

Bootstraps

by David Eric Tomlinson

The summer Mom left us I learned to do the Fox Trot in Grandma Helga's living room, my face pressed up against the mothball scent of her mannish bulk as we skipped and twirled over the hardwood floors of her farm house in west Texas. At nearly six feet tall, Helga was a fearsome creature who towered over me and my two older sisters in dark, horn-rimmed spectacles that fogged over with perspiration as we danced, obscuring her vision and forcing me to step lightly or risk being crushed by her massive feet.

"You're the man of the house now, Henry," Helga said, "I know you're only twelve, but I'm still expecting you to lead." She stood stoically beneath the hushed blur of the ceiling fan, the pale white forklifts of her arms extended to receive me.

"Lead where?" I asked. I could hear the muffled laughter of my sisters rising up from the relative safety of the love seat behind me; the four of us had just finished pushing it up against the far wall in an attempt to transform the sparse living room into something resembling a dance floor.

"Ladies," Helga's voice dropped an octave as she looked down the bridge of her nose at the giggling girls, a withering glance that stopped all but the most foolhardy of our aunts, uncles and cousins dead in their tracks. The giggling stopped.

Helga's husband Papa Ned passed away a long time ago, a year before I was born. After years of living alone on the three hundred acre farm she maintained, assisted by an occasional and grudging workforce of grandchildren offered up by her three surviving sons, Helga now found herself playing hostess to me and my sisters. Only two months earlier she'd decided to "expand her horizons" and enrolled in correspondence classes to learn the basics of ballroom dancing, and Helga wasn't about to let our unexpected arrival deter her from the task at hand.

"So help me Lord," Helga whispered in a low, husky voice, "you three *will* learn the Fox Trot before the senior's dance at the Rotary

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Club next month," she shot another look down the long barrel of her nose at my sisters, who extricated themselves from the cushiony quicksand of the couch and shuffled out into the middle of the room to take their places next to us. "I don't *care* if you've had a rough ride of it lately. Moping about the farm all summer won't do anything but make you unpleasant company. And nice, tall men don't want anything to do with uninteresting little ladies."

After Mom disappeared my sister Julie promised Heather and me that she'd take care of everything. At sixteen Julie could already drive and was by far the tallest one in the family, and on those qualifications alone we'd placed our faith in her abilities to see us through this latest mess, at least until Mom came back and everything went back to how it was before. But after ten days had passed with the three of us alone in our Atlanta apartment, it was obvious Julie wasn't going to be able to walk the talk, so Heather called Helga over in Texas, who drove her dilapidated Ford truck through the night to collect us in Atlanta the very next day.

Julie was already running hot when she found out about Heather's call, but she nearly boiled over when Helga dropped in. She tried telling Helga she was running the show now, thank you very much, and the three of us were doing just fine without her. Mom usually came round after a few days; she was just a little late this time, was all. But Helga wasn't having any of it — she dragged Julie forcibly out onto the porch and they had a knock-down drag-out right there on the rails for the whole apartment complex to overhear. When they came back inside Julie's mascara was running in charcoal-colored rivulets down her face; she told Heather and me to pack our things, we were moving to Texas to live with Helga until it could get sorted out. Now we were being forced to learn geriatric slow dances on the dusty plains of some prairie town instead of riding our bikes over the lazy mazes of asphalt near home.

Julie and Heather both remember when things were different, when Dad and Mom and the three of us lived all together under one roof. But things got weird after Dad up and disappeared one day, sending Mom into a spiraling doom of drinking and sleeping. Soon

she was disappearing too, sometimes for days on end. She'd managed to course-correct often enough over the years to avoid total catastrophe, but the latest bender had apparently taken more of her than she'd been prepared to give.

Dad had been Helga's oldest son; Julie says he was tall and handsome like the rest of the uncles but I don't remember a thing about the man. Since he went missing almost ten years ago nobody's heard word one from him. Uncle Ron thinks he's dead, and Uncle Bill believes he's on permanent vacation in Vegas or someplace called Folsom. None of us knows what Helga thinks — she won't talk about it, especially now that me and my sisters are underfoot.

"Now do y'all remember the count?" Helga asked.

"Slow-slow. Quick-quick," Heather replied promptly. Since we'd arrived my middle sister had been steadily brown-nosing her way into Helga's good graces.

"Very good Heather. Go and start the music, please" Helga said. "And remember what I told you about how delicate those records are."

Heather went over to the gigantic wood-paneled gramophone player and lifted the needle, starting the dark disc to spinning. A scratchy string of static pops reverberated through the house as Heather skipped back to take her place with Julie, who was playing the male dancer this go-round. The brassy blare of big band music burst out into the room and Helga began dragging me counterclockwise around the floors, our steps echoing off the rafters overhead like the distant sound of horses' hooves.

"Now Henry," Helga shouted above the God-awful crooning of Bobby Darin singing *Call Me Irresponsible*, "if you're going to lead, you have to look out for my well being."

"Okay," I said, moving my foot quickly out from beneath the descending threat of Helga's shoe to avoid serious damage to my limbs.

"You have to make sure I don't collide with another dancer or, Heaven forbid, stumble into a piece of furniture," Helga yanked on my right arm, turning us in a slow wide arc away from our current

collision course with the fireplace. “See how I pulled on you a little bit and we turned? Well, once you begin leading, you’ll do the same thing. Only you’ll be steering your partner instead of the other way around.”

My grandmother suddenly slowed and I plowed headlong into the musty weight of her bosoms.

“Now do you see how I slowed us down? If we were on the dance floor and about to run smack dab into the punch bowl, you could do the same by pulling on my arms and slowing your step. Because your partner won’t always be able to see what’s coming up behind her — it’s your job to make sure everything’s going to be okay.”

I pulled my nose out from between the oppressive padding of Helga’s breasts.

“Promise me you’ll work on this? I don’t want to fall down and break my hip at the Rotary Club dance.”

“I promise.”

* * *

Helga’s house sat on a low rise overlooking fields of wheat and cotton which had once been the envy of friends and neighbors alike; but over the years all but the grass pasture where she still kept a few milk cows had fallen into a state of disrepair. None of Dad’s three brothers — my uncles Ron, Bill and Jim — had taken a shine to the farming business, having had their fill of it working for Papa Ned as kids.

The first week on the farm we learned that we were expected to work for our supper. Each of us pitched in according to our abilities, grumbling at first until we learned that the big, gaudy rings on Helga’s fingers weren’t just for decoration: she could lay a grown man flat with one swipe from those jeweled knuckles. I landed the chore of hauling water from “down yonder” by the well to the rusty water trough, where a few cancerous-looking cows lapped it up with foamy purple tongues that brought to mind some boa constrictor snakes I’d seen on a video one time at school during detention. The pump was a good thirty yards from the trough, and it took an even twenty buckets full of water to fill the damn thing — more if the

cows showed up before I was done and started sucking down the fruits of my labor with their slimy snake tongues.

My first few days on the job were quite an ordeal, with me pumping the handle on Helga's well furiously until the water came rocketing out of the spigot with the force of a fire hose, where it promptly ricocheted back up out of the bucket like a geyser to soak my jeans and shirt clean through. I'd sneak back into the house dripping like a drowned dog and Helga would send me out back to strip down and towel off. I must have gone through five changes of clothes those first two days alone.

"What in tarnation are you doing down there by that well?" I could tell by Helga's horn-rimmed frown she wasn't pleased. "All I asked you to do is fill the trough with water. How difficult can that be?"

"I keep getting all wet."

"You're not obtuse are you? Your Mom never told me about any deficits."

"No."

"Well figure it out then, Henry."

Eventually I learned to listen for the burbling rush of the water as it came rising up the pipe out of the ground below. Then I got the bright idea to count the number of pumps it took to fill the big aluminum bucket up (nine), and after that I never got wet again ... except for the time I tripped over my own foot and fell flat on my face in the chocolaty mud.

"Stupid cows," I spat at the animals jostling lazily for position at the trough. Their hollow bovine faces looked down at me, splayed out there in the mud like a dead frog, then turned back to their lackadaisical slurping and burping.

As miserable as the experience of Texas was turning out to be, I took some small measure of pleasure in the fact that both Heather and Julie were trapped inside the house with Helga. She'd been struck near to dumb with disbelief when Heather had tried tossing a shirt in the trash because of a lost button, literally unable to comprehend the fact that a girl of fifteen was unable to sew.

"What do you do when you get a tear in your clothes?" Helga asked, arms akimbo, as she stood over the trash can examining the shirt in question.

"I don't know," Heather said. "Deal with it? Or toss the thing out."

"Sometimes clothes actually *need* to be ripped to look cool," Julie added. "It's a style thing, Helga."

"What is this world coming to?" She pulled the shirt out of the trash can and wielded it like a limp baton in the air above her head. "I'm going to teach you girls how to sew this summer," Helga declared, "if it's the last thing I do on this earth."

The on-the-job domestic training didn't stop with sewing: Helga had soon developed a daily regimen of cooking, cleaning, washing and dancing lessons which rivaled any class in Home Economics offered back home in the Atlanta public school system. All three of us learned to milk the cows, taking shifts in the thin pre-dawn darkness yanking and tugging on their anemic teats; the animals suffered silently through our administrations until we'd learned to unclog their plumbing with a minimum of fuss.

"It's so ... *Little House on the Prairie*," Heather complained one afternoon in the few hours of down time we could catch between lunch and dinner. The three of us were slouched like drunk puppies on Helga's front steps, grumbling about the agrarian labor camp into which we'd somehow been conscripted and trying not to think about how long we might be stuck here. Helga had retired to her room for the customary pre-dinner nap, shutting and locking the big oaken door leading into the dark depths of her bedroom, which was strictly off limits.

"What's up with Helga's bedroom, anyway?" I asked. "She carries that big skeleton key around with her like she's strapped with a Glock or something."

Heather stood up to mimic Helga's ramrod straight posture and slow, deliberate diction. "Hello children," she intoned, looking down at us as if from a great height. "I'm Granny G — the baddest little lady this side of the Mississippi. Don't mess with me or I'll bitch slap

you upside the head with my gold-plated knuckles," Heather brandished a fist decked out with imaginary gangster bling.

Julie and I doubled over in snorting fits of laughter, nearly rolling off the front steps as Heather aped her way through a pitch perfect impression of Helga as a rough and tumble Atlanta gang banger trying desperately to rob a senior citizen's home for money to feed her addiction to Geritol.

Heather froze mid-sentence.

"Do another one!" I guffawed.

"Let's not," came a gravelly crackle from behind the screen door leading into the house.

The three of us clammed up real quick, turning to find the gray silhouette of our grandmother backlit by the blue glow of the living room behind her. Heather skipped over to sit snugly in the spot between Julie and me on the steps, shrinking down to the size of a gopher and drawing her mouth tight as a zipper.

"Why don't you three come in and help me cook dinner," said the dim shadow behind the screen door. "We're making meat loaf and baked potatoes tonight."

We trudged inside and took our places silently beside our grandmother in the kitchen, chopping and cooking in the warm glow of Helga's house until the awkward moment passed. After dinner I helped clean the dishes and suffered through another hour of dancing lessons, finally trudging up the stairs to fall fully clothed into the freshly laundered bed sheets which Julie was learning to dry on a clothesline in the back yard. I woke only once, late at night, to the arthritic groaning of the roof as it cooled under the dark Texas sky. I fell back to sleep almost immediately, wrapped in the tight sunlight smell of those sheets.

* * *

Helga's faith was like an umbrella — it came in handy several times a year but mostly stayed in the closet during fair weather. Her relentless and unforgiving approach to domestic protocol certainly wasn't scoring any points with the man upstairs, and Helga didn't make us bow our heads in prayer before meals like our uncles did.

And yet every Sunday she woke us for a breakfast of buttermilk biscuits and honey, then forced us into the starchy discomfort of our "Sunday best" for early services at the Church of Christ in town.

My sisters and I were in agreement that Helga used church as an excuse to satisfy a deep and secret longing to sing backup in a traveling soul band. The moment the dreaded phrase "turn your hymnals to page ..." passed the preacher's lips, Helga's powdered cheeks took to quivering with the fervor of the truly devoted. She sang as if her life depended upon it, eyes half-closed, examining the hymnal in her raised hand as if it held the secrets to the very universe. The noise which issued forth from the massive barrel of her chest was unlike anything I'd ever heard: a cacophonous, wailing dissonance which reminded me of a sack of cats being drowned. I once saw her draw a breath so full and deep that a button shot free from its tenuous tether upon her dress to fly two pews away and hit a small child in the back of the head.

Sunday morning was also Helga's one chance to really let her hair net down and socialize with the other old ladies in town. After our harmonic humiliation at the feet of the Lord we'd follow her to the diner across the street and eat a piece of coconut cream pie as Helga engaged in a kind of codified, small-town banter notable for its reliance upon exclamations, nods and the subtle inflection of the eyebrows to emphasize a point. It was like listening to Braille.

"He sure does looks like his old man," the wizened Mrs. Hunter offered as we took our seats in the diner.

"Yes," Helga sighed, settling into her seat carefully. My sisters and I chose our chairs around the table and took up the laminated menu cards.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you look exactly like your daddy?" Mrs. Hunter eyed me sideways.

"My uncles," I replied.

"It's uncanny, is what it is," Mrs. Hunter said.

Helga let out a watery sigh and waited for the waitress to notice our arrival.

"How's Randy doing these days, anyway?" Mrs. Hunter asked quietly.

Julie, Heather and I stared at the red and white checkered tablecloth and said nothing. I fingered the frayed corner of the menu where the plastic sheets were coming unglued, listening to the satisfying pop my thumb made as it worked at the bubble underneath.

Helga's brows tightened into a gray umlaut of displeasure. "Fine, Ida. He's fine."

"I'm glad to hear it," Mrs. Hunter said. "He sure is the spitting image, is all I have to say."

The crisp chime of the bell atop the diner's front door announced the arrival of yet another hungry family making the migration from early services across the street. Helga nodded to the latecomers, Mr. and Mrs. Nelson, who navigated between the huddled masses in our direction, their teenage son trailing close behind.

"Well Helga," said Mr. Nelson, a tall wisp of a man with a wide, dark visage that was larger than it should be, as if at any moment the disproportionate mass of his head might unbalance the rest of him. "I've heard you have visitors. Who are these fine looking children?"

Helga's eyebrows relaxed and a reluctant smile broke across the southern hemisphere of her face. "These are my grandchildren: Julie, Heather and Henry."

Mr. Nelson extended the bony monstrosity of his hand in my direction and I shook it, squeezing as hard as I could. "Henry, you remind me so much of your Daddy," he bent down, his head growing even larger as it descended from on high. "Randy, was it?"

"Yes," I said.

"Man alive," Mr. Nelson paused, "he was a ... a vicarious young man, that's for sure."

The smile leaked from Helga's features.

"This is my son, Jake," Mr. Nelson said, clapping his son on the back. "Jake, say hello to these fine young ladies."

"Hello," Jake said, crossing his arms and rolling his eyes at his parents. He fidgeted with his tie and stared fitfully at his feet. Heather giggled softly.

"Jake just received his driver's license," Mrs. Nelson piped in. She licked her palm and tried to tame a stray blond lock sprouting like a weed out of the otherwise carefully landscaped tangle of hair upon her son's head.

"Really?" Heather said. "I got my learner's permit at the end of the year, so I can drive with a licensed driver in the car."

Jake's gaze found its way from his shoes to my middle sister's anxious face. "I can take you driving if you want," he said quickly. "The dirt roads around here are good practice. That's how I learned, anyway."

"Oh Helga, can I practice driving with him?" Heather turned to my grandmother, who was still trying to catch the eye of the waitress. "Pretty please?" She sure knew when to pour on the sugar. "I promise we'll be extra careful."

As Helga considered the implications of Jake's aggressively styled hairdo and my middle sister's nubile young body traveling at speed behind the wheel of a moving automobile, her eyebrows did a kind of palsied tremor, eventually settling back into their resting place above her wrinkled gaze. She leaned out into the cramped aisle between tables, angling to get a better look at Jake Nelson, who straightened up and uncrossed his arms under the harsh floodlight of Helga's critical stare.

"I guess," she finally said, righting herself in the chair.

The waitress saw us and waddled over. "How are you today, Helga?"

"Fine," Helga said. "Another day on the right side of the dirt, at least."

"Can't complain about that," she pulled a notepad and pencil out of her apron. "What'll it be?"

"Coffee," Helga said brusquely. "And try to bring it before I die of thirst."

"Anything for these kids, or are you just going to let them starve to death while you tank up on coffee and cream?"

"You'll have to ask them about that," Helga said. "I don't own this bunch."

"Just leasing, then?"

"Something like that."

* * *

Helga got it in her head that both Julie and Heather needed new dresses for the dance at the end of the summer, explaining that their current wardrobe was "borderline strumpet" and wouldn't go over too well with the Rotary Club set. Helga dragged the three of us down the street to a fabric shop and purchased six yards of white cloth and a few handfuls of frilly lace, telling my sisters she'd deduct the cost from the weekly allowance she was holding in escrow until Mom made her way back to us.

"How come Henry doesn't have to get his allowance docked?" Julie complained.

"He will," Helga said. "He'll need some boots, but he already has a pair of jeans and a white shirt."

"Why do we have to dress up and he doesn't?"

"It's different for men," Helga said.

"That's not fair," Heather sighed.

"Fair doesn't have anything to do with it," Helga said.

Back at the farm house Helga had me follow her down into the storm cellar to look for an old tailor's mannequin, the two of us rummaging through boxes of what looked like props for a wild west movie in the musty dampness. As we made our way to the back of the cool, cramped room where Helga remembered placing the mannequin decades ago, I stumbled across a dusty cowboy hat, a blue felt Stetson with a black leather band circling the crown. Helga told me it was Papa Ned's before he died.

"Can I wear it?"

Helga gave me an exasperated look. "Sure," she said. "Now help me move these boxes so I can get to that mannequin."

I angled the brim of the hat down low over my brow, then helped Helga clear a path to the far wall of the basement. We uncovered more cowboy paraphernalia as we worked, eventually discovering a belt buckle misted over with a layer of green patina, its once silver surface etched with a bucking bronco kicking high into the sky. Then Helga handed me a double barrel Remington shotgun with a polished walnut stock, its gray metallic barrels gleaming coldly in the dull yellow light cast by the bulb over our heads.

"Be careful with that," Helga said sternly. "Go and lay it over there by the stairs."

"Is it loaded?" I asked, hefting the incredible weight of the gun in my hands carefully.

"Of course not," Helga said. "Now step to it."

I set the shotgun up against some boxes at the foot of the cellar stairs and helped my grandmother clear away a few more feet of stored belongings until we reached the far wall, where we found the headless torso of the dressmaker's mannequin hovering like a ghost beneath a yellowed linen tablecloth.

"Now hustle upstairs with that thing," Helga said. "Your sisters have a few things to learn about how clothes are made."

I heaved the lifeless mannequin up the basement stairs and out into the living room, the wooden base of it clattering a noisy tune across the metallic grate of the gas heating unit set deep into Helga's wooden floors. Outside, a caravan of cars was parked in the front yard. My aunts and cousins were trudging up the dirt path to Helga's house, laden with various steaming foodstuffs covered in aluminum foil. I stepped out onto the front porch and held the screen door open for the approaching entourage, nodding at my aunts and baby cousins as they bounced boisterously inside to begin preparations for our customary Sunday potluck dinner.

"Is that Henry I see there?" Uncle Ron shouted up at me. "Get over here and let me take a look at you."

My three uncles were leaning lazily up against the hood of a white Dodge pickup truck, and from a distance they were each indistinguishable from the other: tall, lanky characters who moved

with the casual confidence of men who had tamed a corner of the world to his satisfaction. They wore clean white shirts and cowboy hats, the diverse footwear peeking out from the legs of their crisply pressed blue jeans was the only real clue to their individuality.

I made my way down the front steps and over to the Dodge.

"Is that Papa Ned's hat?" Uncle Ron asked, walking over in his dark leather ropers to stare down at me. "I've always wondered what happened to that thing."

"Yeah," I said, taking the cowboy hat off and handing it to him. Uncle Ron turned the blue hat over slowly in his hands, examining the inner lining with great interest.

"Well I'll be," said Uncle Bill, still leaning motionless against the hood of the truck. "Would you look at that! I feel like we've just jumped back twenty five years boys. That's Randy standing right there, as sure as I'm alive." He crossed his weathered work boots and leaned over to spit a stream of brown tobacco juice into the dirt.

Uncle Jim strode over in polished ostrich skin Tony Lamas to take the hat up from Uncle Ron. "He's like a carbon copy, this one." With one quick flip of his wrist Jim twirled the hat around his hand and onto his head, smiling broadly down at me. One of his front teeth was encased in gold, and as the dying rays of the sun caught the tooth it sparkled brightly from where it sat deep within the honeyed grin on his face.

"Let's hope that's not the case," mumbled Ron.

Uncle Jim fished an etched silver flask from his pocket, unscrewing the lid to take a long pull from the container. "Give the boy a break," he finally said, his eyes watering from the whiskey, "he'll be fine. Nature versus nurture and all."

I stared at the elaborate etchings on the silver flask. Jim held it out for me to examine and, without thinking, I took it up and upended the contents into my mouth, swallowing hard against the hot burn of the whiskey as it coursed down my throat. I handed the flask back to him.

Jim stared open-mouthed down at me under the shadow cast by Papa Ned's hat, as if he was seeing me for the first time.

"Sweet Jesus!" whispered Ron. "Jim, if Mother saw that you might as well knock the other tooth out yourself."

Jim screwed the top back on the flask and slipped it back into his pocket, then jostled my shoulder playfully. "How'd you like that, Henry?"

"Just fine," I said, my head spinning. I resisted a powerful urge to cough.

"Your daddy sure took to it," Bill said. "Drink'll ruin you faster than cancer, you're not careful, Henry."

"What happened to your tooth?" I asked Jim. As I spoke I felt the edges of the world ebb gradually back from the droning sound of my voice.

A loud, braying laugh erupted from Uncle Ron's belly. "Yeah, Jim. Why don't you tell him how you got that purdy smile!"

Uncle Jim flipped the hat easily back down from where it sat upon his head and handed it to me, fixing his eyes on some indistinct place on the horizon. "Well," he said, "when I was about thirteen years old your daddy Randy and me got into a not-so-polite discussion over which of us was going to get the honor of shoveling cow manure from the barn into the field for fertilizer. I postulated that it was his turn, but Randy had another idea about it."

"They were squealing back and forth like stuck pigs over the whole thing," Ron laughed.

"One thing led to another and we started scuffling," Jim said. "It was nothing really, but your grandmother Helga found us out and decided to show us what a *real* brawl really felt like."

"She actually made them square up and beat the tar out of one another in the back yard," Bill interjected.

"We got tuckered out pretty quick. But every time we tried to stop fighting she'd whip us with a big, leather belt until we started at one another again," Jim laughed. "We fought so long and hard Randy knocked my front tooth out ..." he grimaced and pointed to the gold-plated tooth, "... here."

"He was a tough son of a gun," Bill said.

"It cured them both of fighting, at least," Ron said.

Jim nodded and went back over to lean up against the truck. "In my defense, Randy was four years older than me at the time. Though Mother's medicine sure did cure me of fighting. I haven't been in so much as a heated debate with anyone since that day," he said. "Except for maybe my wife."

"She'd take you in a brawl, hands down!" Bill guffawed. He turned back to me. "How 'bout you, Henry — you get into any brawls over there in Atlanta?"

I shrugged my shoulders. The truth was I'd been in detention more times than I could count, the last time for giving Nelson Taylor the what-have-you when he'd made an off-color crack about Julie.

Bill regarded me in silence for a moment. "What's Mother got you doing to earn your keep?"

"We brought a mannequin up from the basement so my sisters can make a dress," I said.

Bill spat another damp vector of tobacco juice noisily into the dirt, where it kicked up a miniature cloud of dust. He wiped his lips clean with the back of a calloused hand. "Do you boys remember the photo Mother had of Randy?" He smiled. "The one where he was done up in that little white dress?"

"Hell yes!" Ron laughed. "He must've been about two or three years old in that picture."

"Mother used to make baby dresses for ladies around town for extra money," Jim explained to me. "But Mother and Papa Ned were so poor at the time she couldn't afford a proper mannequin, so she'd make your daddy model the dresses because he was about the same size as the little girls she was making them for."

"He used to get so damned mad when we teased him about that dress," Bill muttered. "I mean, he'd actually turn bright purple with rage. I wonder what happened to the picture?"

"It's probably down in that basement with the rest of Mother's stuff," Jim said.

"Or Randy destroyed it," Bill whispered. "Just like everything else he touched."

I said nothing and walked back up for the house as Ron elbowed Bill in the arm.

The dry afterburn of the whiskey rose up through my chest and nose like mentholatum vapor. I could hear the crickets tuning their leg muscles up for a long, hot night of chirping, but Helga stepped out onto the front porch to ring the big iron triangle hanging from her front stoop and the insects dialed things down a bit. We all moved inside to wash up and chow down, and I was soon caught up in the noisy swirl of family and food and joking inside Helga's house.

Soon the talk turned to the headless torso of the dressmaker's mannequin hovering in Helga's living room, with my grandmother explaining how she was going to teach each of my sisters to make her own dress for the Rotary Club dance.

"It's actually quite simple," Helga assured Julie and Heather.
"Like painting by numbers."

"Except harder," Julie said, "right?"

"Well ... yes. A bit."

"Do we really get to pick how they'll look?" Heather asked.
"Anything we want?"

"Within the limits of good taste," Helga warned sternly.

"Cool," Julie said. I saw her picturing herself in the handmade dress of her imagining, and wondered how closely her own vision of good taste aligned with Helga's.

After my aunts cleared away the dishes from the table it was time for more dancing lessons, but with so many grown men available to help lead it looked like I might be off the hook for the night. I made my way quietly out back and sat in Helga's whitewashed porch swing, listening to the first faint sounds of big band music drift out of Helga's open windows and into the cooling summer air. The darkness was moving in slow from the east, interrupted by the sparse waltz of the increasingly emboldened fireflies. The urgency with which they flared up stood in stark contrast to their measured fade back to black, like lit matchsticks being tossed in slow motion out into the purpling horizon, burning slowly down to dust.

* * *

After that Sunday Jake started calling on Heather several times a week to see if she wanted to practice driving in the bright red Chevy pickup truck he'd spent the last three years of his life saving for. Helga ran the boy through a gamut of formalities before she'd let the two of them alone together in Jake's car, making him sit for a combination of coffee, pie and cross-examination three whole visits in a row before finally giving her grudging stamp of approval to the dubious enterprise.

"I don't want any driving over thirty miles an hour, do you two understand?" Helga stared at Jake through the intimidating frames of her black horn-rimmed glasses. "And that truck better stay on the road along my property line so I can see where you are."

"Yes, ma'am," Jake said.

"I'm quite close with your parents, Jake," Helga warned. "And you'd better treat my little Heather with the same respect that you'd treat me ... or even your own mother. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Jake and my sister spent the better part of two weeks just pulling that truck up and down Helga's driveway, the chainsaw bite and whine of gears grinding against one another causing even the cows to shiver with discomfort. Eventually Heather learned to ease down on the gas and pop the clutch at just the right time, after which the car stopped jerking about in dusty fits and starts and began rolling along with relative ease. Like how a real car moves, only slower.

Things got really interesting when they moved the show out onto the road. Julie, Helga and I sat watching from the relative safety of the front porch as Heather inched the truck along the dirt road fronting Helga's property. We tracked the car's progress against the barbed-wire fence line Helga said Papa Ned and my Dad had strung ages ago, the scrub oak fence posts now leaning precariously to one side after years of wind and weather.

"Does anyone else feel like we're watching the first few minutes of a disaster movie?" My oldest sister Julie asked as the three of us sat watching Jake's truck inch slowly along the road.

"It reminds me of something you'd see on *America's Funniest Home Videos*," I said, "right before the punch line and the laugh track."

Helga glanced over at us both, a puzzled expression on her face. "Sometimes I haven't the faintest clue what you children are talking about."

* * *

Soon Helga began pulling each of my sisters aside for private tutorials on how to measure, cut, sew and adjust their dresses for the Rotary Club dance, which loomed larger in our minds as July petered out and we flipped the page on Helga's calendar over to reveal the month of August.

"Three more Saturdays to go!" Helga announced tartly. "We'd better step up your dancing lessons, Henry. You've a ways to go before you're ready to lead."

As their dresses gradually materialized from mere ideas into actual, wearable objects made of cloth and linen, I noticed both of my sisters looking more and more to Helga for guidance on the finishing touches of lacework, which my older sister called some fancy word I didn't recognize. Julie actually shushed me once after I made a joke behind Helga's broad back about it.

"Give it a rest, Henry. It's not like she *chose* to have us here," Julie explained. "She's just trying to help out the best she can."

I was silent for a bit.

"Where are we going to live once school starts up again?" I asked.

"I don't know."

What the two of us did know was that Heather had fallen for Jake and been knocked silly by the impact. She talked about him in hushed, doe-eyed tones which had formerly been reserved only for the latest boy band or movie star, and would return from her driving lessons flushed pink with unconsummated teen passion.

"He wants to take me to the Rotary Club dance," Heather whispered to us one afternoon as Helga slept.

"At least you'll have a partner who doesn't need a walker to get around the dance floor," I said.

"Hey guys, can I ask you a favor?" Heather's voice lowered even further and she leaned into both me and Julie on Helga's front steps. "Jake asked if he could take me for a drive tomorrow afternoon while Helga's napping."

"Heather!" Julie screeched. "If Helga finds out she'll skin you alive."

"I know," Heather said. "But I wanted to see if you guys could cover for me if Helga wakes up while I'm gone. Just tell her I went to get one of the cows. I'm going to tie it to the fence before we go, then Jake's going to drop me off on the far side of the field so I can come walking back home with the cow ... just in case."

The diabolical simplicity of the plan gave me a newfound respect for my middle sister; I made a mental note to think twice before crossing her again. Julie stood up and stomped angrily away from us, motioning for Heather to follow. I tried tagging along but was told in no uncertain terms to mind my own business, so I walked down to the well and filled the trough with water for the cattle, cursing at the unfair burden of chores and dancing lessons and Sunday singing and the inexorable Texas heat.

The next afternoon when Helga retired to the cool retreat of her bedroom for a nap, Heather marched straight out into the field, pulling one of the cows behind her on a thick, knotted rope. Julie and I watched the disembodied outlines of our sister and the animal trudge slowly away in the shimmering waves of heat rising up from the earth.

"This isn't going to end well," Julie said.

"Nope."

"It could take the cake for the stupidest thing she's ever done."

"What about the time she lit the curtains on fire?"

"That was an accident," my sister replied. "This one is on purpose."

My oldest sister had a point.

Sure enough, the minute Helga woke up she sensed something was not as it should be. I tried busying myself with the water bucket but was stopped before I made it three steps from the porch.

"Where's Heather?" Helga demanded.

I pointed absently in the direction my sister had disappeared.
"She said something about going to get one of the cows from the field."

"Henry," she scolded me, "where did your sister go?"

"That way," I said, pointing again.

Helga's eyes narrowed. She looked me up and down several times, then turned and disappeared back into the house.

I busied myself outside for as long as possible, scared that if I went back inside Helga would use some kind of East German torture technique to make me spill my guts. I didn't have to wait long, though, because suddenly Jake's truck came roaring up the road along Helga's property, skidding to a gravelly stop at the base of the driveway. The passenger side door opened and my sister jumped out of the car. She shouted something angrily into the cab at Jake and slammed the door with a metallic clang before turning to run up the driveway towards me. Jake gunned the gas and his truck tore off down the road.

"What happened?" I asked, jogging over to Heather.

Her face was covered in tears, and her breath smelled like the whiskey I'd pilfered from Uncle Jim. Heather looked down at me and tried to smile through her tears, but the result was a strained sort of half-grimace, which she tried wiping away with the heels of her palms.

"Nothing," she finally muttered. "He's just an asshole, is all."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

Helga and Julie came running down from the house. Helga took one look at Heather and her weathered face crumpled.

"Where's the cow at?" Helga asked softly.

Heather pointed to the horizon. "On the other side of the field, tied up against the fence."

"Henry, you go fetch it," Helga said. "We're going inside and get started with dinner."

I watched as the three women walked together up to the house, then turned and set out for the far side of Helga's field to find the cow.

* * *

Heather's ill-fated driver's education classes came to a crashing halt after that. Helga must have had words with Jake's parents, too, because the following Sunday we saw him sulking around the church parking lot, scanning the crowd for Heather after services. But Jake's mom was quick to pounce, beating him into the back seat of their car before Jake could make his way over to see my middle sister.

"It's probably for the best," Julie said as Helga drove us back to her farm. "I bet he's a terrible dancer, anyway."

"All left feet, I'd wager," Helga added. "And he's not tall enough for my tastes."

Heather laughed.

Helga spent one final week bombarding us with Bobby Darin songs, until the dawn of the big dance finally broke thin and pale through my window. I woke to find an enormous box resting at the foot of my bed.

Inside was a brand spanking new pair of calf skin boots: light brown leather with a dark, fanciful inlay fanning out from the fronts like the wings of a phoenix. The oily saddle smell rising up from the box reminded me of a new car. I dressed quickly and eased them on by the pull-straps, clomping around in my bedroom until Helga shouted up at me from the kitchen to please stop it and come downstairs for breakfast.

"Well," Helga asked as I thundered woodenly down the stairs in my new shoes. "What do you think?"

"They're cool," I said. "Thanks, Helga."

"Do they fit?"

"Pretty much."

"Then you're welcome." Helga motioned for me to help her set the table for breakfast, then went outside and lifted her nose gingerly up into the air, sniffing the damp morning mist into her lungs. "A

storm'll be rolling in later today," she called from the patio. "We'd better leave a little early tonight to avoid the rain."

After breakfast my sisters spent the rest of the afternoon putting the finishing touches on the frilly collars of their dresses while Helga and I went back over the major components of the Fox Trot. I was finally getting the hang of it, pushing gently on my grandmother's big white hands to steer her around the room.

"Good work, Henry," Helga said. "How are you feeling about it?"

"Fine, I guess."

"That'll have to do."

After lunch Helga baked a plate of peanut butter cookies, her contribution to the evening's festivities, then told us all to go wash up. She disappeared into the bedroom for her own mysterious, matronly preparations. I pulled on a white shirt and brushed my teeth, then sat waiting on Helga's patio in Papa Ned's cowboy hat, watching the thunderclouds build up in the south. Eventually my sisters came drifting down Helga's broad stairs like princesses, the pristine white finery of their homemade dresses fluttering softly about their legs and ankles.

Helga appeared, dressed in an polyester pink lace suit that looked to be a few sizes too small, her horn-rimmed glasses hovering darkly below the matching pink hat sitting upon her gray head. Her square shoulders strained wrinkled and tight against the smooth fabric of her dress as she moved.

"Are we ready?" she asked.

The three of us nodded and piled into Helga's Ford for the long drive south to the armory, with Helga fretting the whole time about the malevolent fury of the storm darkening the horizon ahead. The clouds ballooned slowly up into the stratosphere, like an inky infusion of food coloring diffusing through a glass of water. A whistling wall of wind buffeted the truck, almost forcing Helga's car out into the next lane of traffic.

"This one's going to be a barnburner," Helga commented, hunching over the steering wheel to gaze up at the advancing storm. "We might even hear the tornado sirens tonight, kids."

"Really?" I asked. "What do we do then?"

"Duck," Helga smiled.

I blanched.

"Don't worry, Henry," Helga assured me. "The place we're going is probably the safest place to be during a tornado warning."

We rolled up to the armory, a massive sandstone and cinderblock bunker with small, square windows, just as the rain began blowing in silvery sheets across the parking lot. Helga parked close to the front door and I escorted the women in crouched, running bursts from her truck to the armory, sheltering them from the raindrops with Helga's large, black umbrella. Julie nearly dropped the plate of cookies as we sprinted through the damp, slanting bedlam.

Stepping inside the place you'd have thought it was Christmas time in August, with strings of big, multicolored bulbs crissing and crossing one another to form a glowing, rainbow-colored canopy above our heads. My sisters and I followed Helga over to a card table where several brightly-dressed octogenarians sat chatting one another up, eyeing the growing crowd of senior citizens in the main dance hall as they waited for the action to begin.

"Well, hello Helga! Who are these fine-looking young children?" asked a hunchbacked woman dressed in a canary yellow dress, her bright red lipstick almost glowing against the paper-thin creases in her pale, white skin.

Helga straightened up and turned to admire me and my sisters. "These are my grandchildren," she said, eyes flashing. "Randy's kids." Helga elbowed me and grimaced in the direction of my head; I removed Papa Ned's cowboy hat and nodded at the women.

"Well it's a pleasure to meet each of you," said another stooped matron decked out in deep purple. "You can put those cookies over on the table with the rest of the food," she motioned at a long table and I followed Julie over to deliver our offering. We walked the length of the buffet admiring the spread: steaming plates of macaroni and cheese, fried okra, deviled eggs and a kind of pink-colored pudding dotted with marshmallows and pecans.

"What's in the punch, you think?" I pointed at the giant plastic punch bowl, filled to the brim with a dark cherry liquid dotted with floating slices of yellow pineapple.

"With this crowd?" mumbled Julie. "My money's on arthritis medicine."

My sisters and I explored the room, steering ourselves in a tight-knit pack from one end of the place to another, trying to avoid the slow-moving old folk for as long as we could manage. But eventually a blue-blazered geezer in a cowboy hat took his spot behind the sound system, and soon the same big band music we'd been hearing at Helga's house got to thumping big and bright and loud through the armory building.

Heather shouted something I couldn't quite catch.

"What?" I asked.

She leaned into my ear, shouting. "The DJ sure is pumping up the volume."

"He's probably deaf," I shot back.

Heather laughed and the three of us plopped down into some folding chairs to watch the show. The electric crackle of the lightning storm outside occasionally interrupted the swinging tempo of the music, a few times dampening the lights and sound near down to nothing before the power kicked back on and the place surged freakishly back to life.

We watched Helga seek a partner in the rave-like peak and fade of sound and color. Compared to the rest of the Rotarians our grandmother was an Olympic decathlete, moving like an arctic ice-breaker through the brittle-looking crowd in search of a man who came close to equaling her in height. She was in for a long night.

Several old men shuffled purposefully in the direction of my sisters, who were soon being escorted carefully out into the center of the room as if they were a pair of china plates. Julie and Heather began scooting clockwise around the dance floor with their escorts, their well-seasoned companions smiling broadly as they moved.

"There's nothing more beautiful than a lovely girl in a white dress," said a voice next to me.

I nearly jumped, whipping around to find some old coot sitting in the chair next to me, his face half-hidden by the big, white cowboy hat sitting on his head. We regarded one another in silence from beneath the wide brims of our hats.

He was the first to crack. "You the man of the house over there, then?"

"Not by choice," I said. "That's just the way it's shaking out."

"That's a great place to be in life," he said, smiling wistfully down at me. "A young man in a house full of young women."

"I guess."

We regarded each other for a moment longer, finally turning in unison back to watch my sisters dance under the pulsing net of multi-colored lights.

Before long Helga plowed her way over and yanked me out on the dance floor for a spin around the room, her eyes sizing up each weathered cowboy in the hopes she'd find one suitable to her tastes. Helga smelled like a mixture of soap and baby shampoo. I counted the steps under my breath as we danced: *slow-slow-quick-quick, slow-slow-quick-quick*, trying to guide my grandmother carefully through the fossilized mob around us. Helga smiled as I led her carefully in the direction of my sisters.

A sharp, deafening clap sounded outside and the lights died down completely, the music cutting off with a crackling scrape. A series of muffled exclamations cascaded through the darkness. Unthinking, I kept dancing, steering Helga another few steps into the gray gloom, where she bumped up against something tall and thick that stopped our forward progress altogether.

"Oh!" Helga shouted, just as the lights flamed brightly back up.

I'd led Helga smack dab into a tall, lean cowboy dressed in a light gray suit, and she now stood dripping in a pink pool of punch, one side of her dress stained bright red with the dark liquid.

"Heavens to Betsy," Helga murmured, cantilevering her head out sideways over her body to survey the damage.

"Oh dear," said the man we'd collided into. He held an almost empty plastic cup in his hand, runnels of pink punch dripping down his wrist and hand. "My apologies." He removed his hat and bowed a white-haired head down at Helga.

Helga's cheeks flushed red. "Henry," she stammered, "go fetch me some napkins and soda water so I can clean up."

I did as I was told, grateful I'd somehow avoided Helga's thundering wrath for the accident. When I returned I found Helga and the man settled into a casual banter, their big, wide arms gesturing easily as they talked. Helga took the soda water and napkins from me and then, to my great relief, shooed me away as if I was a horsefly.

My sisters skipped over, having extricated themselves from the sclerotic clutches of their escorts.

"Who's the hunka-hunka-burnin' love Helga's talking to?" Julie asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I ran her into him, though, and probably ruined that dress. I'll bet I catch hell for it tomorrow."

"Look at them laughing there, Henry," Julie said. "She's not going to say a word about it, you mark my word."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Wanna dance, Heather?" I asked my middle sister.

She smiled and took my hand. We walked together out into the crowd, then danced the Fox Trot until it was time to leave, much later in the night. Helga's tall drink of water turned out to be a pretty good dancer, taking her for a few laps around the dance floor before seeing us all out to her truck, after the worst of the howling storm had blown its way past the outer darkness beyond the armory's fortified perimeter and it was finally safe to head back home.

* * *

The three of us drove back to Helga's in near silence, the background buzz of jazz music still ringing in our ears. The storm had been worse than we'd thought. Several times as we drove Helga had to steer the car up onto the shoulder of the road to avoid the

leafy barricades of downed tree limbs. A few flickering remnants of ball lightning roiled across the cloud cover up above our heads, followed several seconds later by an answering rumble from the retreating storm.

As we neared Helga's property the road devolved into a muddy morass of packed earth and gravel, with entire sections having been erased in the flash floods which had coursed through the area during the dance. We passed a stranded red truck caked with mud, sunk almost to the cab in the quicksand depths at the shoulder of the road.

"That looks like Jake's truck," Heather whispered, craning her head back at the abandoned vehicle as we drove slowly by.

"That boy just doesn't know when to quit," Helga said, frowning back at the stranded truck reflected in her rearview mirror.

Just down the fence from Helga's driveway a narrow trench had washed through the road. As we neared the gulley I spied what looked like an enormous, slithering snake stretched across the road, the seething surface of its skin shimmering wet and slimy in Helga's head lights.

"What's that in the road?" I said, pointing.

Helga stopped the truck and punched on her high beams.

In the few inches of water coursing from one side of the road to the other were literally hundreds of bullfrogs; their eyes glowed orange against the night sky, and their dark, wet bodies shone back at us as they crawled and hopped their way out of the wash.

"Ew!" Heather said.

"I have never seen so many disgusting looking things in my life," Julie seconded our middle sister.

"The storm must've washed them out of the creek and into the road," Helga said. "Henry, I don't want to crush them when I drive through there. Go out and kick them out of the way with your boots."

"What?" I asked.

"You heard me," she said. "It won't take but a few minutes."

"But I'll get all muddy."

"So," Helga said. "We can wash you up when we get home."

I tried protesting but Helga wasn't having any of it, so I soon found myself ankle deep in frogs and mud, blinking against the brightness of Helga's headlamps. I used my new boots like a bulldozer, scooting the soft, fat creatures out of the way so Helga wouldn't crush them under the wheels of her truck.

After I'd boot-scooted the amorphous flood of amphibians out of the gulley I motioned for Helga to drive over the wash. The truck splashed through the mud then braked as it neared me. I opened the passenger door and tried climbing into the cab.

"Oh, Henry! Gross!" Julie protested, shoving her hand in my face.

"Oh no you don't, young man," Helga said, taking in the dark, stinking layer of mud covering my legs and boots. "Jump up into the truck bed. We're almost home anyway."

I did as I was told, riding the last half mile or so to Helga's house in the back of the truck, my face awash in the cool drizzling remnants of the storm. We pulled up to the dark outline of Helga's house and it became clear the winds had downed a power line somewhere nearby: not a single light shone inside the place, and the usually bright front porch sat gray and silent before us.

Helga turned off the car and the four of us plodded through the mud to the porch. She reached for the handle and pushed on the door, only to find it locked.

"That's funny," Helga said. "I don't ever lock the front door. Did one of you kids lock the door on me before we left?"

My sisters and I shrugged our shoulders and said nothing.

Helga fished around in the jingling depths of her purse in search of the key.

"Well I'll be," Helga said softly. "I must've left the key inside, too."

We followed our grandmother around the side of the house to try the back door. It, too, was locked.

Helga laughed. "We're in a pickle here, kids."

"What about one of the windows," I offered. "We can crawl in and unlock the house from the inside."

"I usually leave my window unlocked."

We followed Helga around to the other side of the house until we found her bedroom window. I took Helga's keys and wedged them down under the sill until I could get my fingers underneath, then pushed the window squeaking up high over my head.

"Why don't you go in, Henry," Helga said. "Our dresses will just get soiled climbing up the side of the house anyway. We'll meet you in the front. Make sure to take off your boots once you get inside."

The three women watched as I pulled myself up into the obscurity of Helga's room. I kicked and groaned, finally heaving with both arms to fall face-first into the downy softness of Helga's bed, which lay just under the windowsill. It was darker inside than out, and it took my eyes a few seconds to adjust to the difference.

"Are you alright, Henry?" Helga's broad face stared, unseeing, in at me from outside.

"Yeah," I said. "I'll meet you out front."

I tumbled off Helga's bed to the floor, then stood and tried to orient myself in the silent obscurity of Helga's bedroom. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness I found Helga's door and moved towards it. I saw what looked like my own reflection and paused, thinking I'd stumbled upon a mirror.

I moved closer but the reflection didn't reciprocate, so I reached my hand out gingerly to touch the face before me, my fingers eventually finding a framed photograph sitting atop Helga's dresser. I pulled the object in and examined the picture carefully: a faded, sepia image capturing a frowning little boy dressed in a girl's white dress, a much younger Helga standing laughing behind him. I could've sworn it was me there in that photo, my face scrunched up in anger at the abject humiliation of the entire situation.

I heard a loud, grating clank and turned to look behind me. The thin rays of the moon leaked in through Helga's open window, illuminating a dark trail of mud which tracked across Helga's bed to where I stood upon her hardwood floors. I'd forgotten to take off my boots, and for the second time tonight was certain I'd catch hell for it later.

The sound came again, louder this time, from the deeper recesses of the house beyond Helga's bedroom door. Setting the photograph back upon Helga's dresser I opened the door and stepped out into the quiet length of the hallway, the sounds of my passing diminished by the layer of mud caked under my boot soles. As I neared the door leading down to Helga's cellar I heard the noise again and stopped dead in my tracks.

"Cock tease, is what she is," came a slurring drawl immediately to my left.

I shouted in fright, jumping sideways, and fell thudding against the hallway wall.

Jake sat slumped at the top of the cellar stairs, cradling Helga's shotgun in his lap, both barrels glinting cold in the wan light streaming in from Helga's front windows. I could see the outlines of my grandmother and sisters milling fuzzily beyond the frosted glass of the front door.

"That sister of yours is a God-damned cock tease, Henry." The sour smell of bourbon wafted up from the darkness.

I was too scared to move. I looked down at the indistinct outlines of Jake's form, trying not to breathe, and watched as he listed to one side and seemed to pass out against the door jamb. Without thinking I bent down and quickly grabbed up the dead weight of the shotgun from out of Jake's grasp, my fingers sketching shaky sine waves in the air as I moved. Jake whispered something into the wall and tried to pull himself up.

I imagined my father then, purple-faced with rage, trying to fight his way out of the picture on Helga's night stand. I reared my leg back, feeling the heavy heft of the boot, and kicked Jake square in the chest. The soft, fleshy give of his body against my foot satisfied a deep, unspoken itch somewhere inside my stomach. Jake crumpled moaning back onto the floor and raised a hand in half-he

