he to disagree...? He was glad he decided to wear them tonight. He'd had no idea he would be onstage.

While he savored the taste of spiced tobacco, a harsh rumbling and squeaking abraded his eardrums. He looked up to see Rooster pushing a small vintage refrigerator across the stage. A large hand crank protruded from the center of the door. Colorful tubes and light bulbs stuck out of the sides, and a big round hole had been cut into the top.

Roscoe strummed a fanfare. “We’re gettin’ to the good shit now, guys! See, poor ol’ Hoss here is lookin’ way too smooth. Gotta put some hair back on his chest! And his back and arms and legs and rump and taint...!”

Rooster lifted a flap on his hunting cap and put a fat hand to his ear. “T’ain’t what now?” He froze, smiling moronically.

Roscoe rolled his eyes. “T’ain’t what I’m talkin’ about, you shit-for-brains backwoods baboon! Just tell everyone how this gadget works!”

Rooster cleared his throat and placed a pair of reading glasses on the tip of his knobby nose. “Well, y’all must know about them steam cabinets city folk use to draw the sweat outta a feller. This here is a freezing cabinet to stimulate the ol’ follicles! Go ahead inside, Hoss!”

The burly stranger in the audience whooped at this. “Fur ‘im up, boys!” As the cowboy and the redneck hustled him into the device, Hauser glanced back at the man. His broad soul patch had flourished, becoming a pointy VanDyke beard. Bright amber eyes glinted beneath his arched, furry eyebrows. Hauser grinned, flattered by the attention.

Hauser dutifully poked his head through the hole while Rooster shut the door and secured it with several yards of heavy chain and a padlock. He was having trouble recalling how he’d gotten here, but the two men seemed nice enough.

Roscoe faced the crowd. “While my dumbass cousin tries to make his bullshit contraption function — and I ain’t referrin’ to his pecker this time — I need me a song to sing. Somethin’ about the cold. Any suggestions, audience?”

The vague, portly figures in the rear had gotten up from their tables and were milling aimlessly about. A plaintive lowing echoed through the dining hall.

The cowboy grunted. Lustily. Grabbing his bulging crotch, he breathed into his mic, “Now, y’all know how much ol’ Roscoe loves that sound, but I need me someone capable of human speech.” He pointed at the stranger, whose wavy, ebony locks had grown out to Buffalo Bill proportions. A waiter handed him a red felt cowboy hat with a broad brim. As the man placed it on his head, he shouted out, “*The Blizzard!* That there’s a Jim Reeves classic!”

Roscoe nodded. "You know your country, brother, and I salute you for it."

Rooster fiddled with the invention's nonsensical controls, then took a moment to extricate Hauser's beard from the hole. He lovingly fluffed it out and fanned it across the top of the box. Leaning in, he flicked his tongue out between two fingers and growled, "You and me's gonna get up to all kinds of nasty-ass foolin' around, big boy." Turning to the audience once more, he pulled something resembling an old garage door opener from his pocket and said, "Here we go!"

The cowboy played a somber ballad, crooning, "There's a blizzard comin' on, how I'm wishin' I was home, for my pony's lame and he can't hardly stand..."

A sudden blast of freezing air from all sides startled Hauser, making him shout, "Shit FUCK—!" In a notably higher, clearer voice, he added, "I'm sorry, shit, I'm real sorry...!" His teeth clacked against one another like castanets. A white mist shot up from the hole, mingling with the cigar smoke and frosting his beard. Ash tumbled from the cigar into his whiskers, blending with the ice.

"You don't gotta be cold, Hoss," Rooster advised. "Fight it!"

Hauser didn't know how that would work. But as he felt his body grow numb, a pugnacious resentment boiled up within his mind. He loved a challenge... he remembered that now. And he hated losing.

The cold could go fuck itself. His muscles tensed, and a ragged groan arose from his throat. A mild itch in his epidermis escalated to burning sensation. The cold vanished. The mist escaping the hole on top flashed over into steam. When the heat became too much, he forced himself to bear it for another minute and then pounded on the inside of the cabinet with his fists. "Fuck this shit," he roared. "Let's just move on to the next trick, already!"

Tittering, the redneck loosened the chain and opened the door. As Hauser stepped back onto the stage and stretched his limbs, he had the unfamiliar feeling of air moving over his body hair, sending waves undulating through it like it was a wheat field. The steam had brought him to tears; he could barely see anything. He blinked them away.

His body was unrecognizable. Long, dark hair had sprouted everywhere below his neck except for his palms, and (he guessed) the soles of his feet. The coverage was so thick, no skin showed through. It was a pelt suitable for a gorilla.

Hardly believing his senses, he stroked the furry growth, dazzled by its sheen and its silky texture. A musk teased his nose. Not an unclean smell; this was closer to a heavy cologne. He imagined how much better it would smell after it blended with the aroma of his cigars.

He looked back at Rooster. “Not that I’m complainin’, mind you, but it looks like you kinda *overdid it.*”

The redneck scoffed. “Hell, that’s only on account it’s so concentrated. Once we get you back to full size, you’ll look... well, I wouldn’t say ‘normal’...”

“Hoss ain’t never been what you might call normal,” Roscoe interjected. “And praise be for that!”

Hauser patted his beard as he tried to process this new information. He wondered if his cousins had put some kind of whammy on him. They were tricky little shits, always knocking him out, and then he’d wake up with one of them slurping on his Johnson.

...No, he thought, that wasn’t right. His cousins were named Mallory and Kendra. They were tween girls and they were into gymnastics and Timothy Chalomet, not... pervy incest shit like... these horrible showmen...

His eyes were watering again. It was the smoke, stinging them like a cloud of gnats. The room was growing darker. The harder he looked, the less it looked like an auditorium. He seemed to be in a vast barn with weathered rafters and a hay-strewn dirt floor. At the far end, a herd of pale, snuffling creatures crowded against one another, incessantly rubbing at their nipples and bellies and cocks...

Fingers snapped, an inch away from his nose. The house lights flared back up to full strength. Hoss batted the hand away from his face. Fucking prettyboy Roscoe, behaving like a jackass. Like always.

Fuck that prick. Fuck him and Rooster, both. He scanned the crowd, searching for a fresh man to put the moves on. Almost all of them were dull-eyed mouth breathers. Except for a tall, muscular slice of beefcake in a red cowboy hat. The man winked at Hoss as he took a last bite of dessert. And then he whipped his napkin away from his collar, revealing a shirt unbuttoned to the bottom of his enormous, lushly hairy pecs. The stud licked his lips. Clearly, he still had an appetite.

Hoss tilted his head back and narrowed his eyes, one corner of his lips curled just slightly, sending the hunk a message. They’d screw, hell yeah, but the stud was going to serve him, not the other way around. The gorgeous man stroked his pointed beard, like he was considering it. Well, he could keep “considering it” while his ass was getting pounded.

But that would be a lot more satisfying if he was the correct height and build. For now, he looked like a furry pear with toothpicks for limbs. He cast a disparaging glance at Roscoe, who was strutting about the dining room again with his blasted guitar while Rooster dug into his

apparently bottomless wheelbarrow. The cowboy strummed a seemingly endless vamp while intoning, "Big John, Big John, Big John..."

The silent morons perked up at this and halted their chewing to stare rapturously at Hoss.

Roscoe hollered, "Fuck yeah!" The second word morphed into a yodel. "Our regulars know what this next song means. It's time to pump our boy Hoss up, up, UP!" With that, he mounted the stage again, resuming his chant of "Big John."

Rooster stood up and said to the crowd, "And how *do* a feller pump up? Why, through years of diligent and downright boring exercise, naturally. Unless he's got hisself a set of Rooster's genuine patented kettleballs, of course!"

"I think you mean *kettleballs*," Roscoe said, baring his gleaming white choppers.

"I said what I said," Rooster shot back, hoisting up two props that looked like bowling ball-sized "truck nuts" with handles attached. The pair froze again, to allow for the burly stranger in the red cowboy hat to laugh his ass off. After they unfroze, Roscoe gestured for Hoss to take the obscene props from his cousin.

They were heavy as hell, but Hoss was determined not to put them back down. Even though his arms were already cramping up. He glowered at Roscoe. "What the hell are these even for?"

"Y'know," the cowboy mused, "I ask myself the same question about Rooster every day!" After pausing for another anemic audience response, he added, "You lift them babies and you'll get big and strong. And when I say big, I mean tall, not just broad!"

Something inside Hoss wanted to oblige his cousin. But part of him still wasn't comfortable with the situation. He had a sense of being *too* present, *too* aware. "Mindfulness," that's what his roommate at Heffernin called it, but it was an itchy, intimidating feeling.

No, that wasn't right. He'd never gone to college in his life. What did he do when he was in his late teens, early twenties? He had some rough memories of partying in honkytonks and breaking up fights with his sheer brute size. He fancied himself an unofficial bouncer in that way. And there was trucking school, of course. But these crude reminiscences were overlaid with crisper memories of some art school way out east, and hipster boys in thrift shop clothes with big ol' beards, like his own. His arms gave out at last and dropped the grotesque weights onto the stage.

In a stage whisper, Roscoe asked him if he was feeling poorly.

"I don't belong here," he whispered back. His voice was a prissy whine, pathetic to his ears, but it felt more solid than anything else here. "I should be in Denver right now. Please, can you just let me go so I can get back home?"

The cowboy's phony smile slipped from his face. He seized Hoss' whiskers and pulled him close, snarling, "You are just bound and determined to ruin this, ain't you, boy? It ain't gonna happen, though. Not on my goddamned watch." He turned again to the audience. With a bright, merry tone, he said, "You know what I *just now remembered* about Hoss? He's way older than this! Like, about thirty-five years older! And that means...?"

Rooster hurried over and joined his cousin to say, "No mullet! Naw, ol' Hoss is bald as a cueball!"

"Or your mom," Roscoe added. He lifted Hoss' hat from his head. Rooster took hold of the back of Hoss' hair and pulled. A second later, the hair slipped from Hoss' smooth dome like a bad wig.

A shock vibrated through Hoss' body. He could feel a sudden tightness in his face around his eyes and mouth. Silver hair materialized in his beard, replacing a third of the raven ones. He lifted one of his furry arms. His dark pelt was in the same shape, a goodly amount of salt blended with the pepper. At the same time, a chasm opened in his expanded memories. The college boy recollections ceased over three decades back, leaving a dark void that swiftly filled with anecdotes about driving a semi, fucking in truck stop bathrooms, more partying, more scrapping with unruly drunks, more food, more beer, more cigars...

He reeled from this, stumbling backwards and almost falling on his fat ass. But he felt more like himself. He pointed at his cousin's unseemly weights. "I, uh, I just lift these, huh?"

Roscoe took up his guitar again, singing, "Big John, Big John..."

Hoss did a few curls with them, his tendons warming up and straining painfully to continue. It felt odd at first, exercising with a cigar in his mouth, but the smoke whispered to him that this was his normal routine. What else could he do, but accept it as fact? His muscles ached terribly, but he felt power surging into him, giving him renewed determination. He could sense himself growing bigger... but not all over. His testes tingled with pleasure, and he could almost hear the cum building up inside them, roiling like ocean waves in a typhoon.

Meanwhile, Roscoe sang, "Every morning in the mine you could see him arrive, weighed 6'6" and weighed 245, kind of broad in the shoulder and narrow at the hip, and everybody knew you didn't give no lip to Big John..."



"*Big Bad John*," the handsome stranger yelled out. "Jimmy..."

"Jimmy Dean," Roscoe hollered back at him. "You're a country music fan, we fucking get it, Jesus...!"

"Just for that, no tip," the stranger laughed.

"I got a feeling you give out more than just the tip," the cowboy teased.

"Only one way to find out," the stranger shot back.

"I got a song to sing, hot stuff," Roscoe said. "We'll sort your bullshit out after the show." With that, he launched back into his number.

A sudden movement in his peripheral vision drew Hoss' attention to Rooster, who scurried over to unzip his jeans and unbuckle his belt. "That was a close one," the redneck confided. "These puppies look fit to explode!"

Hoss didn't know what he meant, until he looked down and saw his sack swelling up to the size of a medicine ball and plopping down onto the stage, with firehose shaft sticking straight out and dribbling pre all over his Prince Albert piercing. The weights followed his balls, slipping from his sweaty paws and clanking onto the floor. He kicked out with his left leg, cuffing Rooster in the chin and sending him flying. But that act of malice sent him off-balance and he landed painfully on his tailbone.

Rooster limped over and looked at him with a shit-eating grin. "That's why I calls them *kettleballs*," he explained.

Hoss laid back and stomped his feet. "I don't give a shit," he raged. "Just fix me!"

Roscoe took his arm and helped him sit upright. "That's the whole point of the show, Hauser," he said, softly.

Calling him by the wrong name just made him angrier. "Who the fuck is *Hauser*?"

"Nobody," Rooster said. "Literally, nobody. That was just a little test. You passed it, by the way."

Hoss's arm shot out and clutched the redneck's throat. "Fuck you and fuck your test! Just put me to rights afore I pound your goofy ass!"

Rooster leered at him. "Is that a promise?"

Roscoe addressed the audience again. "We're gonna have to squeeze all the extra strength from Hoss' balls into the rest of his body. But we can't do it alone! Can we get a volunteer from the audience...? Oh, that didn't take long at all!"

The stranger was bounding toward the stage, cigar in hand. "I've been waiting for an opportunity like this," he growled.

Roscoe snapped his fingers rhythmically as the redneck and the stranger pounced on Hoss' swollen balls, then launched into "Sixteen Tons" by Tennessee Ernie Ford. "Some people say a man is made out of mud, a poor man is made out of muscle and blood, muscle and blood and skin and bones, a mind that's weak and a back that's strong..."

The other two men slowly, lovingly massaged his set, forcing the mass outward. Hoss leaned back and closed his eyes. A thrilling, tickling, prickling ecstasy trickled up into his chest and arms and neck, and downward into his legs. His cock telescoped down into a reasonable length of ten inches, although it was as thick as a beer can and harder than iron. He felt his limbs stretch out and plump up, acquiring dense muscle and a soft layer of flab over that. Cool air touched his flesh as the bestial coat of hair spread out over his expanding body. He turned his weary head sideways and gazed at the spent cigar that had dropped from his mouth when he had fallen. He could still feel the hot smoke slithering around inside him, gathering in his skull, reshaping the folds in his brain, rearranging his synapses. The smoke fixed his faulty memories, clearing out the ridiculous dreams of being a chubby little loser with a pipe dream of artistry. He was a trucker. He worked with machinery. He provided a service. He was useful. That was all he needed to be. When his sack had been shrunken to the size of his (admittedly meaty) fist, the redneck and the stranger helped him to his feet.

He towered over the three other men. Six-foot-five, like Roscoe had sung. No mere 245 pounds, though, and no narrow hips. He was well over 300 pounds, with a taut, massive gut. He used it to pin drunk assholes to walls, the better to pummel them into submission. It was perfect for pinning horny little men to walls for kissing and fucking, too. He snorted, feeling energized. His rod was stiff as hell and thumping against his belly. He smirked at the smaller men with wild, bulging eyes. "Feels about right, now."

"Almost," Rooster nodded. "I'd say your whiskers could be longer. For corn's sake, Hoss, they barely reach your collarbone now." He elbowed Rooster. "I'm gonna need your help, cousin. You grab one side and I'll grab another."

The redneck frowned. In a hushed voice, he said to the cowboy, "Ain't that just gonna make it fork, like it did with cousin Peanut?"

"I happen to like a forked beard," the cowboy hissed. "Just do it."

Hoss chuckled to himself. Roscoe and Rooster never could agree on anything. He leaned forward and allowed the pair to latch onto his beard. With some exertion, the whiskers were stretched out another two feet, until they rested on his ball belly. He stroked them approvingly. They were silky and perfectly groomed, separating halfway down into two perfectly pointed sections. His mustache had grown to about half the beard's length, parting in the center and curling gently, helped along by the scented oils he brushed through it every night.

He took stock of himself. His clothes were tight but allowed for comfortable movement. He'd thought they'd been tight when he was smaller just a few minutes ago. But then the idea that he'd been smaller was silly. He'd always been huge. He couldn't recall how he'd wound up on stage. Something about helping his cousins with their act. The shifty fucks had probably hypnotized him and made him cluck like a chicken or something. It didn't matter. He'd make them pay later. With his cock.

So much was coming back to him now. He dashed his cigar onto the stage and ground it out with his boot. He squinted at his surroundings. The cousins were obnoxious and corny, but they were aces with glamour spells. They'd fooled him into thinking he was at a hotel restaurant, not his family's rustic base of operations. He saw the fat, naked sex pigs they crafted out of hapless travelers. He saw the less clever members of their clan in their overalls, herding and slopping and watering the pigs. Tomorrow morning the pigs would be loaded into their trailer, and he'd head out onto the highway with them.

And there in his red cowboy hat with his handlebar mustache and pointed beard was his brother Horn. No stranger after all, but no less desirable. And a master salesman, always finding new markets for their livestock.

Before dawn, the whole family would gather in the valley and rut like beasts until the moon was ringed with fire and it cracked open to reveal the eye within. It liked to watch. And if they put on a good show, it would continue to bless their family as it had for generations, forever and ever, amen.