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Murdering Cows on the West Boundary

I been cutting pine, oak, and juniper trees up on the west boundary of the ranch. I'll make more pasture up there, but mainly, I got to repair fence on the west boundary and the north boundary, so I got to cut posts. Lodgepole pine, straight stuff, not too big around, I'll use that for corral rails. Years of no maintenance bout finished the corral.

Buster, neighbor on our south side, little old guy bent toward the ground, he's leased the pasture and hay ground the last ten years. I want to work this ranch myself, but I got a job at the gas company, delivering propane, been doing that twelve years September ten.

We squeaked by ten years with what we made from the ranch, never had anything to spare, but I loved working for myself, the way I seen to do it, hard work, plenty of hours. Things got tighter, the kids getting bigger and needing more. One dry year, we ran short of winter feed for the cattle, had to buy 140 tons of hay. The price was high with dry weather.

Me and Doris sat at the kitchen table after the kids went to sleep. She made a pot of strong coffee, and we looked at each other across that battered old pine table, gave meals to three generations. Doris, she turned her chair, grabbed the coffee pot off the stove, turned back to the table, and poured me and her a cup of

coffee. She give a long sigh and said, "Been a hot day, Rob. That breeze blowing in the windows sure feels good."

"Yeah," I said. "Hot for sure. Sittin up in that swather cuttin hay bout boils the blood out of me, it's that hot. Drink a gallon and a half of water, sweat it out as fast as I can drink it."

We drink strong coffee, knowing we won't be able to sleep a while, but that's okay. With all the hard work running the ranch, not too often we're in bed together and both wide awake. We'll find something we can do. Last light fades above the mountains. Neither of us gets up and turns a light on. Breeze blows in the windows, in the open door, through the screen. One of the kids busted out a corner of the screen slamming it open in a hurry. I hope mosquitoes and flies don't find that hole before I get time to fix it.

Doris and me, we know what each other's thinking. It gets dark in the house, dark outside. I can hardly see Doris, just a shadow in the dark, but I know her, light or dark. I say, "I got to get some work in town or we'll lose this place. Hate the idea, but that's what it comes to. I knew when we borrowed money to buy hay it wouldn't work, but that was one tight corner, and we had to do somethin. Couldn't starve our cows." I sipped black, strong coffee, cup hot in my hands. "Well, once said, it don't sound all that bad, I guess."

Doris said, "I could get a job in town, Rob."

"Then we got what they call latch key children. I work the ranch. You work a job in town. Robbie and Erline come in and watch television, nobody but them here. I don't want that. I know you

don't. I'd make better money workin in town than you would. Just the way it is."

Doris got up and turned the light on, and we looked at each other. She picked up our coffee cups, rinsed em and set em beside the sink, and we headed off to bed, arms around each other.

Next day, I put the word out around town I needed a job. Before the week was gone, Allen down at the gas company called, said, "Ed's wantin to retire, been wantin to about half a year but didn't want to leave me without a driver. You want to work for me?"

So I started driving the propane truck, filling everybody's tanks. Not a bad job. Good pay. I worked the ranch too, the first two years. I sold more than half the herd, and I had a contractor cut and bale the hay, but even with that taken care of, I couldn't keep everything going, especially when Allen started wanting me to work overtime. Ten hours overtime a week paid almost as much as running the ranch with the herd trimmed and haying contracted and some of the fence work contracted out.

We sold the rest of the herd and put the money by for college for Robbie and Erline. I leased the hay ground and pasture to Buster.

Buster did okay the first six, seven years, but he's getting old, and he started having trouble with his health. He has trouble keeping everything going. Got two of his sons working with him, but they mostly work the home ranch. They got jobs in town. Hard to make it these days just ranching.

Buster's supposed to keep the fence repaired on our ranch, seed ten acres in alfalfa every year, and irrigate. He let some of the fence need repair all this year. He didn't reseed but about seven acres. Some of what he seeded, he didn't keep it wet enough, and the alfalfa didn't get a good start.

Kings, over on Buster's north side, used to lease him pasture up next to Forest Service range, but he got behind on irrigation and fence repairs there, and they pulled that pasture out from under him.

Buster told me, "Kings up there, they think they're hot stuff. Walk on a man when he's down. I had surgery you know, wasn't supposed to work more'n a month, but I was up there two weeks after I got out of the hospital, fixing fence up against Forest Service, elk tore hell out of it hunting season, but that wasn't fast enough for the Kings. They pulled that whole pasture out from under me. Makes it tough to feed my cows. Bram and Fred, they help out what they can, but they got jobs in town, can't do everything."

I'd been set to tell Buster he had to keep the fence up better and he was letting the high pasture get too dry, but I couldn't say anything about it then. Buster told me one time, "All this trouble I got with my back and legs, that's from bullets I took from Germans, Second World War, defending my country, they call it, but everybody forgets, two or three years after the bleedin stops. Don't take long, nobody cares anymore."

The next morning, I got up before daylight, took my dog, Ranger,

she's missed having me there working on the ranch, and we walked up to the top of the high pasture in first light and turned water down all the ditches. I changed settings when I got home from work in town. Ranger dug for prairie dogs, took it on herself to herd a cow back down to the lower pasture where she was supposed to be.

Early the next morning, we walked up again, and I turned the water off that field and onto the field below it. I liked being out. Ranger and me, we saw the sun rise way down below us, across the plain. We walked up in the afternoon and changed the flow of water across the field. We watched the sun set above the buttes, orange and red across more than half the sky, but I didn't see much of Doris, Robbie, and Erline, just got a bite to eat when I got back to the house, a quick shower, and hit the sack.

It went more and more like that over the next couple of years. Buster had surgery again, and he had trouble keeping his own place up, let alone this one.

I talked to Bram about it one evening when he drove up to fix fence where some of their cows got out. I saw his pickup along the fence when I was coming home from work, and I drove up there.

Bram said, "Me and Fred, we talked to him about quitting, but he ain't gonna do it. If Dad quit working, he'd probably die. He's been close to dying a couple of times, but he knows he's got work to do, so he gets up and keeps after it. Nobody can talk sense to him. The doctors he goes to, two of 'em, they try to tell him to take it easy,

but he don't pay attention. Harder for him to stay in bed or sit around than go work what he can. Worked all his life, can't quit. He don't read much. He don't care about television. Starts out to watch news, gets mad the way the world's going, yells about how stupid everybody is, shuts it off.

"Me and Fred, we do what we can, but we got jobs. We keep up the home ranch, and that's about all the time we got."

I said, "Maybe you could tell him to just do what he can do with the home ranch."

"Not enough hay ground, not enough pasture down there, he says. We try to get him to trim the herd, but he just gets mad as hell, hollers at us. Jeanine and her husband come up to visit, Jeanine tried to talk to him about cutting back some. He got so mad, he had some kind of a fit. He fell down and hit his head on the table, got a black eye, looked like hell. Wouldn't go to the doctor to see why he fell or take care of his eye. Jeanine's afraid to talk to him now, afraid he'll have fits like that, die from it. He gets so mad, you can't talk to him."

Bram stretched the last strand of barbed wire, spliced it, and loaded his tools in the back of his truck. He said, "You got to do what you got to do. Me and Fred, we know that. You decide whatever you decide. We won't hold it against you. Hard part is telling Dad. I got to get back, change some of the water up above the house." He climbed in his pickup and headed down the road.

I started putting in a gravity feed system of pipes and sprinklers

that spring, weekends and evenings. Robbie's big enough, he works with me some. I started teaching him how to run the backhoe. Got to go a little easy with him though. He says, "I want to play football this year, Dad, so I'm going to have to stay late for practice."

I can't argue with that. I want him to play football. I didn't do much of that when I went to school. Dad wanted me home helping on the ranch as early as I could get there, and I liked doing it that way. I always did like ranching, but I always said my kids, if they wanted to do sports or band or anything like that after school, that's what they were going to do, so now me and Doris, we pick Robbie and Erline up at the late bus after practice, and we get them to games. I'm glad we can do that.

Buster, he don't like the new sprinkler system. Little, bent old man, his hair bushy white and brown with dust, stands out like electric cause he left his hat in his pickup, stands there with his thumbs through his belt loops, pants too baggy, from days he carried more weight, hollers at me, "I been flood irrigatin for sixty years, and it always worked best. Them sprinklers won't put enough water on the ground. Look at them big sprinklers. They throw the water out to the end. They'll wash the seed out at the end and leave the ground dry closer in. You're gonna ruin all the alfalfa I planted."

I put buckets all over the field, then measured, and the water's all within a half-inch of each other, all the way from the sprinkler out to the end, but Buster wouldn't look at the buckets, and he wouldn't believe what I told him. He turned and stomped away, mad at me

cause I tried to tell him something when he knows better.

Come spring, I got fed up. The corral's falling to pieces. Buster stands there in the sunshine, a foot shorter than I am, skinnier than last time I saw him. He's got his hat on this time, greasy, dirty old hat, must of been wearing it thirty years. Buster's so bent over, he looks down at the ground, so I only see the brim of his hat. He says, "I never use that corral." He hollers at the ground down by his feet. "I don't need the damn corral. Why should I fix it? I never said I would."

That isn't the way I remember it. The way I remember it, he said he'd take care of everything, fences, planting, irrigation, corral. Even if you trust somebody, put everything in writing. Things change. People change their minds. Give 'em long enough to think, most folks can invent almost anything about what they said and then talk themselves into believing it.

I think Buster would agree he said he'd keep the fence and the irrigation up. The high pasture, where I don't have any sprinkler pipe, dries. New planting of alfalfa is too dry, starts to die out, and weeds are going to take over. I see Buster's pickup along the top, so I drive up there and talk to him. "Ground's pretty dry up here, Buster. If you can't keep up the work, I won't be able to lease to you when it comes up again."

"Isn't dry," he says. "This ground is plenty wet."

I kick my toe into the ground and crumble the soil into dust, it's so dry. "Looks dry to me, Buster."

He says, "That's on top. You get down a couple of inches, it's plenty wet."

I reach in my pocket, get my knife, open it up, squat down, and dig a hole. Six inches down, still dry as dust. I look up at Buster, "How deep you want me to go?"

He says, "Just like them sons-a-bitches over at the King place, start lyin' and cheatin' to get me off."

"Now Buster, how would you feel if I started callin you a son-of-a-bitch?"

Buster's hard of hearing. Maybe he didn't understand what I said. Or maybe he did, I don't know. He says, "That's right. You're a son-of-a-bitch too. Bunch of god damned sons-a-bitches, cheat and lie, try to ruin a man."

He gets red in the face, and he shakes all over. I remember Bran talking about Buster getting so mad he had some kind of a fit and fell down. Nothing in this world worth killing a man for. If he had a fit and fell down and died, I'd feel like I killed him.

I stood up and said, "Buster, I didn't call you a son-of-a-bitch. I said, what if, oh hell, doesn't matter what I said. Buster, take it easy. I'm not gonna run you off. You just take it easy. Calm down. If you do your best, that'll have to be good enough. We can talk about it when the lease comes up again."

He didn't calm down much. He turned around and stomped away, cussin at the ground as he went, got in his pickup and drove away. I wondered if he'd be so mad, he'd wreck the pickup, maybe

get killed, but he boiled up a cloud of dust all the way down to his place. He got home okay.

I turned water across the alfalfa and let it soak that night, changed the settings the next morning before I went to work.

It isn't just the money for the lease. I want to improve the place, seed new alfalfa to replace what's gone weedy, improve the irrigation, make better use of the water, keep the fences in shape. A few years from now, I'll quit the gas company, draw retirement to help pay expenses, and I'll run this ranch again. I don't want to have to catch up from years of neglect. So I'm helping Buster, but I'm helping myself.

But I could lease the ranch to someone who takes care of it, keeps agreements about keeping things in shape. What I get for leasing pasture and hay ground, nobody's cheaper.

I looked the corral over and decided I'd have to repair it. I took down the top rails. The next rails down were about half rotten too, so I swung the sledge hammer, knocked them off the posts. Where the nails pulled out of the posts, they brought big chunks of wood with them, because the posts were about half rotted where the rails held water against them. Well, I'd better start over and build a whole new corral.

I piled the half-rotten rails and posts off to one side. I brought the tractor up, wrapped a chain around a post, wrapped the chain around the hook on the bucket, climbed up, raised the bucket, and pulled the post out of the ground. Some of the posts broke off

when I tried to pull them, so I'll have to dig new postholes where they broke off or pry out the rotten bottoms.

I started to pull out the fourth post. By then, I'd figured out if I pushed the post back and forth, side to side several times, it loosened it in the hole, and it was more likely to come out in one piece.

Buster drove up in his beat up old pickup, fed a million cows from that pickup, spun his way across snow of twenty winters with it to do all the chores. I sat up on the tractor seat and raised the bucket, watched the post and hoped it wouldn't break off.

Buster climbed down from his pickup, tried to stretch himself straight, walked over and watched me, hat pushed to the back of his head, brim tilted up high so he could see out from under, hands on his hips, looking madder than hell.

I pulled the post the rest of the way out of the ground, backed up, pulled over to the pile, set the post down, idled down, shut off the engine, and climbed down from the tractor.

Buster said, "If you was any kind of man, you'd just tell me straight out you got to get rid of me. Tearing down everything I use is a chickenshit way to say something you're scared to say to me. You gonna start tearing down all the fences next so I can't keep my cows on the place, plow up the hay ground so I can't cut hay? Them Kings, they're sons-a-bitches, but at least they said get off to my face."

I said, "Buster, I'm not running you off the place. This corral is

falling apart, and you're not doing anything about fixing it, so I'm replacing it. You told me you never used the corral. If you never use it, what difference does it make if I tear it down?"

As soon as I said that, I regretted the way I put it. I was planning to run him off when the lease comes due, in March, and now I've said I'm not running him off, and that's the part he's gonna remember.

"You shoulda told me you was gonna do that. Sometimes I need to put cows in there until I can get them down to my place. I got to know ahead of time what you're gonna do, so I can plan my work. I can't tell what you're gonna do or say next. A man says what he's gonna do, he should keep his word. Nobody does things like that around here. You sure as hell don't do things like that anymore. Used to be I could trust you to keep your word, but you sure gone to hell on me lately. That corral was part of what I'm leasing here."

"It was falling down. If you need it, you should take care of it."

He got red in the face and shook all over again, and I said, "Buster, I'm buildin a new corral as fast as I can build it. That's why I tore it down. Why else would I stack all these new rails and posts? A few weekends, I'll have a new corral up here. Buster, when we made the deal for the lease, you said you'd keep the corral in shape, so you and Bram and Fred can help me build it and furnish some of the materials."

"Never said no such thing. Your place, you take care of the corral. You think I ought to send my wife over to keep your house clean,

cook your meals? You should be fixing the fences, but you never fix 'em, so I have to fix 'em to keep my cows in. Hell of a place around here. Nobody keeps their word.”

He stalked away from me, bent over and looking at the ground as he walked, climbed back up into his pickup and tore out in a cloud of dust.

I clean out post holes, set new posts, tamp the dirt around them. I'm thinking, and I might even be talking out loud, “All the work I'm doing, Buster should be doing. If I irrigate and fix fences and build corrals, I should get more money for the lease. Buster doesn't have to have this place to survive. He could ranch his own place and do okay. I don't need all the extra work.”

I get angry, but one thing I know, anger's gonna wind up killing old Buster, and I don't plan to let myself go the way he's going. I calm myself down, and I stay calm. I love this ranch. I love the work I do, and I don't plan to let Buster spoil that.

I got so deep in my thoughts, I didn't hear what I should have heard from a long ways away.

Sudden as a lightning bolt and thunder, there's a cow galloping full speed toward me. I drop tools, turn and face the wild black and white thousand pounds, hooves galloping green, growing grasses to dust, slobber flying into the wind, horns aimed right at my tender middle. I throw my arms toward the sky and holler, but she isn't impressed the least, cause Ranger is right on her heels, snapping at her flying hooves. I dive, scrape grassy, dusty ground, roll, see dirty

hooves, dirty cow gallop by, inches away, Ranger close behind and doggone enthusiastic, and I scream, “Ranger, you stupid dog. You stupid cow, almost killed me, stupid Buster, that cow isn’t even supposed to be down in this pasture.”

Woulda killed that dog if I could, but she was far out of reach, still chasing a stupid cow. I got up, brushed myself off, went back to work on not being angry at dog, cow, and man. Takes a lot of work. Ranger came back, and I talked to her about a dog dumb enough to chase a cow right at a man, but she knew I wasn’t gonna kill her.

Cow’s clear in the upper pasture. Ranger’s panting and puffing, tongue hanging out, happy as a cow-chasing dog even if I am telling her how dumb she is. Okay, well, maybe thrills like that keep you young, don’t know. Time to build a corral.

I come up short of posts and rails, don’t want to spend money on more, head up past the upper pasture, cut rails and posts out of Juniper trees, lodgepole pine trees up there. I wish the cows would stay out of my work area, and if the division fence was in shape, they would. They’re supposed to be on the other side while this pasture grows tall enough to graze.

Buster’s supposed to keep that fence up. I thought he would. He said he would. Guess that’s like the ground that’d be wet if I dug down. I think Buster feels like he’s backed into a corner, doesn’t want to lose the lease on this place, says whatever he has to say to hang on, keep things going like he’s used to. Seems like death to change things too much, and maybe that’s how it comes out,

change things too much, and you die.

Buster's got me on his crew, helping run his ranching operation, and I don't see a paycheck out of it. I can't let it go like it is. I got to do something about it. I got a soft heart. Maybe it's like Doris tells me, more like a soft head. She's right. I got my family to support. I like to be with my family. Kids grow up so fast, they're gone and I'll wonder how could I be so stupid to work for Buster for free and miss the times I could of had with my family.

Buster's cows keep coming up where I been cutting posts, sloppy, wet cow shit on my posts and rails, got to scrape it off or smear myself when I try to load, smear myself even after I scrape it off, cause I can't get all of it off my posts and poles.

That stupid black and white cow almost ran me down and killed me down by the corral hangs around close. I walk toward her. "Hey. Hey, you stupid cow. Get out of here." I wave my arms. She looks at me, starts to move away, stops and looks again. She ducks her head, like she might charge. I pick up a rock and bounce it off her ribs, and she turns toward the other pasture. Ranger gets in behind her and nips her hocks. The cow trots away, kicking at Ranger as she goes.

Next two afternoons, I chase her off twice more. Ranger helps me, but the cow comes back. She watches me. Maybe it's like they say about man-eating lions and tigers. They see how easy humans are to kill, they can't give it up.

This black and white cow, she got a taste of chasing a man, seen

how easy a man is to set running and diving to the ground, she ain't gonna give up the practice, gonna get back at humans for all the years she's been herded, forced to go where she didn't want to go, her calves taken from her before they're growed.

She's staying around too close and watching me, but she's spending her time cropping grass that grows between trees. Every time I run her off, she comes back, but she isn't doing anything. I can't keep running her off and get anything else done. The fence she comes through has to wait for repair. I can only do one thing at a time, so I get back to work cutting posts and rails for the new corral.

Green posts and rails are heavy. Hard to get 'em out of the timber and down onto the road. Been on my mind the gate posts got to be extra big around and extra long, set 'em four feet into the ground. They're gonna be mighty heavy, don't know yet how I'm gonna get 'em out of the timber down to the road.

Getting there comes up soon. I find two juniper trees just right for gate posts, about twenty inches through and don't taper too bad. Juniper resists rot. Dad used to say a juniper post'll wear out two or three postholes.

I get those two trees cut and limbed. I can hardly move 'em. I can roll 'em, but it's a quarter mile down to the road, and it don't seem likely I can roll 'em that far.

I put my rope around one of the big posts and pull. I can move it a little bit. I make a big loop in the rope, put it around my chest,

and I lean into it and pull hard. The post comes four or five inches every time I lunge against the rope. At that rate, it'll take me a week to pull it down to the road, and I'll be wore out when I get it there. I slack off the rope, open the loop wide, and take it off me. Got to be a better way. I can let the post dry, and it'll lighten up some, but it's still gonna be mighty heavy.

I'd like to know if the black and white cow decided to try again to horn me and stomp me into the dust, picked that moment to attack, and Ranger decided to get in on the fun after she went into a gallop or if Ranger attacked her and got her into a gallop and I coincidentally stood in their line of travel or if she got to galloping and decided to channel her forward speed into a kill-the-man plan, or what, but I'll never know. All I know is the hair all over me rose before I heard her hammering the ground to dust, but then I heard and knew why the hair rose, because here she comes, full gallop, head down, long shiny curving horn aimed midriff, Ranger close on her heels, snapping at her flying hocks, a cloud of dust rising above everything and swirling down toward me.

If I live a hundred years, I'll never again make as smooth a set of moves, exactly right. I don't remember thinking about what to do. I just did it. I stepped backward and threw the loop of rope I was holding. The big loop cleared her horns, settled just behind, then closed as she took out all the slack, and the rope snapped tight. Cow, rope, post, dog, everything almost stopped when the post the rope was tied to jumped into the air and then slammed back down

to the ground. Ranger didn't expect that sudden slowdown, crashed full speed into the back of the cow's legs, which threw Ranger's hind legs straight up and drove her nose and head down into the dusty ground.

Ranger sat up, shook her head, realized the cow was moving away from her, at reduced speed, but moving. Ranger stood up, took advantage of the reduced speed to chomp down hard on the cow's left hock. The cow kicked hard, connected square with Ranger and threw her into the air. The cow labored mightily against the rope and gained speed. The rope tightened around her neck, stretched along her side and pulled taut behind. A big juniper post bounced along behind, on the end of the rope.

Ranger spun in the air, hit the ground, and come up on the gallop, chomping for the cow's right hock. The cow gained speed down toward the road, cow, post, and dog on a high gallop and repeatedly dusty bounce. Ranger snapped. The cow surged forward, and the post bounced. The cow slowed, Ranger bit, and the post dug into soft ground and stuck. The cow tried to pull the post some more, but it wouldn't move. The big black and white cow dropped to her knees.

I stood a long way up the hill, above the dog, the rope, the post, and the cow. I heard the straining, whistling, gasping sound as the cow struggled to breathe through that rope loop cinched down tight on her neck. I started down toward the caravan. The cow fell from her knees onto her side, shuddered all over, drove her legs

wild into the air like she galloped frantically toward heaven, and died, choked to death by a strong rope and a juniper gate post.

I looked down at a dead cow for a while. Thoughts ran through my mind. How do you give a cow artificial resuscitation? Jeez. Look at all the evidence. Anybody can figure out what happened. What's the penalty for murdering a cow? I didn't plan to murder her.

Wow. The post dug deep into soft ground about twenty feet from the road. I can back my pickup right to it, stand it on end, tip the end right into the back, slide it the rest of the way in.

I didn't kill her. She committed suicide. Too stupid to stop galloping and live.

I pulled and pried on the rope. I heaved the post up out of the ground and drug it closer to the cow and got some slack in the rope. Ranger stayed close to me. She darted back and forth, acted like she thought the cow might get up and run, and she wanted to be ready to start the chase again.

I said, "She's dead, Ranger. Ain't gonna run again." The rope pulled so tight, it buried itself in the black and white cow's neck. I pried and pulled and yanked. I finally got some slack fed through the little loop at the end and loosened the noose. I opened it up and took it off the cow.

I could brush out all the tracks. I could try to erase the evidence of what happened. I looked at tracks, cow tracks, post tracks, dog tracks, track of the rope around the cow's neck. My tracks.

Probably best just to leave everything but the post. I'd rather

explain what happened than try to cover the evidence.

Buster got himself into this. If he'd kept the fence up, the cow never would have been over where I was working. If Buster had kept the corral in shape, I never would have been up there cutting posts. If he'd done what he said he'd do, damn cow wouldn't be dead, and I wouldn't be standing in hot sunshine and dust, wondering, "What next?"

I unhooked the rope from the post. I walked up the hill, coiling the dusty rope as I walked. Ranger looked at me, looked at the dead cow, trotted toward me, darted back and circled the cow.

I finished coiling the rope and hung it on my shoulder. I said, "Come on, Ranger. That one's used up. Dead and gone to hell. We still got another big post to get down the hill." Two of us, cow-chasing dog, cow-murdering man, walked back up that hill toward growing trees and growing grass. About halfway up the hill, I started laughing, and I couldn't quit for a while. Took me a while to say what I wanted to say to Ranger, breaking up with laughing the way I was, "Couldn't do that again in a million years, the way it just fell together, but nothing says a good dog and a good man couldn't spend the rest of the day trying to get another black and white cow to drag another big post down to the road. We got plenty of black and white cows."