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## Never, Ever Bring This Up Again

A threesome doing bad things. With bison. Enjoy one of the runners-up in the Esquire Fiction Contest from a public high-school English teacher, then [read the other](#). Plus: Winner [JR's Walsh's "An Insurrection"](#) and [more about all three authors](#)

By: Nick Ripatrazone



**Ralf asked** why it was called Bear Brook.

"Who the fuck knows." Paine zipped up, piss invisible in the current.

Kara rubbed her heel along a rock. "Maybe they saw a bear cross the brook?"

"Or not." Ralf smacked the fifty-five-gallon drum like it was a rusted ass and began to hump the rim. "I bet someone found a guy mounting one. You know how they do around here."

Kara smiled. Paine didn't. He sat on the shore and leaned back. He tried to clasp his hands behind his head but couldn't raise his left arm. Could barely make a fist.

"Cal used to fill those with lacquer and bury them behind the pound." Kara toed away flakes of orange from the bottom. Ralf continued to hump, keys clinking against the old metal.

"Keep doing that if you want lockjaw." Ralf had a thing for Kara ever since that weekend in North Platte. He said nothing happened but he'd gotten close. Catch the scent and you're done. Paine knew it was trouble having her around but none of this could happen without her.

He eased Kara's leg away, palm on her calf. She didn't wiggle him loose. Not then, not on the bed of the Ranger when he smoothed the inside of her knee. His hands were free on her.

Paine cradled his left elbow against his chest. The sun was low. He walked toward the pickup. He knew better than to show up unannounced at night.

**Cal had bought** a small bison herd from Manitoba in 1969. Five head that swelled to fifty-four decades later. His ranch was east of Dupree, near a flared bank of Lake Oahe.

Bison, not buffalo. He always liked that word better. It was more direct, sharper. He tattooed a bison head across his chest, the pelt a deep mahogany. He thought he could save the continental population, drive them to a pound where groundwater from the lake kept the plains moist.

Once, before dawn, when the head count was still low, shots peeled near the dirt wallow. An asshole had crept onto his land and let loose. Cal had a folding shotgun and smoothed his hand along the breech as he walked through the pound. The herd had collected in a corner. One or two rustled but the rest were silent. Cal shot the asshole in the stomach and swiped his carbine. Auburn and light. He set it on the log fence and let the man bleed. The asshole had shot the bison in the heart and it stuttered. Cal took it down with one shot to the lungs. It was a risk to take it down in front of the rest but they knew. Sometimes death can be the best relief.

The asshole had no wallet. His pants caked at the bottom: he'd hiked long to get here. He couldn't have hoped to drag the bison by the horns to the highway. Could he have been so stupid as to take one down in August, when the horizon was crisp for miles? He could have a friend on his trail but now Cal had a carbine and a fresh pocketful of rounds. He dragged the asshole to the north end where an intertwined line of bison bones gleamed like jagged teeth.

Back at the pound the bison were ruffled. They get fucked at the smell of blood. They lick the mess and go wild, rocking each other until living blood follows. He let out a few rounds and they scurried, the ground alive beneath them. The dead bison's eyes looked like wet saucers. Its tongue rested in the dirt.

"Fuck."

**Kara lay** on the center yellow lines. Left foot over right foot. She hummed and blinked fast, hoping that after one blink the stars would be revealed. But the night remained overcast.

Ralf and Paine argued in the pickup. The county map spread across the dashboard. Both knew they had either overshot by hundreds of miles or were close enough to smell the herd.

"Can't you feel them, you cock?" Ralf hopped out the cab and smacked the asphalt. "I thought your old man was in touch with them. Didn't he pass it on to you?"

"Fuck you." Paine smoothed out the map. He reached across to close the door.

Ralf lay on top of Kara. They kissed. It was long, long enough for Paine to fold the map and watch. He could leave them there. It was what they wanted. But he knew Ralf would find him. Kara would lead Ralf there. Sex would bind them for good.

**Cal pulled the knife** from the jaw to the belly. Down to the tail. Fixed a rope around the neck, tied the other end to his trailer hitch. Slammed on the gas and ripped the hide off. He could feel the kick then, the tinge in his own muscles. A pulse down to his crotch.

That night he dreamt a mother released a calf, wound in membrane. The mother tongued down the membrane and the calf hobbled in the grass, bucking fresh out of the womb. But the mother didn't stop: she ate the calf.

The next morning Cal strode into the pound and a pair rutted in the corner. Another rolled in the blood-peeled wallow. Another horned a pond pine, scrapping down the flaky bark, yellow needles flecked in its pelt.

Why had they misunderstood?

**They said Tom Nixon** once killed 120 bison in forty minutes. That his rifle heated from the charges. That his forearms swelled. How did it feel the next time he held his sex?

**She claimed** to be Cal's niece. Paine hadn't believed her since she gave herself to Ralf but he knew that was because he thought Ralf was a piece of shit. Even before Ralf smashed him with the claw bar for rocking up against Kara after a night of Jim Beam. She could have been Cal's daughter. Or she could have been nothing. A woman who slid her finger down a county register until she found the fuck with the most land.

Yet she knew so much about it. Not the way to get there, but that matched with her story: her father was Cal's brother and she hadn't been on the land since 1983. She had slept during the car rides to and from. She knew the bison by name: Ty, Clove, Ash, Starn. Said they had "Cs" branded blond on their left hind legs. Said Cal gunned with her father at Lake Oahe and set decoys: canvasback, cinnamon tail, redhead, ruddy. Said when they left her alone she snuck to the corner and found the man mixed with the bison. Said she knew it was Paine's father who'd been lost on the plains. Said she was as sure of this as anything else in the world. Said she would give up her own uncle for reasons she couldn't explain. For reasons Ralf didn't even know. And she had given sex to him and he didn't know. And that was a thing Paine and Ralf could share: that no matter how close one got they would never have that part of her.

Paine had been looking for his father all these years but never considered going north. He'd spent his hours forking dirty omelets at truck dives with big-forearmed fucks smelling of diesel, who claimed they saw a man like his father this way and that, belted pants hanging below his ass, waving a carbine on the road's shoulder. All Paine knew was when his father left and what he wanted: bison. His father's father was from the Henry Mountains and told the stories of Brick Bond's 5,000 kills. Ropes from bison hair ten times stronger than hawser. Sleds from rib bones.

The day before he left he burned the south slope of the farm to scorch seedlings that crept across the plain. Sharp noon wind swept the flames into a dust devil that flung cinders against the siding and along the porch. Paine walked along the porch afterward and the ash warmed his bare feet. He watched his father get

into the back of a pickup with no license plate. He would have remembered the number if there had been one.

Kara shook her head when Paine showed her the photograph. She promised he was the man splayed along the bones. He was much worse for the wear but she would always remember that face.

Ralf agreed. "Your mind takes a fucking snapshot of something that terrible."

Kara said Paine would find his father.

**Never unannounced** at night.

Ralf scratched his neck, other hand on the doorframe. Kara eased him aside. "It's best if he sees me first."

Cal opened the door, carbine against his chest. Kara held out her arms and leaned forward. At first he hugged her with the carbine between them but he shifted and brought her to his chest. There was no hesitation. What other assurance did Paine need of her truth?

Kara turned to Cal and eyed the rifle and then Paine, as if to say this is what shows my truth. There is your father's rifle. The one he kept on the basement wall. The one he cleaned with a beige cloth on the porch, bare toes curled around the railing while he leaned in the wicker chair.

She kept her hands on his face. "You look just the same."

"Eyes never age. But the rest is old." He looked past her. "Who are these two?"

"This," she said, "is my husband." She reached back without looking and grazed Paine's hand but meant for Ralf's. He stretched forward and took it. The movement lacked the grace of a married couple, even the connection of two in love. It was the quick swipe of lust and neither thought Cal would believe it.

He ignored them and focused on Paine. "And him?"

"My brother," Ralf offered. "Younger and stupider."

"You don't look alike."

Paine crossed his arms. "My father used to say the same."

**They folded** into roles of father and sons and daughter. Cornmeal cakes and scrambled eggs with beer and trout. Sleeping in separate beds. Longjohns flapping from a fishing line. Heels rested on the door of the outhouse, head leaned on the back wall, watching bison and sky through a split in the wood. Feed dishes tossed from the roof and clipped with shots from the carbine: Cal took down the first three and handed the rifle to Paine. Did he expect to feel a sting in his wrists, some sign that this was his father's? He felt nothing. His shots sailed into the prairie and the dishes flapped onto the rock and dirt. Ralf laughed. Cal said it was a hell of a thing to laugh at his brother in that way. Paine was about to say they weren't brothers but he said they weren't friends.

"Hell of a shame," Cal said.

The bison corralled on the north edge and one lolled like it was drunk. Cal asked Kara to go check on it and at first she walked like she had never seen such an animal but after a moment she settled into her movements like a mother. Shit caked along the bison's back leg and it wobbled, exhausted. She said it had taken too much barley and forced it forward after a few smacks on the log fence and led it to the chute where it would be kept separate.

Cal hugged her when she came back but she punched him in the arm. "What did you expect? That I wouldn't know my ass from a hole in the ground?"

"It's just been a while," he said. He paused before letting go of her hand. He looked at Ralf. "Ready to go?"

Cal had promised him a trip to Lake Oahe when Ralf asked about the decoys in the basement. Ralf had played it straight, so well that even Paine had to give him credit. But there was time for back-slapping later. Kara saw them off in the gravel driveway, walking halfway down its length, even after they sped out of sight. She came back to Paine on the deck, who stared up at her and asked what he'd been wondering for so long.

Why would you give up someone you so obviously love?

"Love's never obvious," she said, and touched his thigh.

**The choice** to keep the bison was made minutes before they returned. Paine was hoping for the opposite, to sell the bison and the farm, the hundreds of flat and solid acres, but Kara was right that the full sale would never go through. But they could parcel the land and sell the bison off in groups, a dozen head here and there, but keep the rest. After that was decided Kara asked if she should take care of it.

"Only because of your arm." She touched his elbow. It was enough salve for the insult.

"I want this." He guided her hand away and turned.

Ralf, arms spread at full wingspan, held the row of ducks, string dipped at the center, hung over the gravel. He was smiling far too wide to be acting. Kara noticed it. Paine had noticed it the night before. That was fine.

Paine waited until they crossed the threshold of the doorframe and pulled the carbine from behind his hanging coat. One strike with the butt on the back of the head knocked out Cal. He landed on his chin and split skin.

Ralf tripped forward. The ducks spread beneath his fall, wings flapping alive. "Shit. What was that?"

"Don't be surprised." Paine loaded the rifle. His bad arm shook. "You were supposed to honk."

"I couldn't. He wouldn't let me drive." He closed his hand around Cal's wrist. "You're a twisted fuck. You wouldn't give him one last meal?"


Kara put her finger across Ralf's lips. Paine hiked Cal over his shoulder, walked him outside, and in full sight of the bison, shot him twice. They did not stutter, they did not shift. Paine was standing over the body when Ralf ran outside, Kara behind him. She was crying but Paine saw her smile break through the fake tears.

Before Ralf could scream, Paine whirled the rifle across his face. He hadn't expected Kara to watch but she did, and when he was done he leaned back against the house and could feel the shingles through his shirt.

Paine smiled beneath the blood. "Never, ever bring this up again."

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