

Arbitrary Dilettante

by Craig Lancaster

We sat there in a row in the upper reaches of the Richland County Fairgrounds arena, the twilight summer sky the color of grapefruit flesh holding us in on three sides. My wife, JuneBug, and her kid sister, Judi, occupied the first two spaces on the plank. A considerable distance down from Judi sat her husband, Skeeter, and then came me, close enough to Skeeter to let him think I was hanging out with him and yet far enough away to build a buffer between me and his soiled undershirt.

Every damned time we came back to Richland County, I told JuneBug to just do whatever she had to do but to leave me and Skeeter out of it. And every goddamned time, we ended up somewhere like this, the two sisters hook-armed and conspiratorial, and Skeeter and me thrown together and expected to get along because we were men and that's what men do. Or something like that. The trouble, of course, is that there's no partway with Skeeter; you're either his blood or you're just another honkyocker taking up space. Well, Skeeter decided I was his blood, and so I sat there, listening to him ramble on, wondering how much it would hurt if I just ran down the line and launched myself over the railing to the concrete below.

"I'd mud-wrestle me a pig if I got half a chance," Skeeter said.

I dug a gnat out of my ear. "What?"

"I would. I'd wrestle him. I'd win, too."

I leaned forward and hoped I could catch JuneBug's eye. She deliberately avoided my gaze.

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?" I asked.

"I'm just saying. I'd do it."

I shook my head and looked down at the arena dirt. We'd reached the silly stretch of entertainment, where some of the little kids in the crowd were getting to try rodeo in the miniature. In the middle of the arena, a goat paced nervously at the end of a tether as a hell-

bent-for-leather, lariat-twirling eight-year-old bore down hard on the back of a Shetland pony.

"Junie, Junie, look," I said. "Goat on a rope."

My wife, her face framed by enormous sunglasses, paid me no mind.

Skeeter backhanded me in the chest and stomped his feet. "Hey, that reminds me of something. I bet a fella could make a pretty good buck training goats for these kids' rodeos."

"Are you serious?"

"Shit, yeah."

I swear to God, I knew I shouldn't have prolonged it with him, but I couldn't stop myself. "It's a *kids'* rodeo, Skeeter. I mean, they're not on tour or anything. They don't need a stock company. They aren't going to Calgary tomorrow. It's a goddamned kids' rodeo." I emphasized this by punching the aluminum bench seat with my right hand, tearing skin away from the knuckle.

Skeeter looked like I'd run over his dog with a swather.

"I was just thinking and stuff, man. You don't have to be like that." He wiggled to his left, sidling up to Judi, who drew him in with an arm wrapped around him. JuneBug looked at me and mouthed, "What the hell?"

Yeah, I'm the bad guy.

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I sucked the blood from my knuckle, scuffing my feet and kicking gravel on the way to the car. JuneBug walked about as far from me as she credibly could while still moseying in the same general direction.

"Look," I said, "just don't bring me anymore, okay? I'm more than happy to just stay at home in Billings."

"Look yourself, Chuck. This is important to me. I don't understand why you're such a petulant child that you can't just be nice to him for a few hours."

We were at the back of the car now, and I wheeled around on her. "I can't. I just can't. I've tried and I've tried, and I can't."

"Why?" She stepped to me, aggressive.

“Because he's a dilettante. More than that, he's an arbitrary dilettante. You know what he said tonight? That he wants to mud-wrestle pigs and fucking herd goats for kids' rodeos. I'm supposed to just listen to that?”

“It wouldn't hurt you.”

“It hurts my brain, Junie. It hurts my friggin' fully operational brain. I mean, this was way worse than the last time, when he said he wanted to name every rest stop in the state after some famous Montanan. He was gonna drive to all of them, name them, and take the list to the Legislature to have the names officially changed. He'd have tried to do it, too, if I hadn't told him what a bad idea that was.”

JuneBug threw up her hands. “I give up. Let's just go home.”

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By the time we got to Miles City, it was full-on night, glitter scattered across the sky. I slipped into the Town Pump for some seeds and a bottle of tea while Junie slept.

She stirred when I came back. “Where are we?”

“Miles City, baby. A couple hours to go.”

“Good.” She stretched and closed her eyes again. She was folding snores before we got back to the interstate. I reached over and took her hand, and she squeezed my fingers. For a mile or two, the street lamps cast moving pictures across her pretty face. Finally, they dropped away and night closed in around us, and on we drove.

Just beyond Forsyth, as the road bent into the hills, I spotted the idling long-haulers and the coterie of summertime RVs and passenger cars in the roadside parking lot.

“Gary Cooper,” I said.

