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Jon Remmerde

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Jake's Song

I got me a twelve-gauge magnum, far-shootin gun. Now don't that sound like a whole lot of fun? Got me a two-seventy Weatherby magnum rifle with a high-power scope, don't leave the wild game no hope. Got a four-wheel drive, Jeep V-6 with high flotation tires. I can shoot ground animals faster than they can run, run, run and kill wild geese when they fly high in the sky, sky, sky.

That's my song.

I got me a ranch. Desert for two hundred miles around. We irrigate farm ground from the creek and grow plenty to sustain a man and his family, another family or two, though I don't know. I feel like me and mine going it on our own.

My wife Clarice is tough enough to cope and soft as butter to me too. Our boys are tough. We snapped them into line. I've stocked this ranch well for sure. I've stalked it well for sure. I've killed deer and antelope and elk for twenty years, since I was ten, fuel and ammunition enough now to last a century. They won't take what's ours from us without a lot of men dying.

Jabe shoots well. Clark is sure. This year, they bring in most of the meat. Jabe comes in and says, "We got an elk skinned and quartered, hangin in a tree where we killed him up on Scrimshaw ridge. How do we get him home?"

"That's your nut to crack, boy. Carry right on through."

He don't like it, but he goes out and doesn't quit till he has the meat brought in and put up.

Clarice is lonely. She says we should have brought two more families,

and I know she's right, but it's too late now.

Four years ago, when I told him it was his nut to crack, Jabe got the tractor and drove up on Scrimshaw ridge with a trailer and brought the elk home, but this time, he says, "You eat the meat, so you go bring him home. He's hangin in his hide in the big pine tree on the point of the ridge."

"Hunter brings in the meat."

"Whose rule is that? Are you the king of everything, so you make all the rules?" but I slapped him down for that. Clark took the jeep and headed up the ridge. Jabe wanted to swing on me, but he knew I'd knock him flat. He went out the front door and down through the near field of alfalfa, alfalfa young and light green in early spring.

Clarice jumped down on me. "The boys are too big for you to knock them around. You could work it out by talking about it."

"One thing we got to have to hold this place together is discipline."

"Discipline doesn't have to be that rough."

"It's a rough world we're living in. If we're not rough, we won't keep living."

"You don't know that. You don't even know. It's been ten years since we heard anything at all. The only people who came around were afraid of you with all your guns and ran away before we could find out what they might know. For all we know, everybody got settled down, tired of fighting and dying, and maybe everybody's living quiet and peaceful."

"Not much chance."

"Some. Some chance of that."

"Clarice, you're yelling at me. Don't get so excited about it."

"Why not? Why not get excited about something? You think there's anything exciting about staying here year after year, never going more than a hundred miles, scaring away the few people we do see? You think that's any way exciting?"

“Clarice, we’d better not get into that. It don’t go anywhere we want to go.”

“What makes you the boss? What makes you rule what I say and what I think about? Who says you should run things for all of us? The boys are old enough now to have a say, and I’m old enough to have a say.”

“Say. But don’t yell at me, and don’t get hysterical on me.”

“Don’t get hysterical on me. Who the hell are you to know what my emotions are? Any show of emotion is hysteria to you.”

She didn’t just say it. She screamed it at me, like she meant to break my eardrums, and I openhanded her to shut her up. She spun from the blow, and I thought she would fall, but she caught her balance and came up straight. I thought she meant to jump me, and I got ready for her, but she stepped back, with her hand to her face where I hit her, and looked at me for a long time.

“You’re not the king. You’re not the king of everything.” She stepped back until she was at the door, and she turned and walked out and shut the door behind her.

So Clark’s up on the ridge. Jabe’s gone down through the alfalfa, and who knows where Clarice is going?

Quiet. Very quiet night. Moon coming up like that, might be a good time to get that coyote down on the creek. Everybody’ll settle down. Give em time. I picked up the 243 and checked the ammunition. I walked out into moonlight.

Jabe’s seventeen, fillin out heavy, like a growed man. I don’t hit him nowadays. We get along fair, but we don’t talk much. Midwinter, I’m talking to Clarice about spring seeding, he says, “Once that first seed’s down and the weather’s good, I’m leavin here.”

“No, you ain’t. You’ll be here two more years at the least.”

But about once a week, he says, “Weather gets right, get the seed down,

I'm gone."

"No way you're leavin here. You got more than two hundred miles of desert any way you go, and you ain't takin any machine or animal from here."

But he did leave. We got the spring seed in and tilled the ground for summer's seed, and then he was gone. Far as I could tell, he took his rifle and pack, some food, maybe a gallon of water.

Clarice fretted.

I said, "He'll be back in five or six days, really wantin a drink of water," but when he didn't show in five days, I had to shut my mouth and try to help her along. Biggest chance is he's dyin on the desert, doesn't even know where he's going.

She says, "He's young and fast on his feet and smart. He'll make it." And she didn't seem to worry about it as much anymore.

Things was different between her and me since that time I slapped her. We worked together and got along okay, no harsh words or bad feelings, but she turned cold. We rarely even touched each other.

Once in that time, we had strong words between us, and she got to yellin at me. I thought of shutting her up, but she seen me winding up, and she just got real steady and said, "Jake, you taught me to be a damn good shot. I'm telling you now, if you ever hit me again, one day, maybe a long time afterward, when you're starting to think you might live a while. I'll get up in a good spot, and I'll shoot you down like shooting a coyote."

Clark is a real quiet boy. Works hard. Keeps things in shape. Spends a lot of his spare time up in the timber or up on the ridge, watching the desert west of here.

Two years since he's been gone, Jabe comes back. Spring garden planted. Summer garden worked. Everything's about caught up.

Clark busts through the house up to his mother's room. Ain't many

things could excite him like that. I pick up my rifle and head up the ridge. I throw down on Jabe when he comes off the desert. He reins in and shows me his hands. "I'm unarmed. Not so much as a knife."

"I told you if you left, don't come back."

"Still the king of everything?"

I pulled the trigger, but the firing pin snapped down on a dead shell.

"Ammunition is getting old. Half the time, it don't fire."

I work the bolt and put another shell in the chamber, but I can't pull the trigger. I pull and I pull, but my finger don't move.

Then Clark says, "Drop it on the ground, or you'll have an arrow through your chest. This bow, it never misfires." I throw the rifle down in the dirt, and Clarice runs up through the brush and trees, and everybody hugs and kisses and cries and laughs, all three of them.

I just go down the ridge back to the house.

When Clarice comes in, almost dark by then, we look at each other a long time. She says, "There are places out there where people live in peace. Some people still fight, but peace and love, Jabe says they're winning out."

"I got what I got, and I'm keeping it."

"What have you got? What fuel is left is so old it doesn't burn right, and the machines aren't much use. Ammunition is getting so old, it won't fire. You got you. That's all you got."

"I got you. I got Clark."

"We're going. We're going out there with him. You're going too."

"No. You ain't going." I started for the rifle cabinet.

Clark said, "Pa, I been around and unloaded every weapon on this place, and I got the ammunition stashed."

Jabe said, "Pa, peace is the only king. Peace is the king of everything."

I'm the king. I'm the king. I got me a twelve-gauge magnum, far

shooting gun, kill wild geese as high as they can fly, shoot ground animals faster than they can run, run, run. Don't that sound like a whole lot of fun? Got me a four wheel drive Jeep V-6 get anyplace out in the sticks, tear up more back country than you can own, own, own, and the wild country is my home.

"You'll never make it through the desert."

"I made it two years ago on foot, with less experience. It isn't just that we need to be out there. We're needed out there. What you know about building and farming and machinery could go to good use out there."

"They're still fighting. Killing each other."

"Some. Not so much anymore. I've traveled thousands of miles unarmed."

"But you're a fool, that's clear to see. Lot of people won't harm fools. It's bad luck. I'm not going with you. This is where I worked to be, and this is where I'll be. I see I can't stop you, so I won't try, but don't try anymore to take me with you."

Clarice come to me one night before they went and tried to talk to me about going, opened up to me physically like she hadn't done for years, but now it was me was cold. I never been there before, and it set me back on my heels.

I don't care anymore about anything. I just want them to go, leave me alone. You say you're going, so go.

Before they leave, Jabe comes in and tells me how to find water halfway across the desert going west. He says, "Early spring's the best time, because the sun's so intense in summer..."

"Jabe, you slipped your tracks? I been living in this country all my life."

"You didn't know about the water."

"No, and didn't need to or want to. You'd best get on your horses and ride out. I see you or anybody else coming on this place, I'll find me some

live cartridges in that box Clark's leaving for me."

For a long time after they go, I do nothin. Sit in the house until it's dark, then go to bed. The next few days I sit under the trees down at the other end of the alfalfa.

I have to turn water into the alfalfa, and that gets me started back into a routine, and I pick it up, and it's quiet, but it's all right.

The alfalfa goes to weeds. Some of the weeds are good food, little work to me. Rabbits get fat down in the fields, and I trap them for meat. Cougar gets the two horses I got left, one, and then, when I give it up and quit laying for the cat, the other horse. Don't matter. I got nowhere to ride to.

The few chickens I still got got sick and died the third year. Don't need em. Less work for me. Never really was a farming man. I'm a hunting man. Shoot my food when I can. More trapping than shooting now. Shoot an elk with the bow once in a while to remember.

Clark come back the third year of the drought. I think he did. Sometimes, I'm sure.

He come back and come walking down the ridge, bent into the sand wind. I stepped out shooting at him, and he turned and ran. That must be a dream, cause every time I pulled the trigger, it fired, and I haven't had good ammunition in years. If I'd fired once, I'd hit him I know, but he just ran into the trees, light as a deer on his feet.

He come back, and I let him get water. Then I told him to move on. He moved on, never said a word to me.

He come back, and he got water and ate. He said, "I come to get you. This drought is closing down, gonna squeeze you in here tight," and I told him to go and go alone.

I was fevered through a lot of that time. Wind come up and kept blowing day and night, and it blew a fever up in me. Sometimes I didn't know what I'd done and what I'd dreamed.

Clark, he come back, the third year of the drought, and he stood up on top of the ridge in the wind and waited for me to come up and talk to him, but I never left the house, just lay fevered in my bed and watched him through the window.

That's when I first seen the king. Big old turkey vulture, sailin in the wind, turns to stall against the wind, lands beneath the ridge peak and stands there more'n a day, just lookin the place over.

I dragged my rifle over to my bed, stuck it out the window, snapped down on one dud shell and another and another. The fourth time, the rifle fired. I wasn't expectin' it anymore and missed, splintered rock above him, but he just sat still there and watched.

I was too exhausted to keep at it. I dropped the rifle, said, "Okay. Okay. You win. You're the king of everything. Got a new king. Long live the king of everything."

Drought goes into the fourth year; the wind hasn't quit in two. Stream runs enough for the garden, the close field. Everything else long since dried, died, blew away in the wind.

Ground we spent fifty years building dried up to dust and blew away in the wind.

Wind blows all day, every day. All winter, all spring, all summer, all through the fall. Never clear lets up. Dry wind. Dusty wind. Sandy wind.

Equipment shed blows apart. Sheet metal blows away into the desert, and the sand wind carves away at the wooden framework. Sand piles up on the foundation.

Sand wind wears the walls thin on the house. Sand keeps piling up at the garden. I build walls around it to block the sand, but I have to shovel them clear every few days to keep the sand from pushing them in on the garden.

Two years, the wind quits, but no rain comes. I spend long days

walking what was an island, an oasis in the desert.

Most of the timber up on the ridge died. On the windward side, the trees died and the wind sanded them half away. The wind carves beautiful, strange forms in massive tree trunks, then erodes them to nothing, blows them east across the desert.

The meadow is gone, a sandy swale high on the dead ridge now. Sand buried most of the alfalfa. I've been turning water into the field near the house. Some places, alfalfa's pushing up through the sand, but I keep turning water in there, the rest of the vegetation down the drainage is going to die.

I'm a little dry, just like this place has gone near dry. Sand wind carved away a lot of what I was and blew it across the desert.

I'm thinking about going. It isn't so much there isn't enough left to stay with but more there isn't enough of me left to stay.

I don't know yet. I walk up to the open desert north and stand there and look out across the barren sand. Then I walk back to the spring and sit in the shade, and then I look at the desert east and walk back to the spring. I walk out and look south.

Looking west, I stay the longest there. Out there, a few hundred miles, there's an ocean. There's people out there.

I wonder what they're doing out there. Clarice, you get you another man? and has he been good to you all these years? You ever think of me? Jabe and Clark, you got wives and children now, growing big and strong? Clark, maybe I told you go too soon.

That big old vulture soars over about once a day, looks down to see what I'm doing. "Hey there king, how's everything? Way you keep checking me out, must be a bad year for dying out there on the desert."

Leg's a little gimped up from a fall I took about four years ago. It's a long way across that desert. That water Jabe talked about maybe dried up

in a long drought like this. If I get through the desert and run into people, who knows what will happen? Maybe they'll shoot me. Maybe they'll need something I can do.

I put together a pack and what water I can carry, head out across the desert. The old vulture checks me out a couple, three times a day. "Hey king. You can have it all, be the king of everything. If I don't make it, I'll be a few good meals to you, but I kind of think I will. I kind of think I will make it."

Man limping along, using a homemade cane. Cane sinks into the sand and don't do him a whole lot of good. Sun shines down so hot against the burning sand. Black vulture flies over, high in the desert sky.