

## Spring Corn

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*Michael Adams*

I'm sitting on my stoop, thinking about reseeding my lawn. I've lived in this trailer since Carla left, three years. Every spring I tell myself I'll seed the lawn. Every August I look at the weeds and dust and tell myself I'll do it in the fall. It's August again. Nothing's changed.

An old Dodge pick-up cruises by, slow, big blond fellow behind the wheel. He's leaning out the window, trying to read the house numbers.

Montana plates. I watch him. Mostly it's locals use our road. It doesn't go anywhere except the gravel quarry and the corn fields out east.

The truck stops in front of my driveway. A tall cowboy jumps out of the passenger's side door.

"Howdy!" he yells. "We're here."

"Here's nowhere," I say, but he doesn't catch it.

He walks up the driveway toward me. I had him pegged as soon as he jumped out of the truck—the crooked walk, boots, expensive but lived in, the big silver belt buckle. Ought to be a horse under him.

"Digger sent us," he says.

I met Digger in Montana the summer after Carla took our son and went to live in Tucson. When she left I quit going to work and got fired, so with time on my hands I decided to try bronc riding. I've been around horses all my life, owned three until I had to sell them, along with the land and house, to make child support. I busted my arm before the bronc even cleared the stall. Digger took me in. He's a retired rodeo clown, has a dude ranch outside of Helena, on the Hound River. "I knew it was time to quit clowning," he told me, "when my bones got to hurting so bad, by the time I got limbered up it was time to go home."

Crab and Glenda, my retrievers, come tearing out from behind the trailer, skid to a stop at his feet, sniff his boots. "They probably smell mighty good," he says, scratching them behind the ears. "You like that, don't you?"

He likes my dogs, they like him. I warm to him.

"Friends of the Digger?" I ask.

"Digger's my uncle. I'm Clayton." He grins. "I ride bulls."

"A bull rider," I say. "That's a tough line of work."

The big fellow I saw driving the truck comes up the driveway. "This here's Bill," Clayton says. "My cousin and clown." Bill laughs. We shake. It's like shaking hands with a beefsteak.

"Didn't Digger tell you we was coming?" Clayton asks.

"No, he never called." I have a few hours before I have to go to the warehouse for nightshift. "Come on in; have a beer; bring your things. You can stay in the spare bedroom. Here for the Stampede?"

They're from Helena, riding the circuit. Oklahoma yesterday, all night on the road, two days here, up to Casper, Pocatello after that. I start to get the itch. I'm not kidding myself about professional rodeo. I'm good with horses, worked as a ranch hand when I was younger, but I'm too old, too slow, too scared to make a living at rodeo. I drive a forklift five days a week. Almost three years at the warehouse. That's longer than I've ever worked anywhere. Forty-two years old, another twenty years, they'll be retiring me.

I've been seeing a waitress named Paula for over two years. We met right after the divorce became final. She's the one bright spot in my life. Paula works at a diner near the warehouse. She's got a fourteen-year-old boy, Duane. Duane and I took to each other from the start. I feel more like his father than I do Tom's, my own son. Duane's spending the summer in Arkansas, with his real father.

Paula's originally from Arkansas, but she's been in Colorado for years. "Me and Chris were moving to Oregon," she told me right after we met. Chris is her ex-husband. "He was a dreamer! It was the year before Duane was born. Chris had a connection that was going to get us in on the ground floor of a winery. We were going to be rich." She laughed. "Took all our savings. Six months later we were on our way back to Little Rock and I was pregnant. The engine blew up here."

"That's one engine I'm glad blew up," I said.

She gave me a puzzled look, holding a forkful of scrambled eggs halfway from her plate to her mouth. We were eating breakfast, had been together for less than a week.

"We never would have met if the engine hadn't blown up," I added. I felt like a drowning man must feel, pulled from the water just when he's decided he's too tired to fight anymore.

Paula talks about Oregon a lot. Orchards, vineyards, big white mountains. Trees as big around as houses. "It's not like here, Ed. It's green. Great big rivers. That's the place for a horse ranch!"

A ranch. That's my big dream.

The next day I go out to watch Clayton ride. The bulls are my favorite part of the rodeo. They're powerful, unpredictable. You can watch a bronc and get to know its moves, how it's thinking. But not a bull; he'll never move the way you expect him to move.

Clayton doesn't make his eight seconds. Bill jumps in while he runs clear, but not before the bull turns and butts him. Clayton's limping, holding his side. "Son of a bitch pulled right. I never figured him to do that."

At the medical trailer they tell him, "Two broken ribs. You're lucky; you got a bad bruise on your foot, but it's not broken. Take it easy for a couple of weeks."

Clayton walks off toward the corrals.

"Second time this year he's broke ribs," Bill says.

"He was anticipating the bull."

"When he was younger he'd just ride them, take what came. Now he's slowed down, has to try to figure them out." Bill shakes his head.

"You can't do that with a top bull," I say.

Bill's looking out past the corrals. I follow his gaze. There's a hot wind kicking up dust and dry manure. The sun's at the top of a sky bleached white as a bone.

"He's thirty-five years old," Bill says. "Thinks he can go on forever. I tell him to put some money away for retirement, but he just laughs."

"At least he's doing what he loves."

That evening we go to the Sundance. They have a country swing band. I would have brought Paula, but she's working a double shift because one of the girls is sick.

"I got a little nest egg put away," Bill says. "My wife and I have a ranch near Helena. Three, four more years and I'll settle down."

"Shit," Clayton says. "You won't last six months. You'll be like Digger, pining away for the old days, same damn stories over and over."

"That's no way to talk about Digger," Bill says. "If it wasn't for him you wouldn't have made it in rodeo."

"Ain't nobody done it for me. I done it for myself."

"You had the talent, but it was Digger took you from a two-bit sideshow rider to the top."

Clayton starts up from his chair. "At least I ain't spent my whole life as a clown."

I see a fight coming, get up, put my hand on Clayton's shoulder.

His muscles are like steel, vibrating under my hand. "Take it easy. Bill never meant you didn't make it on your own. He just meant Digger helped a young rider get some polish. Right, Bill?"

Bill doesn't say anything. After a few seconds he gives Clayton a curt nod. The tension doesn't go out of Clayton's shoulder, but he sits down slowly.

I wave to the waitress. "Let's have another round."

We're all quiet for a while. The waitress brings our drinks.

"Bring your girlfriend tomorrow," Clayton says to me. I tell him I'm planning on it.

A cowgirl walks by, one of the barrel riders. "There's a pretty lady," I say.

Clayton gets up, walks over to her.

"I should be easier on him," Bill says.

Clayton and the cowgirl are swinging around the dance floor to an old Hank Williams tune. "I wish I had half the love for life he's got," Bill says.

I leave the bar early to go to work. The boss tells me they're cutting back. "Hard times, Ed. I'm keeping you on, but we'll have to hold off on that raise." It's quiet, just me and the boss. The rest of the crew is out on the loading docks.

"I been due this raise for six months, Earl."

Earl picks at his fingernails with his pocketknife. He does that for about a minute, ignoring me.

"You got the money," I say finally. I'm thinking about the money he spent last winter on a new computer inventory system. Right after that he laid off four guys and froze everybody else's wages.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd tell the boys I got no choice," Earl says. "I'll be hiring when I can."

"You're not paying me to be your foreman." I tell him I'm not going to do his dirty work; if he's laying men off he can tell them himself. "There's not enough money in this company for me to do that."

The sun's coming up when I leave the warehouse. The eastern sky is red and smokey. That son of a bitch Earl will milk a man dry if he lef's him. I feel good; I got something off my chest that's been bothering me for a long time. Now I need to do some thinking, so I walk the five blocks to the diner, along the river in the dawn coolness.

I remember what Clayton said yesterday in the bar. "I tried the nine to five. Don't know how you can stand it. If it wasn't for rodeo I'd be dead or in prison."

"I got a kid living down in Arizona," I said at the time, but now, after three years at the warehouse, I feel like I need to think about more than just making child support.

Paula's behind the counter when I walk in the diner.

"Hi, honey," I say.

"I'm beat. I'll be off in fifteen minutes." She gives me a weak smile, a strong cup of coffee. I look in her face.

"What's wrong?"

"You look pretty for somebody who's worked sixteen hours straight."

"That's sweet, Ed, but it's not true."

I tell her about the warehouse.

"That bastard," Paula says. "He won't ever fire you."

"I'm not worried about that." I look out the window. Two minutes ago I felt confident, now I'm sad. The river's a mud flat a half-mile wide, fifty-foot trickle of oily water down the middle. Suddenly I turn to Paula and grab her hands. "I'm going to take you and Duane to Montana. We'll get out of this town, get a ranch." I'm holding both her hands in mine, like I'm praying. "What do we have here? A greasy diner, the warehouse, you in a two-room apartment, me in a leaky trailer." Paula's eyes are wide and brown. A strand of hair has fallen over her face. "Let's make something for ourselves."

Her eyes fill with tears. I put her hands on the table, hand her my handkerchief. "It's clean," I say.

"Look at me, I'm all teary." She tries to smile, cries some more. I put my hand on hers. "I don't know, honey. I don't know. I had my dreams once. Now I got Duane."

"We're not too old."

Someone comes in the diner. Paula bounces up, wipes the corners of her eyes, smiles. "More coffee?"

I go back to the trailer after breakfast. Bill and Clayton are eating cereal and looking glum. I pull out my wallet. "Get yourselves a good breakfast," I say, holding out a twenty.

"We're okay," Bill says. I tell him I trust them for it.

"My luck's going to change up in Casper," Clayton says.

"You ought not to ride there," Bill tells him.

"Hell, cousin, I'm fine." Clayton pounds his ribs. "See?"

"You're a damn fool."

"I'm a bull rider."

"Same damn thing," Bill shoots back.

Clayton puts his thumb in the middle of his chest. "The toughest and the best."

Clayton and Bill are leaving the next morning. Clayton goes out to the rodeo grounds; Bill and I talk for most of the morning about Montana, ranching, horses.

"I want to come up this fall, look for some land. Maybe bring Paula's son and do some fishing."

"Land's cheap. nobody's making a living off it," Bill says. He tells me we're welcome to stay with him anytime.

"Paula's talked about us getting married, but I've always put her off. I've already made one mistake, don't want to make another. But maybe it's time. I know I didn't do too well with Carla and my own son, but maybe I can help Paula raise Duane right."

That night all four of us go to the Sundance. Clayton takes Paula onto the dance floor. "Look at those two," Bill says. Paula looks like she's having a great time. I watch Clayton and Paula. All of a sudden I'm jealous. Paula and I haven't danced in a long time.

"You got to watch out for Clayton," Bill says. "He has a way with women."

Paula comes back to the table between numbers for a drink of her beer. She bends over and kisses me. Clayton leads her back onto the floor. The next song is a slow one; Clayton slides his hand down Paula's back, hooks his thumb in one of her belt loops. He runs his fingers over her jeans.

As soon as the number ends I go up to them. "My turn," I say. The band plays a romantic Willie Nelson song. Paula holds me close. She pulls my head down next to hers. Her hair smells of soap.

"It's good to see you jealous," she says.

"I've been thinking about Montana all day."

"Let's not talk, hon," Paula says. "Let's just dance."

Clayton watches us dance for a while, then the cowgirl from last night shows up and he dances with her. By the time we leave the sun's coming up. I feel like Paula and I have wiped ten years off our lives. I'm tired, light, happy as a bird.

Bill and Clayton have to get to Casper. Clayton gives Paula a hug. Her face is glowing. It reminds me of the spring corn, shining in the morning sun. Bright. Not dusty like the corn is now.

"You get tired of this old fellow," Clayton says to Paula, "give me a call."

"Come on," Bill says, grabbing Clayton's arm. "We got a long way to go."

They drive away. Paula's fingers are on her lower lip, her mouth slightly open. She's holding my hand, leaning forward, like the truck's pulling her north. The big machines in the quarry are starting up for another day. A thin line of dust follows the truck and hangs in the sun for a long time after it's gone. □