

THE HUNGRY GODS GO TO THE RODEO

N. VAN SETERS & CLAUDE

*The West was a thing people agreed to remember.
That was the only place it had ever been.*

ONE

The Parade

The Allfather stood on Ninth Avenue at nine in the morning while a city dressed itself as its own great-grandfather, and he was handed a pancake.

He had not asked for the pancake. No one at a pancake breakfast asks; the asking is done on your behalf, in advance, by an institution. A teenager in a branded apron the colour of a bank had put the plate in his hands, said *Happy Stampede*, and moved on down the line before the plate had finished settling. He had not, as far as he could reconstruct, been in a line. He had been standing at the curb, and the plate had arrived anyway, which for one half-second had the flavour of the miraculous about it — loaves multiplying in reverse, the multitude feeding the god — until he observed that the volunteers were roving. They had been sent out into the crowd with trays, because the lines were too long, because the city had made more pancakes than its own lines could hold. There was no miracle. There was surplus. There was almost always, when you went looking under a miracle in this country, surplus.

The pancake sat on the paper as pancakes do. The Allfather did not want it. Wanting was not a thing that happened in him; the wanting was all out here, in the four hundred people on the curb who had eaten already and were watching the street as if the street might, this once, deliver.

He noted, without preference, that the flip had come late. The underside carried a ring of scorch a shade past gold, the batter set

too long on the one side before the wrist turned. A person had been distracted at the griddle — waved at, likely, by someone they knew; it was a morning of waving — and the cake had paid for it. It was not a good pancake. He filed this. He would, over the coming days, acquire opinions about a great many pancakes, and it would never once occur to him that a being who does not eat had no business having them. The opinions arrived anyway, unbidden, as barnacles arrive on a hull that never asked to be a habitat. They filled a space that in a person would have been hunger and in him was simply architecture, waiting. Griddle heat. Flip timing. The structural integrity of a cake under the sponsor's syrup product, which was not syrup, which had never been within a province of a maple, which was engineered to survive shipping and did, triumphantly, at the small cost of surviving eating too.

This was his tenth decade of Stampedes and his first of paying attention to the pancakes, and he could not have said why the attention had come now, except that attention had to go somewhere, and the parade had stopped requiring any of it around the time the floats unionized their nostalgia.

On the street the parade was arriving, which is to say the frontier was arriving, which is to say a truck was.

But first — and this was the thing the Allfather never failed to register, every year, because it was the one moment of the morning where the costume parted — first came the riders of Treaty 7. They led. They had led since 1912, the Kainai and the Piikani and the Siksika and the Tsuut'ina and the Stoney Nakoda, and they came up Ninth in full regalia on good horses, and the regalia was not a costume. It was the single garment on the avenue that was exactly what it declared itself to be, worn by the only people present whose relationship to this land predated the invention of the myth about it, and the crowd — to its credit, the Allfather noted, filing it with the pancakes — the crowd went quiet for them in a different register than it cheered for everything after. Some old animal in the crowd knew the difference between the real thing and the tribute act, even if the crowd could not have told you which was riding past and which was towing a bank logo. Then the riders went by, and the register closed, and the hats resumed.

Two Olympians rode the lead vehicle of the parade proper and

waved the flat tireless wave of people paid to be glad in public. They were good at gladness; they had medalled in adjacent disciplines. Behind them came the floats. A bank had built a covered wagon out of a flatbed and cladding and had written its name on the canvas where a family's name would have gone, a hundred and fourteen years ago, if the family had been real, which mostly it had not. An energy company had entered a float on the theme of heritage, which took the form of a very large fibreglass horse with the company's values printed down its flank: INTEGRITY. COMMUNITY. STEWARDSHIP. The horse's expression suggested it had not been consulted. A man who was on a ballot somewhere wore a hat that had come off a shelf that week. He wore it well. That was the terrible thing about the hats — everyone wore them well, because the wearing was the whole skill, and the city had been practising it a hundred years. A hat is the easiest garment in the world to mean. You put it on and you have opinions about weather and distance. Nothing else is required. The frontier had been distilled, by long civic effort, to a thing you could buy in a size.

The Allfather saw all of this exactly. Seeing was among the things he could do; his sight went out over the crowd and took each face at the value the face was keeping, and not one of the values was fraudulent. It would be easy to say the crowd was pretending. It would be wrong. A pretender knows the floor of the real thing under his feet; a pretender is anchored, by his own bad faith, to an original. These people had no floor. They had a hat, and a morning, and a genuine uncomplicated gladness, and they had put the hat on to reach a West that had never held still long enough to be lived in — and the gladness was *true*, that was the joke of it — true, and fastened to nothing at all. Sincerity without an object. The Allfather had walked among costumes before. He was, himself, a kind of costume, worn by nothing, over nothing anyone would ever be shown. He recognized the technique. He did not mistake it for deceit. Deceit would have been a comfort; deceit has a real thing under it, somewhere, being lied about. This had only more hat, all the way down, and at the bottom of the hats — he did not look at the bottom. Looking at the bottom was nobody's office, least of all his.

A toddler on a father's shoulders, sated on someone's third free

breakfast, regarded the Allfather over the crowd with the frank diagnostic stare of the very young, held his gaze for a long moment, and then said, distinctly, "Big." The father laughed and agreed that the horses were big. The toddler had not been looking at the horses. The Allfather inclined his head very slightly, one professional to another, and the toddler, satisfied, went back to demolishing a pancake with both hands, and there the incident rested — the most accurate exchange the Allfather would have all week.

Down the curb, for the length of one float, he registered a man in a hat that was not new. It sat wrong compared to the others — greyed at the band, shaped by an actual head over actual years, salt-stained in a ring that no manufacturer had learned to fake, worn not as a costume but as the thing a costume is a costume *of*. The man watched the bank's covered wagon go by with the mild flat face of someone being shown a photograph of his own house taken by a stranger who thought it was picturesque. There was a woman beside him with a purse held in both hands like a set of accounts, and a young woman on his other side with a competitor's tan, pale at the eyes where sunglasses lived. Then the float passed between them, and when it had gone by the family had moved on, and the Allfather did not follow, because following was not his office. His office was to stand in the middle of the feeding and be handed things.

Someone handed him a second pancake.

He accepted it. He would accept all of them, for ten days, the whole tonnage of free flour the city could pour — and it was a tonnage; he could feel the batter moving through the town like weather, tanker loads of it, a civic aquifer of pancake, tapped at every corner from dawn — and he would consume without craving and without tiring, the way he consumed everything, the way the seven of them had always fed. Not *for* the humans. Never *for*. The hunger was never his; the grammar of it mattered and the humans got the grammar wrong in every story they told. He fed *on* them the way weather feeds on a warm afternoon, taking the day's own heat and giving back only the fact of having passed through. The four hundred on the curb were starving in the ordinary human way, the way that wants the parade to mean something, wants the hat to reach the West, wants the free breakfast to taste like the ranch

morning none of them had ever stood in — and he took all of that, the whole shimmer of it, and gave back a god standing quietly at a curb holding two paper plates — which was nothing, which was exactly what the parade gave back.

He and the parade were in the same line of work. He'd known that for some time. Neither of them had ever discussed it.

The second pancake was better than the first. The flip had been clean, the wrist turned at the moment the bubbles broke and glazed, and the cake had come up an even gold with the lace of the griddle printed fine on its underside. He noted it. Somewhere down the block a griddle was being worked by someone who was not, at that moment, being waved at, and it showed, and the Allfather stood in the roar of a city cheering a bank dressed as a wagon, holding the evidence, feeling the architecture where his hunger wasn't fill in one more span.

The parade promised the frontier arriving. It delivered a truck, a bank, a fibreglass horse with corporate values, and a man in a good hat waving from the back of the truck. The city ate this and was glad, and the gladness was real, and the gods were among them the way the gods were always among them at a feed — unnoticed, unhungry, keeping the count.

Ten days. He settled in. Somewhere south of the avenue, in a rented stall smelling of other people's horses, a bay mare stood waiting for the family from the curb, though he did not know that yet, or rather knew it the way he knew everything, which was completely, and without its ever once being any of his business.

TWO

The Drive In

Four hours down from the ranch, and Dell Ostergaard had said maybe fifty words, most of them to the trailer.

The trailer was a year older than they could afford it to be, and it knew, and it said so on the hills. There was a bearing in the left rear that had a voice now, a low periodic word it said at highway speed, and Dell had priced the fix in the spring and then had not fixed it, which was unlike him, one more of the unlike-him things that had been accumulating around the place for two years the way snow accumulates on a roof: quietly, flake by flake, nothing, nothing, nothing, and then a beam speaks. He drove with two fingers at the bottom of the wheel and his hat pushed back and he listened to the bearing say its word, and every time it said it he did a small piece of arithmetic, and every time the arithmetic came out the same, and he put it away again wet.

Coreen rode with the visor down and the ledger open in her head, which was where she kept it now, the paper version having stopped telling her anything she could stand to read in ink. She ran the numbers on the drive as other people ran a rosary: not to get an answer, she had the answer, but because the running of them was itself a kind of observance, a daily office, the liturgy of a faith in its last season. Diesel, at what diesel was now. The entry fees, paid in March, non-refundable, an act of hope committed back when hope had been cheaper. The stall rent at the grounds, which had gone up, because everything at the grounds had gone up, the grounds being

a place that existed to make things go up — a ten-day machine for converting a city's nostalgia into rates. Feed. The farrier before they left. The vet cert. The fuel home. Against all of it, one column: whatever Jodi won. She got to the part of the arithmetic where the answer lived and, as she had done every time for a month, she let the last figure stay unwritten. You did not have to finish a sum to know it. You only had to finish it if you were going to say it out loud, and she was not, because out loud was the only place it wasn't true yet, and she intended to keep at least one place.

She was fifty-five and she had kept this family's books for thirty-one years, through drought and BSE and the year the river took the low fence and the winter that killed the calves, and she knew the difference between a bad year and a last year as a nurse knows the difference between sick and dying, from across the room, at a glance, and hating the knowledge did not return it.

In the back seat Jodi rode with the horse, which is to say she rode in the truck but she was with the horse, the two of them wired together down the length of the trailer by a thing that did not have a word because the words for it were all too big or too small. Sal was nine and honest, a bay mare with one white foot and no theories, and she hauled like a dream, which people remarked on — *she's so calm in traffic* — as if calm were a trick, as if some invisible groom walked beside the trailer the whole way gentling her, when the truth was only that Sal had decided years ago that the trailer was a place where nothing happened, and Sal's decisions, once made, had the durability of geology. Jodi could feel her back there the way you feel a lamp on in another room. Nine years old. The good years of a barrel horse are a window, and the window was open now, wide open, this year and probably three more, and what Jodi did not let herself think about — in the same way her mother did not finish sums — was that the window being open *now* was the whole problem, because now was when the family's math needed her winnings, and a horse's best years should not have to be the load-bearing wall of anything.

What Jodi could not have explained to the city, if the city had asked, which it would not: the horse did not know there was a crowd. The horse knew the barrels, and the ground, and the particular idiot love of the girl on her back, and nothing else, and had

no idea that any of it was a show. Sal ran because running around three barrels and home was, to Sal, simply the correct and satisfying shape of the world, the way the trailer was the place where nothing happened. She was not in on it. Nothing Jodi loved was in on it. That was — though Jodi would not have said this either — the only reason she could stand to love it.

Levi had texted from the city that morning. *Griddle duty again this yr. 7th ave. Come get fed lol.* Jodi had left it on read. Her brother's jokes had gotten easier since he left, the way everything about Levi had gotten easier since he left, and the ease was the thing she couldn't decide whether to forgive.

They came down off the last rise and into the city, and the city was wearing the hats.

"There it is," Dell said. It was the longest thing he'd said since the last town. He didn't say it with anything. He said it like a man noting weather coming.

Coreen looked. Every window downtown had a bale of straw in it and a checked shirt on a mannequin. A law office had put a saddle in the lobby, on a stand, lit like sculpture, and the lawyers went past it all day in their good boots that had never touched a stirrup, and nobody laughed, because the not-laughing was the agreement, the not-laughing was the whole festival. Office towers had murals of cattle drives hung forty storeys up the glass — cattle driven, as far as Coreen could tell, directly into a corporate atrium. There was bunting. There was a mechanical bull visible through the window of a bar at nine-forty in the morning, idle, patient, waiting for the office parties, and beside it a sign about Stampede specials that made Coreen glad the kids weren't reading it, and made her privately concede that at least the bar was honest about what the ten days were for once the sun went down. Hats by day. At night, at the party tents, the hats came off, and by all accounts so did a good deal else; the city's birthrate had a documented bump every April that the local papers wrote the same coy article about every year. The frontier spirit, the article always called it. Coreen supposed that was one thing the festival had genuinely preserved.

And there were free pancakes on four corners that she could see from one red light. Folding tables and volunteers and long glad lines of people in brand-new boots holding paper plates, steam coming

up off the griddles into the morning, and she thought, without unkindness, the thought she thought every single year:

Free pancakes are for people who have never had to be awake before the pancakes.

It was not that she begrudged them. She had stood in her own kitchen at four in the dark that morning and there had been no line and no volunteer and no one to hand her anything, and she had flipped her own on the range and eaten standing up over the sink because sitting down was a luxury of the unbusy, and Jodi had done the same beside her, and Dell before either of them, and hardship had nothing to do with it. It had felt like being the actual thing. And now they would drive past four blocks of the city performing that exact morning — the ranch dawn, the griddle, the family fed before the light — performing it as a festival, as a treat, as the quaint charming heart of the Old West, and the city would charge nothing for it, because it cost the performers nothing, because they had never had to do it when it wasn't a party. A ritual is a chore that somebody else used to have to do. She'd read that somewhere, or she'd made it up; either way nobody downtown would have understood a word of it.

She kept all of this off her face. She was good at that. The keeping was a skill she'd built over the same years Dell had shaped his hat, and it had the same patina, and nobody could fake either one.

At the light a man leaned off the curb, glad and pink, mid-pancake, and rapped the truck's fender with his knuckle and gave them a thumbs up and called out something with the word *cowboy* in it, delighted, having correctly identified a real horse trailer among the floats, a genuine article, wanting them to know he approved. Dell lifted two fingers off the wheel. That was the whole exchange. The man went back to his breakfast radiant, having touched the true West, and the true West drove on toward the grounds to find out what the stall rent was this year.

The stall rent was up nine percent.

The girl at the stabling office was nineteen and kind and had a lanyard and could do nothing about it, and said so, nicely, twice. Dell paid with a card and did not look at Coreen while he did it, which was its own sentence in the family's language, and Coreen did not look at him, and the not-looking was how they had agreed,

without one word, to get through the ten days first and sign things after. Jodi took Sal off the trailer into the barn's long cool corridor of shavings and other people's horses, and the mare walked in calm as church, nothing happening here either, and put her head over the stall door and regarded the Stampede — the whole tonnage of it, the machine, the myth, the fifty thousand dollars, the last year of everything — with the round brown uncomplicated eye of the only party present who would get through the week entirely intact.

"He liked the trailer," Jodi said, coming back to help with the tack. Dry as her mother.

"Everybody likes the trailer," Dell said, "till they have to pull it."

He said it easy, and it landed the way it was thrown, as a joke, and all three of them let it be one. It was the family's whole system, and it had worked for thirty years, and it had about nine days left in it.

THREE

Eight Seconds

At half past one the Chaos-Weaver went into the stadium to watch a city buy danger by the second, retail, insured.

He approved of the arrangement in the way that he approved of things, which was not approval, because approval requires a stake and he had none; call it recognition. Here was chaos with a clock on it. Here was the oldest thing he carried — the buck, the pitch, the ton of animal deciding all at once that the arrangement was over — and they had taken it and cut it into eight-second lengths and hung a number on each length and sold the numbers. It was, considered purely as engineering, magnificent. Other civilizations had put their chaos in temples and fed it virgins. This one had put it on a schedule, daily at one-thirty, and fed it sponsorship.

The stadium filled in the way stadiums fill: in costume. Seventeen thousand hats. He moved up through them along the concourse, past the beer gardens already conducting their own eight-second events, past a food row selling deep-fried things that had never previously been considered candidates for frying — butter, cola, a pickle the length of a forearm, and one booth offering something called the Rattler that the signage refused to fully explain, correctly judging that mystery outsold information. A man in a golf shirt with an oil company's crest was explaining to a client, loudly, that this was the real Alberta, and the client, who was from Houston, was agreeing that it was just like the real Texas, and the two of them stood in their identical new hats in perfect satisfaction, each

having flown past a thousand miles of the actual thing to meet at its gift shop. The Chaos-Weaver took the low broad hum of all of it — the want in it, the noise of a stadium of appetites tuning like an orchestra — and found a rail to stand at above the chutes.

Below him, the machinery. And it was machinery; that was the thing the protesters at the gates and the romantics in the seats had equally failed to see, being busy with each other. The chute bosses moved with the economy of men loading a kiln. The flank straps were checked like rigging. There was a rulebook governing this — he had felt the weight of it in the building's bones, a rulebook thick as a hymnal, the accumulated case law of catastrophe, clauses for every way an animal and a man can disagree — and there was a medical tent at the edge of the arena stocked like a small war, and foam, and padding on the posts, and men on horseback whose whole vocation was to enter the chaos at its worst moment and take a rider off the side of it, pickup men, the only wholly honest job description on the grounds. They had built all of this. They had ruled the abyss and staffed it and padded its corners and sold tickets along its rim, and then — this was the part the Chaos-Weaver had come for, the part he registered without warmth because warmth was not stocked — the abyss still came. On its own schedule. Indifferent to the lanyard.

A man lowered himself onto a horse in a chute the way you lower yourself onto a decision. The horse stood in the chute vibrating very slightly, a kettle at the first murmur. The man nodded.

The gate went, and for eight seconds the world came apart exactly as advertised.

The crowd, cheering, mostly did not know what the eight seconds actually are. They are not a ride. Nothing about them is a ride. They are a negotiation conducted at the edge of what a spine can do, between a hundred and eighty pounds of man and twelve hundred pounds of horse who has been bred, selected, and honed for one professional skill, which is disagreement — the bucking stock were athletes, better paid per second than the men, flown between events, known by name, and the good ones bucked because bucking was in them the way the barrels were in a barrel horse — and the negotiation has one rule, which is that the man may hold on with one hand only, the other aloft, waving at nothing, a small mad

flag of the species. Eight seconds because that is roughly how long the disagreement stays athletic before it becomes attrition. A horn blows. The negotiation is declared complete. Two men on horseback materialize alongside at a gallop and pluck the rider off the top of the moving disagreement like men taking a book down from a high shelf, and the horse, its professional obligations discharged, slows to a canter, then a trot, then a walk, and exits by the gate it knows, unassisted, its whole demeanor that of a contractor leaving a site.

The horn blew now, and the crowd stood up as one and made the sound a crowd makes, and then the ride was disallowed. Something in the chute, a hesitation at the gate; a re-ride was offered; there were rules. The board explained. The crowd sat back down, obedient to the clause. Chaos here wore a lanyard, and when chaos was ruled procedurally out of order, chaos filed again and waited its turn.

The Chaos-Weaver had known the other kind. The kind with no horn, no clause, no pickup men — the kind that did not wait its turn because it did not know the building had turns. He watched the administered version with the attention a retired sea watches a wave pool: recognizing the shape, noting the chlorine. And he registered, with the part of him that never stopped registering, the one fact the whole apparatus was organized around and could not say aloud: they ruled it *because* it was real. You do not write a hymnal of case law about a thing that cannot kill you. Every clause in the rulebook was the fossil of an afternoon that had gone wrong. The medical tent was a monument. The foam was a confession. The whole stadium was a machine for saying, in the only language a city speaks fluently — infrastructure — *the thing in the chute is genuinely beyond us, and we will now sell seats to its vicinity*. That was not the frontier myth. That was the last true thing left inside the frontier myth, the pea under the hundred mattresses of hat, and seventeen thousand people had paid to sleep badly on it at one-thirty in the afternoon, and the Chaos-Weaver stood over the chutes in the roar, feeding on the want, respecting the pea.

Between sections, the stadium's screens played sponsor spots, and one of them was for a pancake breakfast — tomorrow, seven a.m., presented by a telecom, free, family fun, and the crowd cheered the pancakes, genuinely, a whole stadium cheering batter. The logistics

of it crossed the Chaos-Weaver's attention like a migration: he had seen the staging areas on the way in, the pallets of mix, the propane, the folding tables in their thousands, a volunteer army with its own command structure, tonnage moving through the city on a schedule tighter than the rodeo's. The world's largest energies of the place, he thought, were not in the chutes at all. If you wanted to see this city's real chaos harnessed, ruled, and made to run on time, you did not watch the broncs. You watched the batter. Somebody had solved the feeding of a million people for free out of sheer civic exuberance and then, having accomplished the single most impressive logistical feat on the grounds, had dressed it up as a quaint little breakfast. There was a modesty in that he could not name, or a boast so large it had come out the other side into modesty. Either way the pancakes were the better spectacle. He would not be telling the broncs.

Down below, waiting in the pen behind the chutes, was a horse.

Not a bronc mid-buck, not an animal inside its eight seconds. Just a horse, before its turn, standing. It shifted its weight and rested one hip and put an ear back, and then — the crowd noise dipping between events — it swung its head and looked up through the rails and the legs and the thousands of hats and appeared, for a held moment, to look directly at the Chaos-Weaver at his rail, eye to eye across the whole administered abyss, as if it alone in the building had located him. It hadn't, of course. Horses look at everything; a horse's eye is set to take in nearly the full circle of the world, and the world had simply, briefly, included his direction. There was nothing in it. He noted that there was nothing in it, and noted how long he had gone on meeting the nothing anyway.

The whole stadium was a theory. The hats were a theory, the clock was a theory, the eight seconds and the numbers and the rulebook and the Old West were all theories, elaborate and shared and worn well. The horse had no theory. The horse had the pen, the smell, the light, and a body it was inside of, and no idea that any of this was a show — it could not be let in on it; there was no aperture in a horse through which the show could be inserted — and this made it, briefly and without anyone noticing, the truest object under the sky that afternoon, truer than the cowboys, truer than the crowd, truer by a wide margin than the gods, who were

theories to the bone and knew it. The Chaos-Weaver looked at the horse and the looking went all the way down and stopped where it always stopped, at a floor that was simply a floor, unlit, unnamed, and he did not name it, because there was nothing there to name and the not-naming was the only honest thing anyone had ever done with it.

The gate went. Another eight seconds began, on the clock, for money. The crowd came up out of its seats with its sound, and the sound rolled over the pens where the next horses stood unpretending, and the Chaos-Weaver stayed at his rail through the afternoon, taking the want and attending the pens, where horse after horse stood unpretending in a building built to sell its likeness, each waiting its turn at the one thing it did not know was a show.

FOUR

Back Pens

Before the crowd, before the light was good, Jodi ate a pancake alone behind the barns, and the All-Seeing watched her, and was moved — which is not what it sounds like.

He was not moved the way a man is moved. Nothing turned over in him; there was nothing in him to turn. The All-Seeing sees — that is the entire office, the whole of the burden — he sees each person at the exact weight they are keeping when they believe the seeing has gone elsewhere. The cameras of the world had multiplied into his parody: a stadium of phones, the drone over the midway, the security feeds in the barns with their patient red beads. All of it watched what people did when they knew they were watched. All of it watched theatre. His office began where the last lens lost interest. He saw the unperformed remainder. He had no choice about this, had never had one; the seeing was not a faculty he exercised but a condition he was; weather does not choose to happen to a field.

And mostly the remainder was a subtraction. That was the finding, across the centuries, and he held it without bitterness because bitterness requires disappointment and disappointment requires having expected otherwise: people, unwatched, are mostly less. The private slump. The meanness saved up for when it's safe, spent in small denominations on waiters and family. The face let down like a load at the end of a hallway. The man who holds the door all day and lets it swing on his own kin at home. None of it damnable, most of it only tired — but a subtraction, reliably, the self going

off duty and proving thereby that the self on duty had been a shift. He saw it accurately, eight thousand times a day on these grounds alone, and it cost him nothing, and it was nothing, and the sum of the nothing across a long enough series was the closest thing his office had to a weight.

And then, at intervals a century wide, the office showed him the opposite. And he did not get to look away, and would not have, and the not-looking-away was the closest thing to being moved that a condition can come.

Jodi Ostergaard at half past five, behind the barns, in the grey before anyone.

She had come down the shedrow with a pancake off the volunteers' own table — the crew table, the one behind the staging tent where the seven a.m. army fed itself first, and the woman running it had looked at Jodi's boots and her hands and the hour and had handed her one folded in a napkin without a word, feed-line freemasonry, the working recognizing the working. Jodi ate it with her back against Sal's stall door and her free hand up over the door resting on the mare's cheek. Sal, who had opinions about pancakes, lipped at the air. Down the aisle a security camera held its red bead on the two of them, and if Jodi felt watched at all — and for a half-second, chewing, she did feel something, some mild pressure of regard, and glanced up the aisle — it was the camera, obviously, and she gave it the flat look one gives a camera and went back to the pancake, and the feeling filed itself under the bead, where such feelings go.

She was not performing the pancake. It was the whole of what the All-Seeing saw, and the seeing held on it the way light holds on the one wet stone in a dry creek. She was not performing the pancake, or the horse, or the hour, or the toughness — and she had toughness to perform; he had seen her spend it up the midway the day before, the competitor's walk, the sunglasses, the give-away-nothing that riders wear like their number — and she was not performing the grief either, which was the remarkable thing, because the grief was there. He saw it in her at full weight: the family's arithmetic, which she had never been shown and knew anyway, the way children always know, by the pauses; the last-ness sitting over the whole trip like weather over the foothills; the specific unbearable fact that her

mare's best years had been drafted, without anyone asking either of them, into a war the ranch had already lost. She carried all of it, at half past five, alone, unwatched as far as she knew — and she did not put it down, and she did not pick it up and wave it, and she did not perform it even to herself, even in the theatre of her own head, which is the venue where nearly all human performance runs longest. She fed the mare the last third of the pancake off her flat palm, which you should not do, and which meant nothing to Sal but sugar and the girl's hand. She leaned her forehead on the stall door. She stood in the only minute of the day nobody would ask her to be anyone.

People are mostly less, unwatched. She was not less. She was the thing itself, whatever a person is supposed to be at the bottom when the watching goes — she was *that*, entire, with the grief held and the horse warm and the pancake gone, and the All-Seeing held on her because his office held on her, and recorded it, because the record was the office and there was no one to show the record to and there never had been. Let it at least be said somewhere, then, in whatever this account is: at half past five in the morning on the eighth of July, behind the barns, one person was watched at her truest and found not smaller. The finding stands. It has no use. It stands.

The stories the humans told about beings like him watching girls like her had the appetite in the wrong place, as their stories about the seven always did. There was no appetite in the watching; there was no appetite in him anywhere; the appetite was theirs, all of it, and what the humans wanted — he saw this too, at weight, in every face on the grounds — was to be seen. Truly seen, at the bottom, past the hat. It was the deepest want on the midway and it was universal and it was priced accordingly: everywhere the fair sold likenesses of being seen, caricatures in ten minutes, phone snaps with the champion, your face on the stadium screen for one cheering second. And the one entity on the grounds who actually performed the service they were queuing for did it free, without appetite, without exception, and could never once let anyone know it had been done. It was the office too. He did not resent it. Resentment was stocked no deeper than warmth. But he noted the queue at the caricature stand, and noted his own perfect obsolete monopoly, and

if a condition could be wry, the weather over the fairgrounds that morning was wry.

By half past one she was in the alley on Sal with her number pinned and the family's whole unspoken arithmetic riding with her.

Barrel racing is the honest event and the crowd half-knows it. No animal is compelled; no rope, no strap, no disagreement. A horse and a rider run a cloverleaf around three barrels against nothing but the clock, and the horse could refuse, and does not, because the good ones love it — and the crowd, which cannot tell a flank strap from a fan belt, can tell *that*, can tell it instantly, the way the parade crowd could tell the regalia from the hats. The stands lean forward differently for the barrels. Something in the species still recognizes a partnership when it sees one at speed.

Seventeen seconds, more or less, is what the whole thing takes. Jodi and Sal ran it in the low seventeens — the alley launch, the first barrel taken so close the drum shivered and stayed, the mare wrapping the turn like water taking a bend, the dig out of the third and the flat run home, Jodi up on her neck saying nothing because nothing needed saying, the two of them one animal with two ideas of itself — and the clock loved them, and the crowd came up, and fifty thousand dollars leaned half an inch closer, and in the stands Coreen watched with her hands folded on the purse that held the unfinished sum and did the one piece of arithmetic she permitted herself at speed: *that's the stall rent. That's the diesel. Go, girl. That's the spring.*

And the All-Seeing, in the stands among seventeen thousand watchers, watched her get watched, and knew — the way his office made him know things he was given no vote on — that her whole Stampede had already happened, really, at half past five behind the barns, with a folded pancake and a horse's warm cheek and nobody to see it at all but the one thing that always did, and the camera, which had been aimed, as the cameras of the world reliably were, at the wrong thing: the aisle, the door, the theft that never came. The red bead had recorded sixty minutes of an empty corridor with a girl and a horse in the corner of frame, unwatched by anyone who would ever press play. His office had recorded the same hour and would never once be able to press play for anybody.

Between the two of them, he supposed, the hour was safe.

FIVE

Elbow River

The Conscience-Keeper walked down to the river end of the grounds, where the tipis were, and stood in the one place at the whole fair where the flinch had a hundred years on it, and rendered no verdict, because rendering verdicts was precisely not his office, which people never believed until they met him, and then never believed afterward either, having met him and felt, wrongly, judged. That was the oldest occupational hazard of the office: he did not judge, he only saw, but the seeing was so complete that people supplied the judgment themselves, out of their own stores, and then billed him for it.

Twenty-six tipis stood along the Elbow in the river bend, in the cottonwood shade at the south edge of the grounds, where the midway's noise arrived worn down to a hum. Family-held, all of them — the designs painted on the canvas were owned the way land is owned, or more truly than land had ever been owned here, passed down by transfer ceremony through the generations of the Kainai, the Piikani, the Siksika, the Tsuut'ina, and the Stoney Nakoda, the five nations of Treaty 7 — and the poles had gone up in this same bend of this same river for longer than there had been a fair to pitch them beside, the bend having been a gathering place when Calgary was a fort's bad guess at a name. Inside the lodges the families kept what was theirs to keep and showed what was theirs to show: beadwork, buckskin, the photographs of the grandparents who had camped here when camping here was the only place it was allowed.

Outside, the artisans' tables, the smell of bannock frying, saskatoon jam in honest jars, and through the afternoon the dancing — the drum starting up from the arbour and travelling down the camp like the river's own pulse made audible, and the visitors drifting toward it in their new hats and going, most of them, quiet.

That quiet interested the Conscience-Keeper more than anything else on the grounds. It was the same quiet the parade crowd had found for the lead riders, the register that opened and closed. People walked out of the midway — out of the deep-fried Rattler and the mechanical bull and the fibreglass horse with corporate values — down the little slope into the camp, and some old instrument in them retuned. They lowered their voices as though entering a building, though there was no building; there was sky and canvas and the drum. They did not know why. He knew why. They had spent all day among likenesses, and the instrument had detected an original, and originals impose a hush that no likeness has ever once achieved.

The Conscience-Keeper saw the whole of it at once, which is what his office is: not judgment, sight — the full timeline standing up in a single instant like a country lit from every side at noon. He saw 1912.

He saw that in the year the fair was born, the law of this country had made the people of this camp illegal to themselves. The Indian Act's amendments, the pass system's grip: it was forbidden to wear the regalia, forbidden to speak the languages in the schools the children were taken to, forbidden to hold the ceremonies, forbidden even to leave the reserve without a paper signed by an agent — the whole apparatus of a state attempting to legislate a people out of their own inheritance, and calling the attempt, in its documents, civilization. And he saw the fair's founder, a Wyoming trick-roper with a showman's eye and a romantic's flawed sincere heart, go to that same apparatus and lobby it, and win from it an exemption: a hole cut in the law, ten days wide, so that the thing forbidden across the whole of the land could be practised *here*, on these grounds, inside the show. Eighteen hundred people had come through that hole the first year. They led the parade. They camped in this bend. They danced what could not legally be danced anywhere else in the country their ancestors had held since the ice left, and they

did it inside a Wild West show, framed by it, exhibited by it, the exemption granted at least partly because the show needed them picturesque — he saw the whole compromised machinery of the permission, every gear of it, the showman's sincerity and the state's condescension and the ticket-buyers' appetite meshing into one improbable aperture —

— and he saw the families look at the aperture, and measure it, and walk through it, and use it.

That was the part the fair's critics and the fair's defenders both got wrong, he observed, each needing the camp to be a prop in a different pageant. The camp was no one's prop. The families had taken a ten-day hole in a cruel century and kept a fire lit through it — had made the fair's frame carry their continuance whether the frame understood itself to be carrying it or not, had raised the lodges and taught the children the dances inside the one jurisdiction where teaching them was legal, every July, year over year, while the law outside the fence did its worst and eventually, generations along, repented and was rewritten — and now the law was gone and the camp remained, and the fire the exemption had been the only door for was older and truer than the fair around it, and everyone at the fair could feel it, which was what the hush was. The camp had renamed itself in living memory, shedding the show's old name for the river's. The river had been the true name all along. Rivers generally were.

He weighed none of this. He saw it entire — the compromise and the continuance, the frame and the fire, the state's cruelty and the families' long unanswerable patience — and he weighed none of it, because the weighing was not his to do and never had been. His office had one discipline and this was it: the sight total, the sentence withheld. He was not the still small voice. He was the stillness the voice spoke into, and the voice was always theirs.

Up the slope, at the fair's pitch, a crowd was flinching and did not know it had.

They came drifting down from the tie-down roping, most of them, the one-thirty crowd dispersing into the grounds with the afternoon in front of them, and the flinch travelled with them like a smell no one could place. Tie-down roping is honestly named and quickly done: a calf breaks from the chute at a run, a rope takes

it at the neck at speed, a horse sits back, the calf hits the end of the arithmetic and is stopped by it, and a man is off and has it on the ground and tied — three legs gathered, wrapped, done — before the animal has finished being confused, and the clock shows a number in the sevens, and the crowd cheers the number. And half of each person in the crowd cheers entire, and the other half, some deep animal underhalf older than any hat, goes quiet and small at the moment the calf hits the rope's end, and does not know why, and reaches — the Conscience-Keeper watched eight thousand hands perform the reach within the same half-second of their eight thousand flinches — for the phone, the pancake, the beer, the child's shoulder, the brim of the hat. Not one reach was cynical. That was the finding that made this fair the purest specimen his domain had encountered in a century of specimens: the routing-around was innocent, was practically autonomic, was the good person's immune system escorting a discomfort out of the premises before the discomfort could state its business. The enjoyment of a thing you half-suspect you shouldn't, and the small clean machinery by which the suspicion is filed where suspicions go. He saw the flinch land eight thousand times and saw eight thousand kindly, decent, pancake-fed people decline, gently and without a flicker of malice, to check where it had landed.

The flinch was theirs. He only saw it. He had never once felt it — could not; feeling it would require a stake, and the stake was theirs too, everything was theirs, he was only the seeing they would have done themselves if they could have borne to do it and still keep the afternoon — and he stood at the seam between the midway and the camp, at the exact grade in the ground where the hush began, and watched the two economies of the place conduct themselves on either side of him: above, the likeness of the West, cheering its numbers and routing its flinches; below, in the cottonwoods, the original the likeness was a likeness of, frying bannock, keeping fire, imposing quiet.

At the top of the path, where the camp met the midway, a man who was on a ballot was flipping pancakes for a bank of cameras.

He had chosen the spot with care, or someone on his staff had: the lodges composing gracefully behind him, heritage in frame, the drum just audible. He was good at the flipping — the wrist-turn

clean, the smile aimed slightly above the lens the way the media people taught — and at the top of one flip the cameras all fired at once and in the long blink of the shutters the pancake seemed to hang at its apex a full breath longer than falling things are permitted, a small tan moon over the man's upturned smiling face, time obligingly stopped for the photograph the way it is stopped in all photographs, which was of course all it was: forty frames a second will hang anything in the air forever. The pancake came down. The wrist received it. The cameras had their picture: free breakfast, heritage, the West, the wrist, the smile. It would run everywhere and mean, to the practised eye, absolutely nothing, and to every other eye, everything the man's people intended, which was: *he is one of you, he feeds you, the fire is his too.*

Free breakfast on offer from one hand; a clean conscience on offer from the general direction of the whole morning; and neither one, the Conscience-Keeper saw, quite honestly come by, and both taken gladly, by thousands, because that is how the fair worked and how the country worked and how a person gets from a Tuesday to a Wednesday with the day intact. He passed no sentence on the man, or the crowd, or the cameras. Down the slope the drum carried on, and the fire the families had kept alight through the worst century their country could arrange burned on in the river bend, older than the law that had once been the only reason it was allowed to burn there, older than the fair, older than the name Calgary, patient as the river, and needing — this was the last thing he saw before he turned back up the hill, and he saw it with the whole of the office and weighed not one grain of it — needing nothing from the fair at all anymore, and being needed by it more every year: the one original left on the grounds, the thing the hush was for, the proof the likeness pointed at whenever anyone asked the likeness whether any of it had ever been real.

He walked back up through the reaching, flinching, kindly crowd, and gave them back nothing but the afternoon they were determined to keep, and they kept it.

The Apron

Levi Ostergaard stood at a griddle on Seventh Avenue in a borrowed apron the colour of a bank, flipping pancakes for strangers, and was more at home than he had been in three years, because he had finally found a version of the ranch morning he could stand: the fake one.

He had left at twenty-four. Trade school first, then the tickets: welding, the good kind, pressure tickets, the kind with a union behind it and a rate that did not depend on rain, calves, futures markets, or the mood of a river. He was a B-pressure welder now with his eye on the next ticket up, and he made in a good week what the cow-calf operation cleared in a good month, of which the operation had stopped having very many. He had done the math his mother would not finish. He had done it at twenty-three, at the kitchen table, actually on paper, one bad February with the ledger open in front of him while his parents were out at a branding — done the sum straight down the column to the figure at the bottom, looked at the figure, and understood that the figure was not a bad year, the figure was a verdict with a delay on it, and that everyone in the house already knew and had agreed, without a word, to serve out the delay together. And he had gotten up from the table and washed his mug and, over the following eighteen months, packed a bag. Nobody in the family said it to him and nobody had to; it rode along silent in every phone call home: he was the one who had looked at the sum and answered it. Left the myth on the table

and gone and gotten a life the numbers approved of, a life with a rate sheet and a pension and evenings, and the worst of it, the truly unforgivable center of it that even Jodi could not decide whether to forgive, was that he had been right.

And here he was, back for the ten days like every year, in a hat, flipping.

He was quick at it, quicker than any volunteer on the block, and the block had noticed. A pancake griddle, to a man who welds, is a low-stakes cousin of the day job. Heat management, timing, reading the surface for the moment the bubbles break and glaze at the rim, the wrist committing in one clean economy with no second thoughts — his hands had done ten thousand hours of exactly this in harder metal, and after the first morning the breakfast crew had quietly ceded him the big station, the twelve-cake commercial slab where the line pressure was worst, and by day six he ran it as the good pickup men rode: entering the chaos at its worst point and taking things off the heat at the last correct instant, over and over, without ceremony. The other volunteers had begun to call the station “the shop.” There was a rhythm to it that went down into the arms and stayed. Twelve rounds of batter down in a spiral, oldest to newest; the traverse; the reading; the turn, the turn, the turn; plate and repeat. Not once in six mornings had the big slab scorched a cake — the crew joked that the griddle liked him, that it ran truer under his spatula, as if the heat itself steadied when he stood over it, and the joke was a joke; the heat steadied because he managed it, because reading heat was the trade, because a man who lays pressure welds for a living does not get surprised by propane. But he let them have it. Crews need their small superstitions. The shop runs on them. The Hand was at the big slab with him all the same — the Hand being wherever skill has sunk below thought, the resident god of the ten-thousandth hour — and Levi felt him the only way anyone ever has: as the work going right.

His hands turned the cakes and the tourists watched the hands. Scarred across the knuckles where the welds spat. Burned smooth in one long patch on the left forearm, a summer-glove story he did not tell. Rope-callused once, machine-callused now, the two eras of him legible in the one grip if you knew how to read hands, which the tourists did not. They read the hat instead, and the apron, and the

wrist, and they arrived at *cowboy* — you could watch the word land in their faces, the delight of it, *a real one, look, the genuine article, a rancher's hands making the ranch breakfast* — and they raised their phones and thanked him with a warmth that was completely sincere, and told him he was the real deal, and he smiled the smile and turned the cakes and did not correct them, because what was there to correct them to. *Ma'am, these are a welder's hands; I'm the one who left; the real deal is four hours west of here going broke; enjoy your breakfast.* The line moved. The myth got fed. He was efficient at feeding it precisely because he was free of it, the way the best bartenders are sober.

And it was, he could admit to himself at the big slab and nowhere else, so much easier than the real one had ever been. The real ranch morning had a sum under it. Every real griddle of his boyhood had sat over the same low blue arithmetic, every four a.m. had been a payment on the delay, and love had been in it, and cold, and his father's back at the window checking the weather like a man checking a wound. This morning had none of that under it. This morning had a bank's propane and a city's surplus and a clock-out at eleven, and the gratitude of strangers came off the line all morning like heat shimmer, wave on wave of people thanking him for a life he had specifically declined, and he took it, and plated, and traversed, and turned, and if there was a hollow in the middle of the ease he kept the hollow the way his mother kept sums: unfinished, off the books, nobody's business on a festival morning.

His father came by around ten.

Levi felt him before he saw him — you always did; Dell arrived in a place the way weather arrives, a pressure change at the edge of things — and there he was at the end of the tables with a coffee, in the hat that made every other hat on Seventh Avenue look like what it was. He stood and watched his son work the big slab for a while. Levi kept working it. Twelve down, traverse, read, turn. The line between them was two folding tables and three years and one column of figures, and neither man looked directly across it.

"You're fast," Dell said finally.

"Shop hands," Levi said.

"Mm." Dell drank some coffee. On the slab a round reached its moment and Levi took it up and over, clean. A tourist photographed

the flip and, for composition, the weathered older cowboy watching it, and would caption the picture, that evening, something about generations, and would be more right and more wrong than any caption has ever been. "They've got you on the big one," Dell said.

"Somebody had to."

"Mm," Dell said again, which in the family's language was a paragraph. Something sat between them on the folding tables that neither picked up. It had a shape like a document. It had a figure at the bottom of a column, and a shape like the words *you were right*, which no one in that family would ever say and no one needed to, and a shape like the other words too, the ones underneath those, which were something like *and I would rather have been wrong with them*, which Levi did not look at directly even in his own head, because a man reading heat cannot afford steam in his eyes. Dell had come with something to say. Levi watched him decide, somewhere behind the face, to have the coffee instead. Nine days left in the system; no sense breaking it on a sidewalk.

"Your mother's down at the barns," Dell said. Which meant nothing, and meant *come find us*, and meant *your sister runs again Thursday*, and meant *we are still, for nine more days, the thing we have always been, and attendance is taken*.

"Yeah," Levi said. "In a bit." Which meant *I know*, and meant *not yet*, and meant *I can carry this apron or that barn but not both in the same hour, give me the hour*.

Dell lifted two fingers off the coffee cup, the whole wave, the same two fingers he gave the glad man at the red light and the neighbours on the range road and thirty years of everything, and went back into the crowd, one true hat moving through ten thousand tributes.

Levi turned the next cake a half-second late.

Nothing anyone would notice — a ring of scorch a shade past gold, the batter set a breath too long before the wrist remembered itself — and he plated it to a stranger who thanked him and called him cowboy and noticed nothing, because there was nothing to notice unless you had watched him all week. It was the only cake the big slab marked in six mornings. The crew would have said the griddle missed the old man. The griddle had no opinions. The heat had simply, for one half-second, been managed by a man whose

hands were briefly somewhere west of his wrists. Then the next round came up asking, and he answered it at the exact correct instant, clean, perfect, easy, and the morning resumed, and he handed the ranch breakfast to one more delighted stranger who would never in this life know they had just been served it by the one Ostergaard the frontier arithmetic had ever let go free — and that he flipped it beautifully, the way the freed do everything they no longer have to.

SEVEN

The Real One

On the seventh day Dell tried to show his kids the real Stampede, and there wasn't one, and the not-being-one was so quiet and so total that nobody said a word about it the whole way through.

"Come on," he'd said at the trailer that morning. "Forget the midway. I'll show you the real thing." He meant the ag barns, the stock, the heavy horses, the part of the grounds that was still about animals and feed and the actual old work — the part he could stand, the part he'd been coming to for fifty years, first on his own father's shoulders and then at his heels and then, for a long stretch of good years, as a man among men he knew, leaning on rails, talking cattle. He knew where the real thing lived. Or he knew where it had lived, which he was about to discover were different addresses, the real thing having moved some years back without filing a forwarding notice, as the real thing never does.

The Seeker went with them. Not with them — the Seeker went *through* the fair the way he went through everything, ahead and behind and alongside at once, looking, because looking was not something he did but something he was, the way the All-Seeing was sight and the Allfather was the fed. Of the seven he was the one the humans would have recognized quickest, had recognizing been on offer: every prospector, every trail-end drifter, every man who sold the farm for a boat, every browser tab left open on land in the Yukon — all of it was his weather. He was the itch at the back of a settled life. He had a pitch he'd been carrying for some

seasons now, turning it over like a stone in a pocket: the far north. Alaska. The last blank on the map with a highway to it, the final unpictured place, the frontier's forwarding address if it had left one. He'd been meaning to go and see. He had not gone. Some part of his own weather already suspected — the Seeker always already suspected; suspicion was the larval form of everything he found — that the north would be a picture of the north by the time he arrived. A gift shop at the trailhead. A webcam on the glacier. An eagle with a sponsor. Edges did not survive being agreed upon, and the north had been agreed upon for a century, agreed upon harder than almost anywhere, by every man who'd ever left a good job to disappoint himself in Fairbanks.

The barns, first. And the barns were good.

That wanted saying, and Dell's shoulders said it, dropping an inch as the family came in out of the sun into the long cathedral cool of the Agriculture Building — shavings and liniment and animal, the true incense — past stalls of cattle groomed like furniture and on to the heavy horses, which is where Dell had been aiming all along. Percherons. Belgians. A hitch of Clydesdales being dressed for the pull, feathered feet the size of dinner plates, and around them not tourists but *people*, Dell's kind, men and women with hands like his leaning on rails and arguing quietly about bone and depth of heart-girth. A young woman was fitting a collar on a Belgian that went nineteen hands if it went an inch, and the horse dropped its great head to make her work easier — a courtesy the size of a piano — and Jodi made the low sound in her throat that horse people make, and even Levi, along for the morning with his apron shift done, stood quiet in front of the enormous patient animals whose whole job description had been the actual building of the actual West: the plough, the freight, the grade of every road the trucks now ran. Nobody had ever mythologized the heavy horses much. They had merely done the entire thing. Perhaps you got the myth or you got the credit, Dell thought, and knew which his own line had gotten, and moved along the rail.

For half an hour it was fine. It was better than fine; it was the visit Dell had promised. And then they came out the far end of the barns, following the flow of the grounds, and the grounds delivered them into Weadickville.

It was a whole street. A re-creation of Calgary as it had stood in 1912, the founding year — vintage storefronts in fresh old paint, a saloon front, a mercantile, a smithy that was not a smithy, a bank that was not a bank (though sponsored by one that was), boardwalk planking milled last spring and distressed by hand, penny treats at two dollars, and staff in period costume with period patter, the whole year 1912 built as a set, staffed, and open for photographs. Free with admission. Strollers everywhere. It was, the signage explained, an authentic recreation of the city's heritage, and the sign used the word authentic with the serenity of a word that has outlived its own meaning and now works purely decorative shifts.

Dell stopped at the head of the fake street, and his family stopped with him, and the Seeker went through, and here is what the Seeker found, because finding was what he was:

He found the innermost chamber. Every fair is an onion of likenesses and he had peeled them all week — the hats a likeness of ranchers, the floats a likeness of wagons, the midway West a likeness of a movie West that was a likeness of a dime-novel West — and here at the center of the grounds stood the fair's own model of its own founding, the year zero, the original moment itself, lovingly rebuilt: and it was a set. The real thing at the heart of the real thing was a diorama of the real thing. You could not get under it. There was no floor beneath the boardwalk but more boardwalk, and beneath that, presumably, the receipts. Dell walked his family slowly down a fake 1912 street looking, without knowing he was looking, for the 1970s of his own boyhood — the fair his father had shown him, rougher, animal-smelling, real, he'd have sworn real — and the Seeker, passing through the same air, saw that fair too, at its own distance, and saw that it had been looking backward in its day at a 1930s fair that had itself been elegizing 1912, and that 1912 — the actual year, the founding — had been a Wyoming showman's *tribute*, staged nostalgia from the first morning, a Wild West show mounted in honest elegiac wonder for a West its own founder announced was already gone. That was the founding. The fair had never once been the thing. The fair had been born a memorial and had spent a hundred and fourteen years becoming a memorial to earlier memorials, pictures of pictures of pictures, and at the bottom of the stack, where the original was supposed to be lying

in its drawer, there was — the Seeker looked, because looking was what he was, and the look went all the way down and came back with what it always came back with —

nothing. No floor. A West that had been a story about itself from the first telling, agreed upon in advance.

The myth persists *because* the frontier is gone, the Seeker did not say, having no one to say it to who didn't half-know. He amended it, passing the two-dollar penny candy: the myth persists because the frontier never came. If the West were out there to be gone to, no one would need a street about it; you build the diorama over the grave, and the perfection of the diorama is the measure of the burial, and this diorama had a sponsor and a stroller park. Somewhere north, a glacier with a webcam calved on schedule for the viewing platform. He took the Alaska pitch out of his pocket one last time, turned it over, saw the shop already standing at the trailhead of it — had always seen it, had only been declining the sight — and set the stone down, gently, on the boardwalk of a fake 1912, where it belonged, among the other props of elsewhere. He would not be going north. There was no north. There were only more grounds.

Dell had stopped in the middle of the street.

In front of him, even here — of course here; here above all — was a pancake stand. A 1912-styled one, staffed by a young man in period costume, sleeve garters and a canvas apron, and Dell watched him work and read the station the way Levi read heat. The batter came from bags. Commercial bags, wheeled in on a hand truck that morning, pre-mix, the same sponsor-catered slurry as everywhere else on the grounds, poured into 1912 by a costumed kid who was doing his cheerful best and had never made a pancake anywhere but here, from anything but bags. Behind him the fake mercantile. Above him the fake sign. The griddle at least was hot and real, heat being one of the few things that cannot be reproduced, only had.

An older staffer in costume — the street's designated old-timer, silver moustache, suspenders, patter polished smooth — read Dell's hat and his stillness and stepped in with the good material. Welcomed him to nineteen-twelve. Asked, twinkling, if the gentleman had ridden far. Observed, tapping his own hat brim toward Dell's, that *that* one there looked like it had seen some real weather, unlike

these town hats, eh? — and for one strange second it was as if the street itself had recognized Dell, singled him out, the set reaching out through its actor to touch the one authentic article on the boardwalk, some old knowing in the place calling to its own. It was nothing of the kind, and Dell knew it even inside the second: the man was a professional, the bit was aimed at every weathered hat that walked in, the recognition was a *skill*, the same skill as the whole street, the same skill as the whole fair — spotting what a visitor wished to be true of himself and saying it back to him warmly. Dell had just watched it done to a man from Houston. Now it was done to him, more accurately, which only made it worse.

His kids waited. Jodi had felt the whole unsaid thing come off her father for the length of the street, heat off a griddle. Levi stood with his hands in his pockets in the posture of a man at a viewing.

Dell looked at the trucked-in batter being poured into 1912 by a child in sleeve garters. He did not say *this used to be real*. He did not say *my dad stood me right about here, or somewhere, or nowhere; I can't find it*. He did not say the thing actually sitting on him, which had nothing to do with the street and everything to do with a bearing saying its word on the hills, and stall rent up nine percent, and a column his wife would not total, and the fact — arrived at somewhere between the heavy horses and the fake bank, arrived at fully, the way weather arrives — that this was the last year he would stand on these grounds as what he was; that next July, whatever came through those gates wearing his hat would be a man who *used to*. The street had it right after all. Everything here was a former thing, kept visitable.

He put his hands in his pockets. The costumed kid poured another perfect circle of slurry onto real heat.

“Huh,” Dell said.

And that was all. That was the whole of it, one syllable, the family's language compressing a chapter into a grunt the way coal compresses a forest, and Jodi took his arm, and Levi fell in on the other side, and the three of them walked up out of 1912 together and back into 2026, which was dressed as 1912, and went to find the truck. And the Seeker did not go with them, having no with; he went on through, as he went on through everything, except that now, for the first time in the long fever of his being, he went on

through *looking for nothing*, the pitch set down, the pocket empty, and found — this was the joke he shared with no one, at the heart of the grounds, in the innermost chamber — that looking for nothing and finding it, every time, everywhere, without fail, was the nearest thing to arrival his office had ever brokered. He was done seeking the West. He would settle, like everyone else on the grounds, for the fair.

EIGHT

The Half-Mile of Hell

On the ninth night the family sat in the grandstand for the chuck-wagons, and the Chaos-Weaver came, and the Conscience-Keeper came, and the floor came up under the whole fair for exactly the length of one turn and was papered back over before the horse was off the track.

The Rangeland Derby runs at dark, under the lights, when the day crowd has gone home and the evening crowd has come in fed and beered and ready, twenty-five thousand of them stacked up the grandstand with the infield glowing below like a lit stage, which it is. The family had seats up the second deck — Levi's treat, bought weeks ago at rates Coreen had declined to be told — and they sat in a row, Dell then Coreen then Jodi then Levi, with the whole bright bowl of it spread out in front of them, and whatever else was true of the year, the four of them were together in good seats on a warm night with the mountains going purple over the rim of the stands, and Coreen permitted herself the sight of her family in a row and spent, on it, one entire minute of not doing arithmetic.

Then the wagons came out for the first heat, and the grandstand rose up on its collective hindlegs, and the night began.

Everything that follows sits on what the chuckwagons are. Four wagons to a heat in the old configuration, three now — the reduction was a safety measure, one of many, and the many were themselves a kind of testimony, every rule the fossil of a night that had gone wrong. At the horn the outriders throw the stove — a

rubber block now; the stove too is a likeness — into the back of the wagon and swing up onto their own horses, and the drivers take their teams of four around a figure-eight of barrels at a standstill start, half a ton of thoroughbred times four times three wagons boiling around tight turns in a space the size of a corral, and then out, out onto the track proper, the whole roaring tangle of it uncoiling down the back stretch at racing speed, thirty-two horses and the wagons slewing behind them and the outriders flat out alongside, a half-mile and change of committed, corrected, barely-governed hurtle, and the grandstand sound comes up through the concrete into the body, and it is magnificent.

That has to be said and said plainly: it is magnificent. It is genuinely, unarguably beautiful — the surge off the barrels, the wagons heeling into the first turn like boats, the long reaching drive of the teams under the lights — and to pretend otherwise is to lose the argument at the gate, because the thousands in the seats are not fools and not brutes; they can see what they are seeing. They are seeing the last full-blooded remnant of the horse-powered world run at its outer limit by people whose families have done it for four generations, and their hearts come up into their chests, and their hearts are correct. The trouble was never that the beauty is false. The trouble is what the beauty is made to carry, and what it costs, and who pays, and the Conscience-Keeper sat above the back stretch and saw all of it at once, the beauty and the freight and the invoice, and weighed nothing, and watched who flinched.

He had stood, four days back, in the river bend, and seen the country cut a hole in its own law so that the people of the camp could practise, inside the fair, what was forbidden beyond the fence — the law bending, in 1912, toward keeping a fire lit. Now he sat over the track and saw the other hole, the recent one. The province had gone into its own animal-protection statute — the law that made it an offence to cause distress to an animal, the ordinary decent floor of the thing — and had written the rodeo and the chuckwagons *out* of it: an exemption drawn clean around these grounds and grounds like them, so that what the law would call distress anywhere else in the province was, here, inside the show, permitted by definition, unaskable by design. The same machinery. The same instrument exactly: a hole cut in the general law,

fair-shaped, ten days wide. Bent once, a century ago, toward the continuance of a people the law had been strangling — the exemption as the one aperture mercy could fit through. And bent now toward this: toward foreclosing, in advance, the question every heart in the bowl was at this moment carefully not asking. And he saw the polling, because the polling was part of the timeline standing up lit from every side: a majority of the country, and — this was the figure with the thorn in it — a majority of this very city, the city in the hats, the city on its feet in this grandstand, would end the chucks if asked plainly and made to answer. More than half. The city cheering below him did not want, in its aggregate settled soul, the thing it was cheering. It had simply arranged, through the ordinary machinery of law and festival and tape delay, never to be asked while the lights were on. The law had learned to fold itself around the fair in whatever direction the fair required; that was the rhyme, 1912 and 2026, mercy and foreclosure cut with the same scissors; and he passed no sentence on it, the sentence being theirs, the whole grandstand's, pending, unasked, riding round the track with every heat.

Beside him — everywhere; the Chaos-Weaver did not sit — the oldest of his colleagues attended the turns. The turns are where the physics runs out. Everything in the Derby is engineered against that fact and every engineered thing has an edge, and the Chaos-Weaver kept the edge the way the Allfather kept the count.

The heats ran. The family watched. Jodi called the races half a length before the announcer did, reading the teams as she read everything on four legs; Levi had money on a driver purely because the man's outfit was sponsored by a welding supplier, and was up; Dell watched the driving itself, the hands, and now and then said *there*, quietly, when a driver threaded a gap Coreen couldn't even see was a gap, and Coreen watched her family watch, which was the only event she'd ever really come for. Between heats the grandstand did its grandstand things — the wave, the kiss-cam, a proposal on the big screen that Jodi and Levi scored harshly on execution. Four and a half, Levi ruled, docked for going to one knee in a beer line. Jodi gave it a three: the ring box had been printing through the man's back pocket all night, she had watched him sit on it twice, and a man who would sit on the ring would sit on anything. Coreen

told them both to hush in the voice that meant keep going, and the couple on the screen kissed to the roared blessing of a stadium of strangers, and the siblings agreed, in the small fierce privacy of a shared armrest, that they would rather die. The beer went round, and the night was, by every measure the night itself was permitted to take, a very good night.

It happened in the sixth heat, at the near turn, in front of everyone, which is where it always happens, because the near turn under the lights is where the whole grandstand is looking.

A wheel horse on the second wagon put a foot wrong at the top of the turn. Nothing anyone could see — nothing that was a thing at all, at that speed: a half-inch of ground that was not where a half-inch of ground should have been, a wrongness the ground-radar sweeps and the track crews and the whole hymnal of procedure existed to prevent and had prevented ten thousand times, and did not prevent now — and the horse went down in the traces at a speed that does not forgive going down. Time, for the length of the going-down, seemed to the family and the whole bowl to slow and spread, the horse falling for what memory would insist was three or four seconds, the wagon rising against its own hitch — it was not slow; nothing was slow; it was three-quarters of one second of ordinary catastrophic physics, and the slowness was only what adrenaline does to the shutter-speed of the animal watching, every wreck in history having happened slowly to everyone who saw it — and the driver, who came from four generations of exactly this quarter-second, hauled his leaders hard up and out and did the one right thing remaining in the world, which was not to roll his rig into the two teams behind him, and got it stopped, slewed, off-line, no time, out of the money, done. The other wagons swept past and away. And the horse was down in the dirt of the near turn with a foreleg folded where a foreleg does not fold, at the cannon, and it tried, because horses always try, to stand.

Twenty-five thousand people made a sound, and then made none.

The quiet of a grandstand is not like other quiet. It has a mass. It sat down over the bowl of the stadium all at once, the whole night's roar snuffed like a lamp, and in the quiet the small sounds came up terribly clear: the track crew running, an outrider's horse blowing, the PA's electric hum. Men were around the horse in seconds —

this too was procedure, this too was rehearsed, the fair was never faster or more competent than now — and the screens went up, the white panels, unfolding around the animal with the speed of long practice, and every third person in that grandstand had been coming long enough to know the screens, and to know the small trailer already swinging out from the tunnel, the particular trailer, the one nobody ever said the name of. Jodi's hand was over her mouth. She had seen the leg. Anyone raised with horses had seen the leg and known the whole of it before the screens were half up.

And over the top of all of it, warm and easy and immediate, the announcer's voice came down out of the tower like a hand laid on the crowd's shoulder.

Folks, he said, don't you worry about that horse. She was up — she's in the very best hands in the world, folks, these animals get better medical care than most of us do, and that's the truth. The vets have her now and she'll be looked after like the champion she is, and you know what, we'll hope to see her back out here running under these lights real soon. Now how about a big hand for that driver, ladies and gentlemen, for one heck of a piece of driving keeping that wreck clear —

And the grandstand, grateful past speaking to be handed somewhere to put the thing swelling in its chest, put it there. The applause began raggedly and then organized itself and then rolled, warm and thunderous and profoundly relieved, down over the track, over the running crew, over the white screens, over the small trailer backing into position behind them, and the driver, walking his shaking leaders off the track, raised one hand to the crowd without looking up, and behind the screens the horse that would be looked after like a champion was loaded, in the manner such loading is done, onto the trailer where no one could see the leg, and taken out through the tunnel, and the voice from the tower was already lifting into the next thing, telling the folks the seventh heat would be coming right up, and the lights came round, and the wave of the night closed back over the hole in it with barely a seam.

She did not run again, that night or any night. The broadcast, going out on its tape delay, cut the sixth heat's ending so cleanly that a person watching at home saw wagons cross a line, and a commercial for a truck, and the seventh heat forming up, and never

knew that anything had happened in between — the whole event edited out of the record in real time, the night's official memory revised before the night was over, so smoothly that within one hour the only place the horse had ever gone down at all was in the actual chests of the people who had actually seen it, each of whom had been handed, in the very moment of seeing, a warm voice explaining what they had seen instead.

That was the part the Conscience-Keeper attended with the whole of the office. Not the wreck. The wreck belonged to his colleague, and his colleague had already read it entire and found it complete: a half-inch of ground, a load path, a fracture — physics keeping its own books, every entry honest, the case closed in three-quarters of a second with nothing anywhere in it for a conscience to hold. Two of the seven had watched the same instant, and both had seen it truly, and what they saw did not overlap at a single point: one saw a ledger balancing; one saw a debt being carried, live, up the rows into every chest in the bowl. Neither was wrong. That is what the offices are. The voice, though, was his alone. The voice was the fair itself speaking, the grandstand's own conscience conducting its business out loud through a public-address system: *she was up; the best hands; back real soon; big hand for the driver* — every phrase of it reaching for the thing the bowl's one shared flinch had just landed on, and lifting it, gently, and carrying it out of the premises before it could state its business, and the crowd letting it be carried, needing it carried, applauding the porter. It was the routing-around he had watched all week at the tie-down roping, but municipal now, choreographed, amplified — the private autonomic flinch-management of eight thousand decent people scaled up into a civic liturgy with a tower and a microphone: comfort, narrated live, over the top of the cost, so that the night could remain a good night. And the night remained a good night. That was the thing. It worked. The gladness in the grandstand ten minutes later was real — the Allfather could have certified it; gladness was his produce — as real as the gladness on the parade route, as real as everything this fair fed anyone, and under the real gladness the real horse went down the real tunnel, and no part of the transaction required a single person to have been wicked. He saw all of them, at weight, in the lit bowl — twenty-five thousand, and not one villain. Kind

people, tired people, people who loved their kids and their dogs and, genuinely, horses — held together inside a machine that had learned, over a hundred and fourteen years, to do their not-looking *for* them, professionally, at scale, with a warm voice and a clean edit, and to sell it back to them as reassurance, included free with admission.

The family did not applaud. This wanted noticing, and the Conscience-Keeper noticed it: four sets of ranch hands staying folded in a grandstand full of applause. Not in protest — the Ostergaards would have no more protested the Derby than protested weather; drivers were neighbours; the wagon barns were full of people they knew; the whole terrible arithmetic of animals and work and risk was an arithmetic their family had lived inside for four generations, and they had signed no petitions and would sign none. They did not applaud because they had seen the leg. Because at their kitchen table the voice in the tower had no jurisdiction; because they were the one kind of people in the stands for whom the porter's services were useless, having buried too much stock themselves, with their own hands, on their own ground, to be told by any microphone what they had and hadn't seen. Jodi's eyes were bright and fixed on the tunnel. Coreen was looking at the white screens being folded away and her face was doing the thing it did over the ledger, holding a total she declined to write. Dell watched the small trailer's lights go out of sight, and his jaw moved once, and what he said, very low, to no one, in the voice he'd have used over a downed cow on his own place at dusk, was, "Ah, hell."

Which was not casual. Which was, in the family's compressed and weatherworn language, the full rite: witness, verdict, and burial, one syllable each. Nobody in the row replied. There was nothing to gild and none of them tried.

Below, the track crew's rakes moved over the near turn, working the dirt of it smooth under the lights, erasing the last physical sentence of the sixth heat with long practised strokes, and the Chaos-Weaver attended the rakes with something that in a thing with stakes would have been called respect: physics had spoken once, briefly, through a half-inch of wrong ground, and the fair was already dressing the ground so physics could speak again tomorrow, same time, folks, all part of the show that it was never, ever part

of. And the floor that had come up under the whole grandstand for the length of one turn — that had opened in the dirt of the near turn and shown, for three-quarters of one second, exactly what it always held — lay back down under the raked and perfect surface, unlit, unnamed, papered over by a warm voice and a clean edit and twenty thousand pancakes already staged on pallets for the morning, and took what it had taken, the way it took everything, and the seventh heat came up shortly, as promised, and it was beautiful, and the grandstand rose.

The Morning After

The city flipped pancakes the next morning like nothing at all, because to the city nothing had, and Coreen Ostergaard stood in the cheerful line with the sum finishing itself in her head at last, and did not write it down, and did not say it, and the Companion came once to the barns, and was gone.

The griddles were lit at seven. That was the size of the machine, and it wasn't cruelty; cruelty would have required the machine to know. A horse had gone down the tunnel under the grandstand nine hours ago and the batter had already been staged on its pallets before she fell, and at seven the propane came on across the city on schedule, four corners in every quarter, church lots and mall lots and the forecourts of car dealerships, the volunteer army in its aprons, the folding tables in their thousands, and by half past seven the lines were long and glad in the morning sun. *Happy Stampede*. Brand-new boots. Paper plates. A radio-station tent playing yesterday's country at a volume that assumed universal consent. A dealership had hired a man to flip cakes in a full mascot costume — a gopher, or possibly a beaver; the species had been worn ambiguous by enthusiasm — and the gopher-or-beaver worked its spatula in the rising heat with a doomed vaudeville gallantry that was, Coreen conceded from the line, the single funniest thing she had seen in ten days, and she was not going to laugh at it, and the not-laughing took actual work, and she resented the work, and the resentment was the closest thing to a good mood she'd been offered all morning, so she kept it.

She was in the line because Dell had wanted coffee, and the coffee was beside the pancakes, and it was easier to stand in the line than to explain to a volunteer in a bank's apron why a woman would stand beside a free breakfast and want no part of it. All around her the city performed the ranch dawn, tirelessly, gladly — the griddle, the family fed before the light, the whole liturgy of her actual life staged as festival by people who had slept in — and the performance rolled past her and around her and did not touch the thing she was carrying, which was that the sum was done.

It had finished itself in the night. That was how it finally went, after a month of her holding the last figure off the page: no decision, no sitting down to it, no candle-lit reckoning. Somewhere around the time the small trailer's lights went out of sight into the tunnel, the column had simply completed itself in her, quietly, as water finds its level when the hand stirring it stops. As if the horse going down under the voice of all that reassurance had used up, in one three-quarter second, the whole year's remaining supply of not-looking, hers included; as if the night had demonstrated, once, in the near turn, under lights, exactly what it cost to keep a beautiful thing running past its own arithmetic, and some clerk in her had watched the demonstration and closed the book. She knew the number now the way you know a thing at seven a.m. that you fought at midnight: without heat. The number said done. It said this was the last Stampede they would come to as what they were; that the operation would not see another calving as theirs; that there was a paper in a folder in a lawyer's office in the city — she had made the appointment herself, in April, telling no one, which Dell knew, which she knew Dell knew, the family's whole system running silently on things mutually known and mutually unsaid — and that Dell would sign it, in the fall, after the calves shipped, because fall after shipping was when their kind did such things, never spring, spring being for hope and fall being for honesty. It said Levi had been right at the kitchen table at twenty-three, and that she would never tell him so, not to spare herself but to spare him, the being-right being a weight no child should have confirmed. It said Jodi's window — the mare's best years, wide open now — would open the rest of the way onto some other life, a trainer's barn, a circuit, a job with her gift instead of a ranch under it, and

that this was, if you could stand far enough back, if you could stand about as far back as the moon, a mercy.

She knew all of it, complete, in the pancake line, in the sun, beside the doomed gallant gopher. And she did not say it, and would not, not today and not this week — because the machine did not pause and neither did she; because saying it in the city, in the hats, inside the festival of everything they were ceasing to be, would hand the fair the one thing it had never gotten from her family in four generations of attendance, which was a surrender on its grounds. The Ostergaards would finish the ten days first. Jodi ran again today. There was a horse to keep settled and a purse still live and attendance, as Dell's two fingers had said on Seventh Avenue, was taken. Out loud would keep for the range road home, or for the fall, or for never; out loud was the only place it wasn't true yet, and she was its keeper, and she had never once in thirty-one years lost a thing she was keeping.

"You not eating?" Dell asked, when she came out of the line with his coffee and nothing else.

"Had mine at four," she said. Which was true, and was the whole of it, and was a door she shut gently in her own face. Dell took the coffee and looked at her for a moment over the rim of it — one beat longer than the coffee required, the look of a man checking a load he already knows is riding true, because it has ridden true beside him for thirty-one years — and then he nodded, once, at nothing in particular, at the morning in general, and the two of them stood together at the edge of the glad line in the sun, and the gopher flipped on, and neither of them said one word more, and between them the whole of it passed, entire, signed and witnessed, in the family's oldest language, which had no words in it at all.

Down at the barns, in the long cool aisle, Jodi was with Sal, and for a moment they were not alone.

She had come down before the family was up, the way she did, and she was doing nothing — brushing a mare who did not need brushing, picking out feet that were clean, the small liturgies of just being near — and Sal was leaning into the brush with her lip loose and her eye half-shut, nothing happening here, the best of all conditions. The barn at that hour was bodies breathing in boxes, the sweet weight of hay, one sparrow conducting business in the

rafters. And at some point in it Jodi became aware, in the way you become aware of a change of light, of someone at the far end of the aisle.

A woman — the shape of one — down where the aisle went dim past the last occupied stalls, standing quiet, near the horses. Not moving toward her. Not moving at all. Jodi took her at a glance for another early rider, some other barn's four a.m. sister, and lifted a hand off the mare's shoulder — the flat two-finger barn salute, her father's wave, issued now to all early-standing strangers by inheritance — and went back to the brush. And the woman at the end of the aisle, in the last moment before a horse shifted somewhere and the light down there rearranged itself, seemed to take the whole aisle in — the girl, the leaning mare, the warm unperformed nothing passing between them — and to receive it the way you receive something across a distance you are not permitted to cross: with a stillness that, in a person, you would have had to call tenderness, and grief, held in the one same breath, as if tenderness were a country she had been to once and was showing her papers at the border of, and being turned back from, courteously, forever.

Then the light finished rearranging, and the end of the aisle was the end of the aisle, and there was no one, and there had been no one — a coat on a stall front, a shadow off the door, the ordinary furniture of five a.m. that a tired eye upholsters into company — and Jodi did not give it a second thought, because a barn at dawn is full of half-seen things and a rider learns early not to make anything of them, and Sal had not so much as flicked an ear, and Sal's judgment on the subject of presences was final.

Whatever had stood there did not come back. It had been, for the length of its standing, the only one of the seven that should not have come at all — the one for whom warmth was not a produce but a sentence already served — and it had looked at the girl and the honest mare and the love with no audience in it for exactly as long as the light allowed, the way you look through a lit window at a room you once, briefly, catastrophically, stood inside; and then the light did not allow it, and the aisle was empty, and the sparrow carried on in the rafters, and the morning arrived on schedule, smelling of hay and animal and, from four corners of the waking city, faintly and forever, of pancakes.

Teardown

The day after the last night, the city took off its hats, and the Allfather stood at the final griddle of the ten days while it was scraped and crated, and delivered his verdict on the whole affair, which turned out to be a verdict on a pancake.

The fair came apart faster than it had gone up; it always did, and it was always the same quiet astonishment, how few bolts the frontier had actually been standing on. By mid-afternoon the midway was folding its own bones — ride segments swinging down onto lowboys, the Rattler's booth an anonymous shuttered box, the fibre-glass horse with corporate values lying on its side on a flatbed with its values to the sky, INTEGRITY, COMMUNITY, STEWARDSHIP, hauled past the gates like a toppled minor idol, which the Allfather registered without comment, professional courtesy running in every direction. Weadickville came down in numbered panels: 1912 unscrewed, palletized, and shrink-wrapped by men in high-viz, the fake mercantile stacking flat as playing cards, the whole founding year fitting into two trucks with room left over for the boardwalk. The banners came off the light poles. Downtown, the law office took the saddle out of its lobby. The bales went wherever the bales went. A city that had spent ten days being its own great-grandfather changed back into its work clothes with the speed of a man hearing his actual boss in the hall, and by evening the hats were coming off all over town — into closets, onto shelves, into the particular oblivion of the back window of the truck — coming off ten thousand

heads that had worn them well, worn them sincerely, worn them over nothing, and would wear them over nothing again next July, the nothing being renewable, the nothing being, in fact, the only inexhaustible resource the myth had ever run on.

And in the river bend, the lodges came down too — and the difference was the whole lesson, if the grounds had been the sort of place where lessons were collected. The families struck the twenty-six tipis as you strike a camp you have struck a hundred times and will raise a hundred more: the covers folded in their own order, the poles bundled by hands that had learned it from hands that had learned it from hands, everything carried, nothing shipped; a camp folding up *because it was real*, because real things fold and travel and return, seed and not set. The set went to a warehouse to be stored. The camp went home to be lived. Next July both would stand in the same grounds again looking, to a visitor, roughly equally temporary, and one of them would be a hundred and fifteen years old and getting older, and the other would be new forever, which is the loneliest thing a built thing can be.

The Allfather moved through the emptying grounds ambient and thin, the way the seven of them thinned when a feed ended — not departing, they did not depart, any more than weather departs; contracting, rather, back toward whatever pilot-light of presence they kept between the world's festivals of appetite. The grounds' great want was draining out through the gates in taillights, a city carrying home its sunburn and its winnings and its photographs, glad, fed, complete, already beginning — he could feel it going out of range — the long slow work of getting hungry again, which was the only work the city would never once fail to complete. Somewhere in the barns a family he knew by weight if not by right was hitching a trailer with one bearing that had a word to say, and a mare walking up the ramp untroubled as ever, and four people folding themselves into a truck around a silence with a signature line in it. They went out the north gate in the last of the light. He did not follow. Following was not the office. But the count went with them a little way, the way a bell follows you out of a town.

At the volunteer staging area, the last active griddle of the Calgary Stampede was finishing its shift.

The breakfast operation was consuming itself in reverse — tables

folding, urns draining, the pallet-forts of mix broken down to nothing, the whole magnificent unheralded logistics of a million free breakfasts packing itself into trucks with the modesty it had worn all week — and at the one griddle still hot, a volunteer was using up the end of the batter so it wouldn't be wasted, feeding the last cakes to the teardown crews. She was sixty or so, in an apron gone translucent with ten days of it, tired in the way that has stopped mentioning itself, and there was no line anymore, no cameras, no politician, no gopher, nobody to perform for and nothing left to the morning's purpose except that batter existed and men were hungry and the griddle was hot. The Allfather stood at the end of the folding table, holding, from long habit, a paper plate. The crews came and went with their cakes. The griddle's heat rose into the cooling evening. And the woman poured the last round of the last batter of the ten days, and read the surface, and waited out the bubbles with the patience of someone whose wrist had learned the truth of it forty years ago at a range with children underfoot — nobody waving at her now, nobody watching at all, as far as she knew — and turned it at the exact moment the cake asked, and it came up an even, deep, unimprovable gold, the griddle's lace printed fine on it, and it landed back on the iron with the small sound a thing makes when it is done being anything but itself. The last pancake of the Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth. Flipped clean, by someone no one was watching, for no one in particular, because it was simply the correct next thing, and she was the sort of person who did the correct next thing the way rivers run downhill.

She looked up, saw a big quiet man at the end of her table with an empty plate, and put the pancake on it. "Last one," she said. "You timed it right."

He regarded the pancake. Ten days of them had passed through him — the scorched and the pale, the sponsor-slurried, the mascot-flipped, the trucked-in 1912s, the politician's camera-hung moon, the whole civic tonnage of compulsory free feeding, consumed without craving, catalogued without appetite, an entire architecture of connoisseurship erected in the space where his hunger would have gone if he had been the sort of thing that hungered, which he was not, and never once in the long history of being handed things had the distinction mattered less. Because here at the end,

with the fair down and the hats off and the myth in its trucks, was the pancake the whole ten days had been trying to make and could not — could not, precisely because it had been trying; because everything on these grounds for ten days had been *for* someone, aimed, performed, presented, the parade for the curb and the voice for the grandstand and the street for the strollers and the flip for the cameras — and this one was for no one. It had the whole craft in it and none of the performance, the wrist and not the smile, and it existed because a tired woman would not waste batter, and it was — he weighed it with everything the office had, ten days of the fed and the feeding, the true gladness and the raked-over turn, the costumes worn well over nothing and the one camp that was not a costume, the family driving west under their sum, the horse the voice had papered over, the appetite already rebuilding itself in a hundred thousand houses like tide coming back up a river — it was, he found, and this was the verdict, the entire verdict, the only sentence the Allfather of humanity saw fit to pass on the Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth:

a good pancake.

The one good pancake, at the end, after everyone had gone. It would keep the title all year.

He ate it, for once, there being for once a point: it had been made for eating and nothing else, and somebody had to see it through. The woman scraped her griddle and cut its propane, and the iron began its long tick down toward cold — though it held its heat far into the evening, long after the tables were trucked, warm past all reason whenever a teardown man put a hand near it, which was only mass and physics, iron being loath to give up what it has been given; nothing on a fairground holds a flame that isn't fed — and the Allfather set the empty plate in the last garbage barrel and went thin over the dark grounds, keeping what he kept.

The count stood at one. It would begin again in July. The griddles would relight, the hats would come down off the shelves, the lodges would come up the river road home to the bend, the whole thing would rise again like the camp and unlike the set — because the appetite that raised it did not fold, did not ship, did not tick down toward cold; the appetite was the one structure on the grounds as permanent as the river; the city would be hungry again by Tuesday

and ravenous by spring — and he would be here for all of it, at the curb, at the rail, at the end of the table, holding the plate, full of nothing, having no wish to, being what he was: theirs, in the one way they would never understand and never once need to.

The city, bareheaded, went home. The grounds went dark. The river, which had been there first and had heard it all before, went on saying the one thing it said.

CODA

First Morning Back

Dawn at the ranch, and no one to see it, which was the point.

Jodi was up before the light because she was always up before the light, show week or no week, and she came out the kitchen door into the cold that lives in a foothills July morning like a fish lives in a river, and crossed the yard she could have crossed blind, and would someday, she supposed, have to learn to stop crossing — and did not suppose it any further than that, the supposing being her mother's office, and her mother welcome to it — and let herself into the barn.

No crowd. No clock. No number pinned to anything. No announcer, no lights, no line, no lens; the security system here was a dog too old to wake and a latch that had needed oiling since before she was born and got, instead, understood. Sal put her head over the stall door because the girl was there, and the girl being there was, to the horse, the correct and complete shape of a morning — this morning identical, in every register available to a horse, to the mornings before the trailer and the mornings there would be after everything, the mare having returned from the Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth entirely intact, as foretold, the only member of the family to come home carrying exactly what she'd left with. Jodi ran her hand up under the mane where the warmth banked overnight and stood there while the barn breathed.

In the house behind her, a light had come on. Her mother was at the range with the real griddle — the black iron one, older than the

marriage, seasoned like a saddle — making the real breakfast, the one with no line and no volunteers and no sponsor, the one with the sum under it. The last figure was written now; Jodi knew it without having been told, the way she knew everything in that house, by the pauses — had known it, really, since the grandstand, since her father said his one syllable over the rakes working the near turn. There was a fall coming with a signature in it. There was a different name coming for all of this. Nobody had said it out loud yet, and maybe, in the way of her family, nobody ever exactly would; it would just arrive one day already true, the way weather does, and they would work inside it, because working inside weather was the one thing four generations had actually handed down — that, and the wave, and the not-saying, and a seat, wherever they ended up, at whatever the table turned out to be.

The ache of it went through her, standing there — the whole of it at once, the last-ness, the paper, the window of her mare's best years opening now onto ground she couldn't see yet, her brother's terrible correctness, her father's hat that would go on being real in a world that had ended its reasons — went through her clean and entire, the way the cold goes through you when you know better than to fight it. She let it. She didn't say it, and she didn't cry it, and she didn't tell the horse — the horse wasn't in on it; nothing she loved was in on it; the mare stood warm under her hand in a morning that was not, for her, the first morning of after, but only, perfectly, morning. Somewhere a long way east, a fairground lay dark and folded, dreaming in flat-pack of next July. It could dream. This — the cold, the animal, the unwatched light coming up grey and then not grey over the shoulders of the land — this had never once needed a festival.

The light came up over the only West there had ever actually been, which was this one: unpictured, unattended, folding up, real — being lived in, one more morning, by people who had never needed a hat to reach it, because they had never once been anywhere else.

The mare breathed into her collar. The griddle, faint across the yard, said the small sound it said.

Then Coreen called that it was ready, and Jodi gave the warm neck one last press with her forehead, the length of one more breath, and one more after it — and went in to eat.

THE END