Burnout and other stories

Newell Roche

Carroll College, Helena, MT

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Name: Newell J. Roche

Thesis Title: Burnout and other stories

Approved by the Department of Languages and Literature:

Mr. Loren Graham
Date
Thesis Director

Dr. Cheryl Conover
Date
Reader

Ms. Niki Whearty
Date
Reader
4-15-05

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Newell J. Roche
“Hey, Jake,” Maria called as she approached the back porch. “You 'sleep?”
“Yep,” replied Jake gruffly, as he stroked the fat orange cat that lay curled on his lap.
“Mind if I sit?” she asked.
“Sit wherever you want; you own the place,” Jake responded flatly. “But I ain’t got another chair.”

Maria’s dad owned the house Jake was renting, so he felt obligated to refrain from telling her to leave whenever she showed up, but he didn’t care for her very much. She was actually pretty attractive; they had even dated once in high school. Her hair was dirty blond and unkempt; her skin fair, but her eyes seemed sunk into her head, and her cheekbones protruded sharply from of her face. She had gotten a lot thinner—too thin, Jake thought. She plopped down on the top step at Jake’s feet and leaned her head on his knee. He slouched in his chair, staring at the back of Maria’s head, refusing to begin a conversation with her unless he was forced. The cat began to purr and rub its head on Jake’s leg, but stopped purring and perked its ears in the air at the sound of barking dog.

“It’s okay, buddy,” Jake said to the cat, running his hand over its back. “You should go over there and show that mean ol’ dog who’s boss, huh.” The cat looked up at him as if understanding what Jake had said.

“Don’t take this wrong,” Maria said suddenly. “But it makes me sad. You had so much going for you in high school. Popular. Coulda gone to college, and left Rainey. There wasn’t anybody that wouldn’t have traded places with you. But look at you now. You’re turnin’ out just like everybody else around here.”

Jake furrowed his eyebrows and his face wrinkled. “Everybody’s always barking at me about how great I used to be. And the great things that I could have done. Bark, bark, bark. Just shut up,” Jake said, growing angrier, but keeping a calm voice. The cat jumped off his lap as he stood up and walked over to the side of the deck.

Maria got up from off the steps and sat down in his chair, staring straight ahead.

“You shouldn’t let one bad thing ruin the rest of your life,” she said.
Eighteen months ago he was the head of a five-man Missoula smoke jump crew. It was a routine jump. A small fire had popped up in the Bitterroot Mountain range northwest of Wisdom, and his crew got called since the fire was not accessible by engine. All their jumps went fine, and the fire was relatively small. But then something strange. The wind picked up suddenly, whipping smoke and dust into a storm all around them. Jake couldn’t see, and his instinct sent him back in the direction from which he had come. He ran. In mid-stride one of his feet didn’t find any ground, and he fell. His broken recollections were flashes of smoke, being on a stretcher, riding in an ambulance, and then waking up in the hospital. He remained there for eight days with multiple broken bones. He later found out that he was lucky to be alive after having run off a 50-foot cliff. His crew should have been so lucky; the other four perished in the fire. He had lost four co-workers, and four close friends.

Jake stood staring off the side of the deck, contemplating whose job it was to paint the tattered white picket fence that separated his yard from the neighbor’s.

“I don’t want to do it,” Jake muttered out loud.

“What?” Maria said spinning around in the chair.

“Oh, nothing, just talking to myself,” he said. “It’s nothing, really.”

The next morning, Jake sat on his east-facing deck, just like he’d been doing every morning this past year and a half, slouched in his wooden chair, his legs kicked out and crossed, sipping on a cup of steaming coffee. The bags under his eyes were heavy. He watched the sun claw its way over the hills every morning. He had on his usual attire: no shoes or socks, faded blue jeans, a snap-button flannel and his red “Missoula Smoke Jumpers” hat, which reads only “Smoke,” every other word having nearly faded off. His hat tipped forward on his face with the bill almost touching his nose, shielding his dark brown eyes and exposing only his lips and sharp chin to the sun. The skin on his face was rough and creased.

He busied himself with his leather work boots, lace-up Hathorns, the kind of boots you’ll have forever if you get the soles redone maybe once. His left hand was jammed inside the boot, his right hand methodically stroking the leather with a pre-oiled sponge. The orange cat hopped into his lap. Paying the cat no attention, he lifted the
boot to his face to inspect a scuff. He froze for a moment, and then pulled the boot to his nose. He held it close for a few seconds, paused, sniffed the boot one more time, and carefully placed it on the wooden floor next to his chair. He leaned his head on the back of the chair, shut his eyes, and pet the cat.

He was dozing off when he was startled by the sound of a car crunching gravel as it pulled up in his driveway. For a minute, Jake thought it was his ride to work. But today was Saturday. He sank back into his chair and used his hand to block the sun. He couldn’t see who it was.

“Mornin’,” a man’s voice called out as Jake saw the figure throw something in the direction of the deck. He recognized the rolled-up tube of newspaper sailing through the air. It hit the steps and tumbled back down to the concrete walkway. “Have a nice day,” the man said, climbing back in his car and driving off. Jake walked down the steps and grabbed the paper. He snapped the rubber band on the roll and wondered why he even got the paper anymore. He never read it, except for an occasional glance at the sports page. Most of the papers stayed rolled up, just the way they came, and went straight into the trash can. “What a waste,” Jake muttered to himself.

As he walked back up the stairs, the dog next door began barking at him through the white fence that separated his yard and the neighbor’s. Without breaking stride, Jake flung the rolled-up newspaper at the dog. The paper smacked the fence directly in front of the dog and fell to the grass. That only made the dog bark louder. The cat scurried across the deck, nearly tripping Jake in the process. Jake flung open the screen door and cat bolted between his legs and into the house. Jake shook his head and walked inside, letting the screen door slam shut behind him.

That evening, the sun was slowly falling behind the house, and Jake was back in his same spot. Barefoot. The cat was sitting on his lap again. He sat slouched with his hat tipped down on his face, but for no sensible reason, since the sun was shining on the opposite side of the house. A bottle of Miller Lite substituted for the coffee. He heard the sound of an engine approaching and sighed as he saw Maria’s beat-up silver Ford pickup roll into his driveway.

“I do have a phone, ya know,” Jake yelled out to her. “You could call first.”
“I don’t have one,” Maria yelled back as she climbed out of her pickup.

Maria approached the deck and stopped to lean on the stair rail. “My dad says you’ve got until the end of the month to pack up your stuff and get out of the house,” she said matter-of-factly.

Jake let out a sharp laugh. “Ha!” Jake knew she was bluffing, especially in light of their conversation yesterday about him sitting around this town and “wasting away,” as she called it.

“Serious. We want you out,” Maria continued, her face unflinching.

Jake lifted his hat off his face and stared back at her. He leaned over the side of his chair and grabbed his Hathom boots, slipping his bare feet into each one. He quickly laced each one up with just one hand and walked down the steps.

“Come with me,” he said, walking right past Maria and across the lawn. The cat followed at his heels.

“What—?” Maria started then stopped and followed after him.

“You see old man Sather’s Doberman right there?” Jake asked her, pointing across the white fence into the neighboring yard. On cue, the dog came barreling across the yard right up to the fence and began to bark violently. The cat took off back towards the house and disappeared underneath the deck.

Maria jumped behind Jake and held on to his shirt. “Yeah.”

“What do you think would happen if I went over in the yard and slapped him in the face?” Jake asked.

Maria began to chuckle. “Don’t be stupid. Besides, Sather would probably come out and shoot you.”

“Don’t worry about Sather; he left an hour ago. That old drunk won’t be back until two o’clock in the morning. Seriously, what do you think would happen?”

“I think you’d be lucky to get outta there,” said Maria, glancing cautiously at Jake. The dog was standing on its hind legs, his snarling snout forced over the top of the white pickets.

“Let’s go,” Jake said heading toward the yard, motioning for her to follow.

“No, Jake, don’t. Please!” Maria pleaded. But Jake ignored her and kept walking towards the neighbor’s yard.
Maria stayed back as Jake walked around to the front gate. The Doberman went wild, working itself into a frenzy, baring its teeth, ears laid back, barking viciously. Saliva hung from the dog's mouth, and its whole body shook with each menacing bark. Jake reached for the latch as the huge dog flung itself against the gate. Without wavering, he undid the latch and entered the yard.

The dog lunged at his upper body, but Jake managed to block the dog's open mouth with his forearm and shoved the dog backwards. The dog backed up for a moment and came at him again, but Jake grabbed the dog by the throat with both hands and, yelling obscenities at the top of his lungs, threw the dog onto its back. The dog looked like a turtle struggling to get back on its feet, but once on all fours it came at him again, this time staying lower and going at Jake's leg. But Jake was ready, meeting the dog halfway with his Hathorn boot, crushing the dog's chin. The dog yelped and staggered for a moment then came again, lunging at him, but Jake caught the dog with a hurling right hand, slamming his fist into the dog's eye socket. The dog staggered sideways, let out a couple of pathetic barks, then backed away slowly, head down almost to the ground.

Jake was breathing heavily. He looked down at his right hand and arm and saw he was bleeding. He wiped his hand against his leg. He was still standing in the yard with the dog, who was now lying down, panting and staring back at him as if nothing had happened. The dull thud of his fist hitting the dog's head echoed in his mind.

Jake turned around, unlatched the gate, and slowly walked out. He looked up and saw Maria. He had forgotten she was standing there.

She stood silent, flinching as Jake walked past her. Neither one of them said a word. He reached the porch, sat back in his chair and began to unlace his boots. Maria continued to stand in the middle of the yard as Jake tossed his boots off to the side, picked up his beer and took a long, slow gulp. The orange cat reappeared and hopped on his lap, lay down, and started purring.

"You liked that, didn't ya old boy," Jake said to the cat, scratching under its chin.

Maria began walking towards her pickup. "You might wanna get that arm checked out. Dogs have rabies you know," she said sullenly as she reached for her door.

Jake ignored her. "Say, do you think your old man would care if I was a few days late with next month's rent."
“Well, no, I don’t think it’d be a problem,” Maria called back as she climbed into the cab.

“Thanks, 'preciate it,” he said, waving his hand and flashing her a sinister smile as she slowly backed out of the driveway. He swigged down the last of his beer and began to gnaw on the opening of the bottle, grinding his teeth against the dark glass.
It was Saturday and she sat on the living room floor folding both his and her clean clothes and stacking them in their respective piles. She felt old. She swore she was the oldest twenty-nine-year-old on the planet. She glanced over at the full-length mirror that hung on the hallway wall. She still looked young; still was pretty too. Her hair was a rich brown, and she always looked in the magazines to see the latest hairstyle. She just got it cut a couple of weeks back; a cute little bob about chin length. She liked it, for now at least. She had deep brown eyes and long eyelashes that didn’t even need any mascara; she was glad for that. Most girls would die for her eyelashes. The only thing she didn’t like was her nose. It wasn’t too big or too small, but rather smashed against her face, making it look too fat. But overall, she was happy with how she looked. She went back to folding clothes. An afternoon talk show droned in the background, but she rarely glanced at the television. Tell was at work.

Their relationship seemed to be fine, except for the issue of having children someday. She had tried on two separate occasions to bring it up. After all, she was almost thirty and she wanted a family. A ring would be nice first, she thought, but she would only accept a ring from someone who wanted to have children. The first time she had brought it up, he had said that he didn’t think he ever wanted kids, that he just wanted to spend his life “lovin’ her.” If “lovin’ her” had something to do with power tools, and guns, he was doing just wonderful.

The second time she had asked him he had said, “Yeah, sure, someday, I guess.” He might as well have said no. She had never brought up the topic of children again. He wouldn’t talk about it. The other thing that had seemed to become an issue was hunting; she was not sure why, but it just had. It wasn’t that she even disliked his hunting, but he thought she did.

“You can’t say you dislike something if you’ve never tried it,” he had said. She had responded with something about how she would only like to go hunting if nothing got killed and that she figured that she wouldn’t be able to stand the sight of an innocent
animal being slaughtered, even though she had seen her dad shoot many deer when she was younger.

"Well, that kind of defeats the purpose of hunting," she remembered him saying. "Besides, hunting is only inhumane if you're careless. I'm not a careless hunter, Amy."

And she believed him. As much hunting as he did he ought to be pretty good.

"Hunting shouldn't just be about killing," she had continued, trying to get him to see her point of view. "It should be about the whole experience, being in nature, appreciating the animals. All of it, not just the killing."

Then he had given her a macho "you don't understand this type of thing" look. So she had turned his question around on him; she had asked him if he understood hunting. A gruff and insulted "What?" was all she got in return. Then he laughed and walked out the door.

She worked at the bar in the evenings Thursday through Saturday, and as a teller at the bank in town during the day. "In town" meant Wisdom, since Wisdom was the closest place that had around a thousand people. Going to town meant you were going to Wisdom. Tell was a carpenter, doing work in town and right there in Rainey, remodeling bathrooms and kitchens, re-roofing houses, and doing other odd jobs. He was good at what he did and made decent money.

She was just finishing up the last load of laundry, folding two pairs of his socks together and tossing them in the top drawer when he came bursting through the front door. He had a grin stretched from one side of his face to the other. In his outstretched arms he held a brand new rifle. He cradled it like a newborn baby, then carefully set it down on the couch.

"Look," he said, his eyes and face glowing. "Isn't she beautiful!" She looked at him quizzically. He was thirty-two but looked like a little boy. He still had a baby face. And he was getting a belly, not a big belly, but a belly nonetheless. But she loved him. She continued to look at him, but he did not notice, lost in his new toy. He still was handsome in a way. His hairline had begun to recede considerably, forming a triangle of brown hair that came to a point at his forehead. His eyes were okay; nothing special, just your run-of-the-mill brown eyes. But his dimples. She absolutely loved his dimples.
when he laughed or smiled. And he did have a great smile. She figured she would humor him by acknowledging his new baby.

“Yeah, she’s gorgeous,” she said mockingly, walking across the room and flopping down on the couch, tired.

“You just don’t appreciate any of it do you?” he said annoyed, shaking his head. He fidgeted with his hands, and then methodically popped every knuckle as he stared at the ground. “Why are you so tired?” he asked.

“I worked at the bank this morning and I’ve been doing laundry all afternoon,” she said.

He laughed. She wasn’t sure how to take the laugh, but she was pretty certain it wasn’t a “thank you honey.”

“I want you to come hunting with me this weekend,” he blurted out. It caught her off guard; he had never asked her to go hunting with him before. Maybe if she went she would understand, she thought. Maybe it would help things if she went. He was staring at her, waiting for an answer; she nodded her head.

“Ohkay,” she said. “But no fawns, and no does with fawns either.”

Early the next morning, they were huddled in the brush on the edge of an open field. Tell had made her dress completely in camouflage. It was all big and baggy since it was his old stuff. She even had some kind of black and brown paint on her face, which she thought was probably shoe polish. She sat about ten feet behind him. One doe and two little fawns had wandered out into the open field, opposite the side that she and Tell sat on. He turned and looked at her, gesturing with two fingers at his eyes and then pointing out into the field. She vehemently shook her head no and gave him a scowl. “I know, I know,” he silently mouthed back at her. Well, at least he had remembered their agreement. She nodded at him. They had been sitting there for almost two hours, and she was getting bored. She was cold and hungry, and her butt hurt from sitting on the ground for so long. She just wanted something to happen so they could go.

The doe had her head to the ground, eating some grass on the edge of the wheat field. Amy wasn’t very good with distance, but she figured it to be about as far from the post office down the two blocks to the bar, maybe more. Amy noticed the doe stop
eating and look back into the brush. A couple more does came running out of the thicket, prancing around nervously. All the deer stopped eating and held their head in the air. Then, a large deer came trotting out of the brush and continued across the field. Amy noticed its antlers rose well above its ears and his body seemed twice the size of the other deer. The rest of the deer joined him in running across the field. Amy looked down at Tell, but he had his rifle propped up and was following the deer through the scope of his rifle, his finger resting on the trigger. The deer began to quicken their run across the field.

The loud blast of the gun made Amy jump. Amy looked out at the deer, but the one with the large antlers was still standing, and oddly enough, all of the deer slowed down almost to a stop, acting confused. She didn’t understand why Tell didn’t shoot again, as the big buck now stood broadside, looking in their direction. She looked at Tell; he had lowered his gun, and hung his head between his knees, looking dejected. She was confused. Tell stood up and carefully placed his gun over his shoulder. He motioned for her to stay where she was as he started to walk out into the field. She ignored him and quickly followed, running up next to him.

“What’s going on?” she asked. But he just shook his head and kept walking. She grabbed hold of his hand and walked with him. She looked up and saw the deer running again at the sight of her and Tell. She then looked up at him; his face was long.

“What’s wrong,” she tried again. But she got no answer; he just shook his head again. She looked down and watched her feet crunch the wheat stubble. She didn’t know what was the matter, but she had a bad feeling. Honestly, she didn’t really want to know.

“I’m sorry,” he said, but she didn’t respond, just looked at him. They kept walking. Amy just stared at the ground, the perfect rows of chopped-off wheat. Then Tell came to an abrupt stop. She looked at him.

He was staring down at the ground about ten feet in front of them. There lay a small heap that looked like a curled up dog or some heap of fur. She felt the color run out of her face. She wanted to leave. She wanted to hit him too, but she knew he hadn’t meant to do it. Tell walked up to the dead fawn, grabbed it by a leg, and rolled the small animal on its back. It was so tiny, so innocent. She wanted to cry but she kept her composure, standing in the same spot, frozen.
Tell pulled his huge buck knife from his belt and slipped the protective leather sleeve off. Its silver blade gleamed in the sunlight. Amy didn’t want to watch, but at the same time she couldn’t take her eyes off the fawn or Tell. She watched the knife blade disappear into the underside of the fawn, and Tell began sawing upwards through the ribs. He sawed vigorously, as hard as he could. Then he stopped, halfway through the chest cavity, and stood up. Amy saw the sweat beading up on his face. She said nothing.

He walked a few feet over to the edge of the field and sat down in the stubble, his back towards Amy and the fawn. Amy stood frozen. She looked at the fawn sprawled on its back with the knife handle protruding from its chest. Amy hesitated, then walked over to the fawn and knelt down. She ran her hand over its fur, feeling the softness. She felt a lump begin to form in her throat, but she stopped it and grabbed hold of the knife. The first knife stroke was the hardest, seeing the fur and skin peel away as she moved the knife up and then down. But she kept going, until she was almost to the throat, which she thought was far enough, and she stopped. She looked over her shoulder at Tell. His back was still to her but she was sure he had probably looked at her.

She turned her attention back to the fawn. This is the part she did not want to do, but she knew he was not going to do it. She buried her arm inside the fawn, almost up to the elbow. It was so warm, almost hot. She yanked out the small mass of innards and they flopped out onto the ground. She looked back at Tell again. He was sitting exactly the same. She looked down at her arm; it was covered in bright, red blood up to the elbow.

She knew the skin had to come off of the fawn, but she wasn’t exactly sure how to do it. She had seen her dad do it once or twice, but not to a fawn of course. Usually her dad did it at home, when it was hung up, but she figured she might as well try to do it now. She started cutting the skin back from the ribs and she was surprised at how easily it sliced and pulled back away from the dark red meat. She kept slicing and pulling, and before she knew it she had the whole fawn skinned, except where the hide was still attached to fawn’s small head.

At that moment, Tell came walking up over her shoulder and roughly bumped her out of the way. He had a saw in his hand, a small handsaw. She wasn’t sure where it came from, but nevertheless there it was, its teeth sharp and ready. She stood up and
moved to the side as Tell knelt down over the head. He began sawing at the back of the head and she turned away. That was enough; she didn’t want to see anymore. By the time she turned back around, Tell had the headless sack of meat draped across his back, walking back in the direction of the pickup.

She picked up a small rock and hurled it in Tell’s direction. She watched the rock hit the ground, bounce once, and then disappear into the stubble halfway between her and Tell. He didn’t even turn around. She knew he wouldn’t see her throw it, but she needed to anyway. Then she followed after him because she had to; it was getting dark and she didn’t even know where she was. Tell’s figure was becoming faint in the distance.

The next morning she was sitting in the kitchen, staring at the little green clock numbers on the microwave. It was almost ten already; she had been up for over three hours. She stood in front of the kitchen sink, staring out the window. She watched two black birds skip across a branch, not really following each other. They just looked as if they hopped in unison to the same place. Then they flew off.

Something else caught her eye. A shadow was cast onto their cement patio out back. A strange shadow that she had never seen before in that spot. She leaned over the sink and tried to look out the window to see what was casting the shadow. She walked across the kitchen into the dining room to look out the sliding glass door. She gasped and stepped back; he must have hung it off their back porch when they got home last night. But it didn’t look the same. It was grotesque. Its front legs had been cut off at the knee joints and looked like stubby little arms stretched above the rest of the body. The back legs had not been cut off at the knee, and they hung down below the body cavity. Amy squinted her eyes and ground her teeth together, but kept staring. She could see the little ribs protruding out of its chest. Completely stretched out, it wasn’t more than four feet tall. And with no fur at all, that was the troubling part. The meat was so dark and red, different than she thought she’d ever seen before. She suddenly regretted having skinned it in the field. Why’d he have to string it up like that? Couldn’t he have just laid it out somewhere, so it looked more natural, not strung up as if it were standing in mid-air. She wanted to stick her head out the sliding glass door and take a closer look, but she couldn’t.
She walked back across the kitchen and over to the window. To avoid looking out the window, she stared down at the sink. Spotless. Just how she kept it. She turned around as she heard the hard wood floor creak. Tell stood there in his camoflauge boxer shorts and a white t-shirt. His hair was messed up and he squinted because of the light.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said, turning to look back out the window. She knew he hated when she responded like that, which is why she did this time.

“Well, I’m gonna jump in the shower while you do nothing,” he said, mocking her. “Start a pot of coffee.”

Amy gave him no response. She heard the water in the shower start running, and something hit her like cold morning air being sucked through her nostrils, painful yet refreshing. She walked into their bedroom, grabbed a duffle bag and began packing some clothes. She wouldn’t pack all her clothes, yet; she would just take enough for awhile. She was going to get some toiletries, toothbrush and things, and maybe some makeup, but that was in the bathroom, which was where he was; she could buy new.

She flung the duffle bag strap on her shoulder and grabbed her keys off the kitchen counter. But she skidded to a stop and looked at the coffee pot. She was going to start the coffee for a minute, probably out of habit, but she caught herself. She stood still for a second and listened to the water still running in the bathroom, then she opened the door and headed out into the crisp morning air. She didn’t want to but she looked over at the hanging thing; it was completely silhouetted by the sun. Its arms, or legs, or whatever they were, seemed to be reaching towards her. She kept staring at it, hanging there helpless, neglected. She turned her head away and walked to her car and climbed in. She fired up the engine and put it in reverse. As she backed down the driveway she waved, but she wasn’t sure at whom.
EIGHT FEET TALL
Newell Roche

He stood hammering new nails into those same old gray boards, repairing the corral that needed much more than just new nails. Jameson glanced up to see his son next to the tattered chicken coop, scratching in the dirt with a stick. He had asked Toby to help, but Toby had said no.

A bead of sweat made its way from underneath his baseball cap down the side of his face and stopped when it met the collar of his shirt. The air was hot and calm, unusually hot for an October day in Montana, but that dark storm cloud kept getting closer. For the moment, the row of lilac bushes in front of the house and the cottonwood tree in the yard held still. An old red pickup truck with an arm and a hand waving out the window roared down the county road that bordered their yard. Jameson simply raised his hammer in return. Damn people, he thought, always drivin’ way too fast down these roads. Trigger, the ranch dog, rose from his resting spot as if to chase the truck, but seeing it already gone, let out one weak bark and lay back down.

Toby had stopped digging in the dirt and was throwing a miniature rubber football at a tire that hung from the giant cottonwood tree in the yard. He had on Jameson's old high school practice jersey. Jameson had cut the bottom of it off to fit Toby, but the jersey still dangled almost to his knees. Toby always said that when he was throwing the football at the tire he pretended he was Jameson. Jameson chuckled and shook his head, thinking about his own glory days. He’d never have thought then that he would still be here. But he was. He’d give anything to have them stop coming up to him downtown and telling him they remember in '83 when he threw for 315 yards and four touchdowns against Custer County in the state semis. Sure, he was proud of what he had accomplished, but he was thirty-four years old now, not eighteen.

Toby was a constant reminder of his high school days, when he dated Julie, Toby’s mother. All he cared about then was football, parties, and girls. Jameson had changed a lot since then. He thought himself a simple man, wanting a piece of land of his own, which he now had, and to run his few head of cattle and maybe have a couple of horses, which he was working on. But that hadn’t been enough for Julie. The thing was,
Jameson wasn't Toby's father. Julie and Jameson had dated two different times, once in high school, and then later after college. The second time was almost ten years ago, and Julie came crawling back to Jameson, seven months pregnant and abandoned by Toby's father. Jameson took her back. Two months later she had Toby, and just two years ago she had left them both. Toby hadn't seen his mother in over six months, although the two of them did talk on the phone every couple of weeks.

Small raindrops began to spot the boards of the corral. He looked up. The dark clouds were nearly on top of them. The raindrops were falling bigger and faster. Jameson removed his baseball cap and wiped his brow with his forearm, then tilted back his head and let the rain mix with the dirt and sweat on his face. He tossed the hammer in the dirt next to the corral fence and started toward the house.

"Toby, come on bud," he called across the yard.

The boy had gone back to digging in the dirt with the stick, but huddled next to the chicken coop, trying to stay dry. Toby glanced at his father, and then back down at the ground and kept digging. The rain started to fall harder.

"Toby, let's get somethin' ta eat," Jameson yelled. He could feel the rain soaking through his shirt onto his shoulders.

Toby stopped digging and stood up. He grabbed his football off the ground and came running to Jameson.

"Can we play catch?" he asked as he trotted closer to Jameson.

"Not right now, buddy," Jameson said putting his hand on Toby's shoulder. "A big storm's rollin' in and Rose has dinner ready."

"Can we after dinner?" Toby asked.

"Well, I've got a meeting to go to in town," Jameson said. "We can tomorrow. Promise."

"Can you teach me how to throw a spiral?" Toby asked, looking up at him excited.

"Can a bird fly?" Jameson asked Toby, tousling the boy's hair. Toby looked at him quizzically.

"Yes, I can teach you how to throw a spiral," Jameson said, opening the door for Toby.
“Rose?” he called out once he was inside.

“I’m in here,” came the response from the living room. Rose was great. He had hired her a few years back, when Toby’s mother had taken off for good. The old woman kept the house clean and cooked for Toby while Jameson tried to keep the ranch running.

“Could you get Toby dinner and make sure he brushes his teeth and is in bed by 9:00?” he asked, walking into the living room.

“Of course,” Rose said, standing up straight and stretching her back. “But Mr. J, I have something for you. A letter.” Her voice was trembling a bit.

"From who?" he asked.
Rose hesitated.
"It's from Tucson," she said.

The color drained from Jameson’s face. He knew only one person in Tucson and he hadn't heard from her in over a year. His hand searched for a chair like a blind man's would, but found only the counter. Jameson leaned against it.

Rose held the letter out in front of Jameson. He stared at it for a moment, then slowly pulled the little white envelope from Rose's fingers. He carefully tore open one end of the envelope and unfolded the letter.

J—

Hi. I know I should've called but I didn't have the courage. A letter was just easier I guess. How are you? How's Toby? I'm doing good, I really am. I've cleaned up and am back on my feet. Thanks mostly to Troy, my new fiancé. He works as a loan officer at a bank and he is really a great guy. I think you'd really like him. He's a lot like you. He got me a job as a secretary at a law firm. I'm also thinking of going back to school. Troy and I were talking and I was wondering then if you would let Toby come live with me. I really miss him and I know I can care for him now, I couldn't before. I'm so grateful for all you've done for Toby. I am forever in debt to you. I don't want to fight in court over this or anything like that. I'm just asking a favor. I'm a mom who needs her son, and I bet Toby's a son who needs his mom. Please consider. You can reach me at work at 520-621-8847 or at home at 520-791-5524. Give Toby a hug from me.
With love,
Julie

“I’ve gotta get to town,” Jameson said, carefully folding up the letter and putting it back in the envelope and stuffing it in his back pocket. He patted his pants, searching for his billfold and keys. “Town meeting and the guys asked me to be there.”

He grabbed Toby by the top of his head and bent down, kissing the top of his matted blond hair. "Be good for Rose," he said, and headed out the door, letting it bang shut behind him before Rose had a chance to ask about the letter. He fired the engine of his old brown ranch pickup and slowly drove down the drive.

Jameson rolled to a stop in front of the town hall shortly after leaving his house. He was a couple minutes late but that was okay. He wouldn’t have to talk until half-way through the meeting, he guessed.

“Hey there, King James,” an old man called out to him as Jameson got out of his pickup. King James was his nickname from high school. It was printed on the front page of the Wisdom News Argus when he led Rainey High to the state football championship his senior year.

“Hey Wally,” Jameson replied. “I'm no King James no more. Jameson will do just fine.”

“Oh no it won’t. You’ll always be King James roun' here,” Wally said as he held the door open for Jameson. As soon as Jameson set foot inside the building, heads snapped around and people began to fire questions at him.

"Hey James, school board is aimin' to take our sports away and just give 'em to Wisdom. They say we don't have enough kids and we should just consolidate all sports with Wisdom!" one man yelled. "You need to march right over to them school board members' houses and tell them Rainey ain't consolidatin' nothing with Wisdom!"

“Okay, okay hold on,” Jameson said, walking up the center aisle of tables and stopping in the middle. On both sides, faces eagerly awaited what he had to say.

He cleared his throat, removed his cap, and flung it on the table. He paced back and forth with his hands jammed in his back pockets, concentrating on the white tiled floor. His boots clicked as he walked. Everybody was silent.
"You think they'll listen to me, just one man, huh?" Jameson said, chuckling and shaking his head.

"But you are you, Jameson! King James! If they're gonna listen to anybody about keepin' our sports, it'd be the biggest sports star to ever set foot in this town," blurted Tell Dilling, a man Jameson had gone to high school with.

"No, no, no! It doesn't work that way!" Jameson retorted. "They're not gonna let some has-been tell them how to do their jobs! We'd be better off if we tried to do something together as a group. Besides, maybe we should just consolidate with Wisdom if we don't have the kids to even field a team."

The men were beginning to stir. Some leaned over to the person seated next to them and whispered. Others just lowered and shook their heads.

"James, you know dang well we can't let that happen. It's matter of pride. Town pride, school pride. You don't have none of that without sports teams!" Tell rebutted.

"I care about this town and this school just as much as the next guy, but consolidatin' with Wisdom would be better than havin' no sports at all," Jameson said, growing more agitated.

"James, we come to you because people respect you roun' here. They'll listen to what you gotta say," came a voice from the back. It was Doc Shirley, a long-time farmer and much-respected citizen.

"You're the leader James. We know it, the town knows it, everybody knows it but you. You can't just be one of the crowd, cause you ain't. You know how to lead. Been doin' it since high school, firin' around that pigskin. Well James, we're your o-line, your runnin' backs, your receivers, but you're the quarterback. You gotta call the play," the old man continued.

"Shit, this ain't football! I don't wanna lead nothin'! Ain't got shit to do with me playin' football!" Jameson fired back.

"As long as you're around here, you are King James, like it or not," Doc Shirley said calmly.

Jameson didn't respond. The room was silent. They all sat and waited for a response from Jameson. He scooped his hat up off the table and walked towards the door.
"You can't care about this town and refuse to take your place in it," Doc called out as Jameson was about at the door. "If you care, you'll accept what you are to this town."

Jameson paused and placed his hand on the cold metal door. He turned his head to look at the faces staring at him, then pushed open the door and went out into the pitch black night.

The next morning, Jameson glanced over at his alarm clock. Its green numerals read 9:03. Jameson sprang out of bed. He hurriedly threw on the same pair of jeans from the day before, socks, and his boots.

"Dammit," he yelled. He had forgotten to set his alarm last night. He was usually up before it even went off at 7:00, but he had been awake until 2:00 a.m. staring at the ceiling. Wrong day to sleep in, he thought. He still needed to finish fixing the corral so he could bring some of the heifers in for vaccinations. He had to run over to Carpenter's ranch and pick up some more hay; he figured two pickup loads would be enough. And he'd almost forgotten, he needed to hook up the horse trailer and haul his red mare in to get shoed so he could ride her next week when he moved the cattle to another pasture.

He grabbed a shirt, pulled it over his head. As he turned the corner into the living room he bumped his elbow against a frame that hung on the wall, sending it tumbling to the ground. It hit face down on the floor. Jameson stopped and flipped the frame over with his foot. It was still intact, unbroken. It had been a gift from his grandfather; for that reason alone he kept it out. Through the dusty glass of the frame he saw himself being chased by defenders, clutching the football tight in his right hand. And words below the framed snapshot: "You'll always be M.V.P." He picked the frame up and set it on the bookshelf and walked to the kitchen.

Rose was up and cooking breakfast for Toby who was already outside running around. Toby was wearing his red San Francisco 49ers Jerry Rice jersey with the white number 80 on it. Jameson watched out the window as Toby dodged imaginary defenders, raised his hands in a signal for a touchdown, and spiked the football off the ground in celebration. Jameson noticed the football as it rolled to a stop on the ground; it was the game ball from one of his high school games. He couldn't remember which one.
“Mornin’,” he said to Rose. He grabbed his flannel shirt that was hanging on a kitchen chair and began buttoning it up as he headed out the door. He paused and patted the back pockets of his jeans, then pulled out the letter and handed it to Rose.

“I’m callin’ her at noon,” he said.

“Sir?” said Rose.

"Just read it. I need to go do some thinking," he said.

He started to open his mouth to explain more, but all that came out was a loud sigh. He looked down at the floor.

"It'll all be okay," he offered, then turned around and flung open the screen door, letting it slam shut behind him.

“Damn, I gotta fix the spring on that thing too, stop it from slammin’ like that,” he mumbled to himself.

As Jameson walked to the corral, Trigger ran up beside him wagging his tail.

“Hey, boy,” Jameson said, “looks like it will just be you and me roun’ here.” He thought he would keep Rose around for a couple weeks after Toby left. Give her a chance to look for a new job and tidy up the place, he thought.

“It prob’ly be best to let him go, huh, Trigger,” he said to the dog. “I got too many other things on my plate anyway.” Jameson looked down but the dog had lain down next to the pickup a few feet back. “What, not good enough for you neither?” Jameson said looking back at the dog. The dog rested his head on his front paws and just looked at Jameson.

Jameson picked up the hammer out of the dirt and grabbed his coffee can of nails that he had left on the wooden post. The nails were a bit rust-colored, but he couldn't see any water. He tipped the can upside down anyway, stopping the nails with his hand. A bit of brownish water trickled through his fingers and splattered shiny spots on his dusty black boots.

"Coulda used more than that," he said, grabbing a board off the top of the pile on the ground. He knelt down on the board and hammered a nail into it. Then, he raised the board and began nailing it to the post.

Toby would probably just be better off with his mother, he thought. Toby liked the guy who won the dusty trophies that served as bookends on the bookcase, but he was
not interested in the guy who was trying to build a ranch and be a father. Maybe he would be happier somewhere else with his mom in a city, Jameson thought, shaking his head. He smacked the hammer against the post.

He gave the nail one more whack and the board was connected on one end. He grabbed a nail and raised the other end of the board into position and started to pound in the nail. When he was finished, he put a hand against the board and lowered his head.

"I just try to live my life quietly and trouble seems to find me," he muttered.

He knelt back down and started hammering a nail into the next board. Then he froze.

"Dad," came the quiet voice from behind him. He turned around and there stood Toby. Jameson was on his knees and was at Toby's height. Jameson bit his lip as he felt a swelling begin to rise in his throat. Toby had called him dad only once or twice before, but that was when he was much littler; he hadn't said that word in a couple of years. Since he couldn't pronounce Jameson, Julie had taught Toby to call him James, not Dad.

Toby was hugging the oversized football in his arms. Without saying a word Toby reached out and handed the ball to Jameson. Jameson took the football and fixed his right hand into place on the seams, squeezing the worn leather as he looked at Toby who had begun to run out into the yard and emphatically wave his arms in the air. Jameson held the ball in his right hand and patted it with his left. He reared back and launched a perfect spiral. He watched the ball sail through the air and down to Toby. Toby stretched for the ball, but it sailed clear of his hands, hitting with a thud and creating a poof of dust in the dry dirt. Before the ball came to a stop, Toby had scooped it up and was running back towards Jameson.

The boy ran with the ball hugged against his chest. Jameson took a couple steps to meet him, snatching him up in his arms and setting him on the top board of the corral fence. Jameson didn't say anything, but Toby broke the short silence.

"Do you think you could've been as good as Joe Montana?" he asked sincerely, his eyes big and dancing.

Jameson let out a loud burst of laughter, but then looked at the honest anticipation in the boy's eyes. "I suppose anything is possible. So who knows, maybe I would've been better," Jameson said with a smile, shaking Toby playfully by the shoulders.
Toby giggled, then looked at Jameson. "I knew it, that's what I told Tommy. I says you coulda been the next Joe Montana, but he didn't believe me," Toby said rubbing the leather ball with his hands. "I'll tell him you even said so."

"You do that," Jameson said.

Toby tried to wiggle free and climb down the fence but Jameson held him firm.

"Tobe, how would ya like to go live with your mom for awhile?" Jameson asked.

"Mom? Why, does she want to see me?" he asked excited and confused.

"Matter of fact she does. She says she misses you and loves you and wants you to come live with her," Jameson said, his voice quivering a bit.

Toby seemed to ponder it for a second, then dropped the ball on the ground threw his arms around Jameson's neck and squeezed hard. "I miss her lots," he mumbled into Jameson's shirt.

"I know ya do," Jameson said.

"Do I still get to come back to visit?" Toby asked, his face sad now.

"Of course ya can, whenever you want," Jameson said, lifting Toby off the fence and setting him on the ground. But Jameson knew better. It'd be years before he'd see Toby again, if ever.

"I'm gonna tell people all 'bout you at Mom's. Gonna tell them you woulda been better than Joe Montana," Toby said excitedly. "I'm gonna go tell Rose." He started running towards the house.

"You're gonna tell Rose I coulda been better than Joe Montana?" Jameson asked jokingly.

"No, about going to Mom's," Toby yelled, running with the ball in front of him, holding it with both hands; it was too big for him to tuck under one arm. Then he skidded to a stop in the gravel and came running back toward Jameson. He almost ran into Jameson trying to come to a stop; Jameson stuck his arm out and caught him as he stumbled forward. Toby stood up straight and stuck out the football to Jameson.

"Here, you keep this," he said, cradling the ball in his forearms.

"No, I think you better have this one and take it with you so you can practice," Jameson said.
"I don't want it 'cuz it's too big for me. Plus I know how important it is to you," Toby said. "I'll ask mom to buy me one that's more my size," Toby said, then darted back towards the house, scurried up the steps and through the door.

Jameson looked at the football and rubbed his hands across the leather. He brought the ball up to his face, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath of dirty, worn leather; it smelled of old shoes.

With the ball still at his face, he peered over the laces of the ball, his eyes focusing in on the tire dangling from the rope. He brought the ball down to his side but kept his eyes fixed on the tire. It shifted slightly in the morning breeze, just across the driveway from him. He patted the ball twice, and glanced around, as if somebody might be watching. He held the ball in his right hand and swung his right arm in two big circles, one forward, and one back. He glanced around again.

A heavy gust of wind blew dust up all around him, and he buried his eyes and mouth in the crook of his elbow. He waited for the wind the die down then looked up. The tire swung in a big swooping motion from side to side, spinning in slow circles at the end up the rope.

Jameson patted the ball once more, palmed it in his left hand, and started walking. He held the ball out away from his body, his arm parallel with the ground as he walked. Without breaking stride or turning his head, he dropped the ball in the bed of his pickup. He jammed his hands deep into his pockets, and scuffed his heels in the dirt as he walked towards the corral.