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Funeral Pie

Albert crawled to the foot of his air mattress and then out through the opening of the small nylon tent he had borrowed for this most unwise adventure. He prepared to stand, patiently adjusting joints, tendons, muscles, and bones. He managed to get his feet under him at last and rose, creaking and grunting, to an awkward stoop. The cold of the night had seeped into his seventy-four-year-old body. Resting his hands on his knobby knees, he exhaled and tried to relax until he was ready to begin straightening his spine.

The sun had not yet shown its first brilliant sliver above the horizon, but its pale light had begun to wake the birds of the New Mexico desert while it signaled to the nocturnal creatures that it was time to nestle under yucca and creosote where shade would offer comfort until dusk returned once more. Albert listened closely to the natural sounds all around him, sounds he had nearly forgotten.

He recognized the familiar salt-shaker buzz of cicadas and the staccato call of a cactus wren nearby, rasping like a car that wouldn't start. It had been more than sixty years since the first time he camped on this ranch, a boy among other boys. Albert smiled, happy that he could still remember the names of the creatures he'd encountered so long ago: speckled earless lizards, Gambel's quail, black-tailed jackrabbits. But then another memory floated to the surface, and as it slowly came into focus, his smile evaporated.

A summer night in 1942, in a large canvas tent, on the very same ranch where he now stood. Albert and Heck were sound asleep when Bo startled them awake, his loud whisper suspended in the dusty air, saying something about the coyote coming back for round two. Bo rolled out of his cot and handed his heavy rifle to young Albert, pushing it at him, white teeth gleaming inside his grin in the dark. Albert pushed back, sleepy enough to stand up to the older boy just a little.

"Do it," Bo said quietly. "Be a man."

Albert listened to the plaintive voices of the sheep, calling *ma, ma*. At last he said, "But I've never killed anything. Not on purpose. I've never even held a gun before."

In his bedroom back home in Concord, Massachusetts, under the ivy-covered eaves of the stately brick house on Lowell Road, Albert had left behind his collection of empty cages, tanks, glass jars, coffee cans, and shoe boxes lined up on a low shelf. They were the former homes of the small creatures he liked to capture and observe. Before leaving home for the summer, he released them all. The thin black garter snake had been let go in the back garden, along with the fireflies and a beautiful Sphinx moth, and the tadpoles were dumped back into Bateman's Pond where they belonged. Albert felt a small sting of remorse when he remembered the tiny brown field mouse that died only days after its capture. He had gently wrapped it in a handkerchief and buried it in a corner of the yard.

"Hold it like this, aim, and pull the trigger. That's all there is to it. You'll be a hero." Bo leaned in closer, breathing into Albert's face and pressing the boy's quivering fingers around the gun.

Heck sat up on his cot rubbing his eyes, but he said nothing. Albert looked at him, and even in the faint moonlight, he saw that he was ashamed for not speaking up for his friend against his brother.

Albert squirmed away from Bo and onto the dirt floor of the tent. He sat cross-legged, balancing the stock of the rifle on one knee and the barrel on the other, breathing hard as he weighed his options carefully. For a moment, the sheep were still, and the only sound was the scrape of crickets' wings.

Now a grating, metallic sound, a long zipper, pulled Albert back to the present and told him that his companion was also awake. In the half-light he turned his head. He watched Harold Whitaker, known to his friends as Heck, emerge from his low, one-man tent. A shock of white hair appeared first, followed by folds of the woolen blanket still wrapped around his bulky shoulders. Albert thought of a monarch butterfly he had once seen struggling out of its pale chrysalis, damp and crumpled. When Heck stood, he stretched his arms wide, spreading the blanket out like wings to complete the picture.

"The fire out?" Heck let his blanket fall to the ground. He lumbered over to the fire pit and kicked at the end of a charred log with his heavy

boot. It rolled off the blackened pile of spent firewood, sending up a puff of white ash and a handful of orange sparks. He grinned back at Albert. "Not quite."

Albert watched him move off toward a clump of young piñón trees nearby, rocking his big body from side to side as he walked. Even without his glasses, Albert could make out the form of his friend, briefly motionless as he emptied his bladder, then bowing and rising, bowing and rising, as he collected twigs for kindling. Heck moved painlessly, it seemed to Albert, who had finally managed to ease his body upright. His own bladder demanded relief, but in order to walk a few steps away from the campsite to act on the urge, he would first have to make a choice: fold up his body again to crawl back into the tent for his shoes, or endure a shoeless walk over the stony ground, where thorny goatheads lay in wait to prick his feet made tender by a lifetime of city living. Albert stood in his stocking feet, dreading both options.

It had been less than twenty-four hours since Albert left Boston and the quiet life of a retired academic, and boarded a plane bound for Albuquerque. His teaching career in the Conservation Biology department at Tufts had lasted forty years, and he still lived in the small, elegant apartment where he had lived with his wife Nancy. With her exquisite taste and artistic eye, she had selected beautiful furnishings and arranged everything to charm and fascinate anyone who entered. Albert hadn't changed a single thing in the four years since her death.

Heck, his closest childhood friend, had surprised him with a phone call inviting him to visit the Whitaker family ranch near the town of Moriarty, New Mexico. Heck and his brother Bo had inherited the place from their father many years before. Albert was glad to trade the dreary October weather of New England for a few days of bright sunshine in the desert.

While being invited to the ranch had been a surprise, being invited to New Mexico was not. This was an annual trip. Each year, usually around the winter holidays, Heck met Albert at the airport in Albuquerque and they would spend a long weekend together. When they were younger men, they would drive out of town and camp along the banks of the San Juan River for some fly fishing or hike down into Frijoles Canyon to see the Indian ruins. But as the years passed, and their bodies aged, Heck tailored their plans to include less athletic pursuits. There had been a decline in

Albert's health, especially since his beloved Nancy's death. Heck himself had never married. Albert would have been happy enough staying in Albuquerque, two old men wandering the city's museums and bookstores, but Heck enjoyed escapades of grander proportions.

The previous winter, the two old friends had played golf at Heck's exclusive club, bet on a few horses at the track, and then tried their luck at the blackjack table. Although everything Heck planned seemed an adventure to Albert, camping on the ranch at this point in their lives was surely a little ridiculous, wasn't it? He had wondered about this the day before the trip as he folded his windbreaker into his duffel bag. And why now, two months before Heck's usual invitation? Why not meet in the winter as they had always done? Albert loved the outdoors and would never insult his host, but he thought about asking his friend what had prompted him to suggest such a challenging and possibly foolish undertaking. He even considered declining the invitation. But now that he was here, with the desert coming to life around him, Albert was glad he had come after all.

"Ready for some of my famous coffee?" asked Heck, after he breathed life into his cooking fire. He crouched and banged around in his gear until he found what he was looking for. "Remember this?" Albert's glasses were on now, as were his shoes, so he ambled over for a closer look. Heck was holding up a battered aluminum coffee pot.

"Is that...? No. You don't still have that?" Albert laughed.

"It's the only thing I kept out of the old sheep wagon. Too bad Bo isn't here to fix us a raisin pie for breakfast."

It had been many years since Albert tasted raisin pie, or funeral pie as his Pennsylvania Dutch ancestors called it. It was an old tradition, bringing the sweet, sticky pie to a neighbor after a death in the family. A cure for grief, because no one could feel sad eating something so sweet. Bo often made raisin pie during that long-ago summer when Albert and two other Middlesex School boys came to work on the ranch, because the ingredients were handy in the chuckwagon.

Mr. Whitaker hired Albert and the other boys to help his sons, Bo and Heck, herd sheep on the ranch after most of his herders left in 1942 to fight in the war. He owned three hundred ewes and more than eight thousand acres near the town of Moriarty. Before the war, Mr. Whitaker, a wealthy and educated man, had sent his two young sons to Middlesex, a boys'

boarding school near Boston. Bo was gregarious and a natural athlete, and he made friends there quickly, navigating among the privileged city boys as if he were one of them. Heck had a more difficult time fitting in, and he struggled to keep up with the demanding curriculum. Albert, his classmate, was assigned to tutor him in biology. They spent many afternoons at the edge of Bateman's Pond behind the school, where Albert showed him how to sweep his dipping net in a slow figure eight through the water to collect specimens to examine, and then carefully return all the creatures to their habitat. They shared a deep appreciation for the natural world, and from that a close, lifelong friendship grew.

"Bo's pies were the worst. Once I watched him making one with filthy hands, working and working the pastry until his hands were nearly clean, and then I understood why the crusts were so hard and gray." Albert grimaced and chuckled. "After that I was only too happy to offer my share to that old man who used to wander into camp begging for scraps of food."

Heck placed the coffee pot on a rack over the fire. His hand shook a little. "Abuelo," he said after a pause.

"Yes, that's right. Grandpa. We never knew his real name, did we? He was probably considerably younger than we are now, but I guess everyone seems old when you're a kid. Didn't Bo give him an old pie tin to use as a plate? He carried it everywhere, like his prized possession."

A picture of the man was forming in Albert's mind: his thin brown wrists showing below the ends of his tattered sleeves, his black eyes shining from under his sun-bleached hat as he stood apart, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, watching the boys eat their supper. One of them always gave him something to eat, placing it in the pie tin he held out to them. He responded with a nearly toothless smile and a quiet *Gracias* before shuffling back down the trail and into the wide-open desert. Then after they went to bed each night, Abuelo would return to edge around the chuck wagon, stooped and limping slightly. With animal quickness, he would snatch an apple, a biscuit, or some leftover funeral pie and carry it off in his dented dish. He never took much, and Mr. Whitaker sent fresh supplies every week from the ranch house a few miles away, so the boys accepted the arrangement.

Until that summer of cooking over an open fire, sleeping under the stars, and herding sheep, young Albert's days had been filled with the

sort of upper-class family rituals a child finds tedious: sitting up straight, minding his manners, speaking when spoken to, and dressing for dinner.

“Albert,” his father would growl at him from his high-backed chair at the head of the dinner table each evening. He pronounced his son’s name like the French, Ahl-BEAR, which Albert hated. “Your stockings look like a spiral staircase.”

In response, the boy would bend over obediently to untwist his ribbed knee-socks below the cuffs of his knickers and slide into his chair at the table across from his mother. Placed precisely on the linen tablecloth were china and silver, a tiny crystal finger bowl at each place looking like a doll’s portion of watery soup, a slice of lemon floating on the surface.

The three ate in silence. After the plates had been removed to the kitchen by the cook, Edith, in her starched white apron, the silver coffee service was brought in on a tray. Then Albert was excused, and he could hear his parents begin a quiet conversation as he hurried outdoors or up to his room, where his books and his wild creatures waited for him. Since finishing elementary school, it was only when he was home at Christmastime and during the summer recess from Middlesex that Albert had to endure family dinners. To Albert, the smell of coffee was ever afterwards a sign of impending release.

But for one glorious summer, three months of dust, heat, and freedom, Albert herded sheep. On the ranch, he imagined himself to be Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett wandering the frontier on horseback, or he could be Meriwether Lewis or William Clark crossing the continent with a rugged party of explorers. A faithful listener to radio programs like *The Lone Ranger* and *Tom Mix Ralston Straight Shooters*, he longed to be a tough outdoorsman, a mountain man. But Albert was a scholar at heart. Try as he might to be a trail-blazing legend out there on Mr. Whitaker’s ranch, he was still a bookish teenager. He more closely resembled John James Audubon as he stumbled over the dry ground in his lace-up oxfords, filling his notebook with sketches and descriptions of the flora and fauna he saw through his thick eyeglasses and a pair of cheap binoculars: spleenwort, spikemoss, pigweed, javelina, and coyote. And like Audubon, young Albert learned to fire a rifle.

That summer he also learned to tend sheep. His task each morning was to release his flock from the pen and lead them over the two and a half

miles of scrub pine and sage, to water. Each of the boys was responsible for one flock of ewes and their lambs. The trick was to keep the flocks apart, taking turns at the well. Because if the groups mixed, Albert was told, it would be impossible to separate them again without inadvertently separating some mothers from their young. Then they would become one enormous flock that would be more difficult to manage.

All five flocks had to be watered and returned to their pens before the hottest part of the day. If the boys walked too slowly or got up too late, the sheep would lie down along the trail, stubbornly chewing their cud in the heat.

Then came that awful night near the end of the summer, which became Albert's last night in the tent, when he sat on the ground in the moonlight with the rifle across his lap, the chirp of crickets as shrill as sirens filling his head, Bo bullying him to take a shot at the coyote prowling around the sheep pens, and Heck sitting silently on his cot in the corner. Two cots stood empty. The other boys, the ones who had found the mangled body of the lamb the morning after the first coyote attack, were so shaken that they had begged to spend the remaining nights at the ranch house a few miles from camp. Their flocks of sheep were left to be tended by the three remaining boys.

At last, with his mind made up, Albert lay on his belly in the dark, propped up on his bony elbows, and poked the tip of the long gun out between the flaps of the tent. He couldn't see well without his glasses, but he didn't need to see. He didn't want to see. He wasn't planning to aim at anything. He would just fire and claim he missed. Bo had missed the night before, hadn't he? There was no real shame in missing, but he knew there would be shame in refusing to fire.

He could just make out a dark shape slinking low to the ground outside the nearest sheep pen. A nervous lamb called out, a sound like a human child crying for its mother. Trembling, shivering, Albert nosed the barrel a bit to the left of his target, praying that Bo would believe him later when he insisted that missing the coyote was purely an accident. He closed his eyes and squeezed the trigger. It didn't move as easily as he imagined it would. The knuckle of his index finger ached as he curled it back. The steel bit into his flesh. And then the gun fired. The butt slammed into his shoulder. The pain was sharper than any he had felt in his life, and for a moment

he thought he had shot himself. His ears were ringing from the explosion. Then as if through cotton stuffing, he heard Bo's high-pitched laughter as he pushed aside the canvas flaps and ran out into the night.

"You got the son of a bitch!" said Heck, starting after his brother. "Come on!"

Albert lay stunned and gaping inside the tent. He had no desire to see for himself the poor coyote, bloody and twitching in the dust as he imagined it would be, tongue lolling and eyes full of fear and resignation. A wave of nausea flooded over him and swept him outdoors. He ran from the tent, away from the bleating of the startled sheep, away from the unwanted praise that was sure to follow for a deed well done, away from the shouting silhouettes of the brothers, Heck and Bo, with the beams from their flashlights bouncing as they rushed toward the pens.

Albert heaved and retched and then ran some more, until the sounds from camp became faint. He collapsed onto the ground and rested his damp forehead on his arm, weeping. At last, he found his feet again and followed the well-worn track leading to the safety of the ranch house to join the other boys who had found refuge there the night before.

"If this doesn't put hair on your chest, I don't know what will." Heck's voice brought Albert back to the campfire, back to the pungent smell of coffee that warned him that this primitive brew might take the enamel off the old steel mug, not to mention the lining off his throat and stomach. His friend passed him a steaming cup of thick, dark liquid and smiled.

Albert took a sip, aware of feeling slightly unsettled. There was something about Heck's cheerful smile that seemed a bit forced, as if he were wearing a pleasant mask. Ever since the long drive from the airport to the ranch the day before, cruising along the highway in Heck's new pickup truck, Albert had been pushing away the uneasy feeling that something wasn't right. He couldn't put his finger on it exactly. Heck was quieter than usual, and he hadn't laughed much either. Now as he watched his friend drink his coffee and look off into the distance, Albert studied his face and his manner.

"Something on your mind?" Albert asked. "You don't seem like yourself."

Heck walked a few feet away and stood watching something. After a moment, Albert saw that it was a tiny gecko positioning itself on a flat rock to catch the first warm ribbons of sunlight as they unfurled across the

landscape. Albert came closer and squatted down, peering at it, until with a flick of its tail it disappeared.

“Bo’s dying, Cancer’s everywhere.” Heck told his friend of his brother’s recent diagnosis and failed treatments. “Doctor says he’s got three months, tops.”

Albert put his arm around Heck’s shoulders. “There’s nothing they can do?”

Heck shook his head. “It’s been no picnic having him as a brother, you know. He made my life a living hell when we were growing up. I was scared of him, but I idolized him, too. It seemed like he had all the answers and I was just a dumb kid, but he was pretty brainless in those days, too. He did some really stupid stuff. After he moved out of the house, we rarely saw each other. I avoided him, truth be told.”

“I remember you said he got into some trouble after high school.”

“He had a run-in or two with the Moriarty police. Nothing serious to hear him tell about it. But he did a bit of time.” Heck took a deep swallow of his coffee and flung the dregs into the brush. “And there’s something else.” After a long pause, he turned and looked at Albert. “I need to show you something.”

Albert set his mug down near the fire and followed Heck along a short trail, past the old sheep pens which were nothing more now than a few weathered posts and a tangle of barbed wire. The trail petered out, but Heck kept walking, puffs of dust rising around his feet with every step. Albert, nearly jogging to keep up, was breathing hard.

“Is it much further?” he asked, pressing his hand to his chest. Sweat ran down his temples. Heck didn’t answer; perhaps he hadn’t heard.

The sun was fully up now, its rays baking the earth. Cicadas whined in the fragrant creosote bushes that snapped and creaked in the heat as the two old men hiked past, descending into an arroyo. Heck turned right and followed the dry wash to a clump of palo verde trees where he paused in the thin shade and waited for Albert to catch up. The two stood without talking for several minutes, Albert breathing hard and Heck with both fists jammed into the pockets of his jeans.

“Remember the night the coyote took one of the lambs?” Heck said at last. “That summer during the war when you came out here to help on the ranch? We were all too scared to do anything.”

“Except Bo,” Albert panted.

“Sit for a minute and catch your breath.” Heck motioned toward a low, flat rock and then unsnapped a small canteen from his belt and handed it to his friend.

Albert sat. He unscrewed the cap and took a long grateful drink, swallow after swallow. He slipped off his left shoe and sock, rubbing a hot red spot on the back of his heel. “Bo took his best shot at that coyote.”

“He always took such pleasure in hunting and killing.” The muscles in Heck’s jaw were flexing. “But he missed his target that night, and the damn coyote killed that lamb. The sound of the gun must have scared it off, because it left the carcass near the pens where we found it the next morning, with four big fang punctures in its throat. Remember? And its belly ripped open.”

“I wish I could forget.”

Heck drew the back of his hand across his sweaty forehead. Albert held the canteen out to him, but he shook his head and continued talking.

“And the next night, when it was just us three, it came back for more. You were sound asleep, but I woke up because the sheep were nervous and making a racket. I knew Bo was awake, too, and I saw him go for his gun. Then I closed my eyes and pretended to be sleeping. I had a bad feeling that he didn’t want to risk the humiliation of missing a second time, and that he might make one of us give it a try. Better to lose another lamb than lose face, was the way he saw things back then.”

“He gave the gun to me. He made me shoot it.” Albert leaned forward, cradling his shoe in his lap. The drink of water and the bit of shade had helped Albert recover somewhat, but his stomach lurched now as he recalled the incident. Even after he had returned to his dormitory at Middlesex the following fall, the memory of that night still clung to Albert, like a bad smell that lingers inside your nose long after the source is gone. The knowledge that through his own actions, taken to avoid the shame of being called a coward, he had fired a rifle and killed an animal. It remained the one and only time he fired a gun, the one and only time he killed a living creature. For him, the violence of the act outweighed the knowledge that it was unintentional. This was the boy who refused to collect butterflies for biology class because he couldn’t bear to watch them die in the killing jar and pin their delicate torsos to a board. This was the boy who had pulled the trigger.

“And because of this cancer thing, well, Bo is seeing a lot of things differently now. I wanted to tell you right away, that very night, and tell our parents, too, but Bo made me promise not to. He swore he’d beat the shit out of me.” The story was coming out in a rush now, the floodgates were opened. “As the years went by, I wasn’t so much afraid that Bo would carry out his threat, but I was sure he would go to jail. He had a police record. They would have locked him up for what he did out here that night, for his part of it anyway. It was his gun, after all, and he was eighteen, legally an adult. He knew the blame would have fallen on him.”

“Blame for what? Killing a coyote? What are you talking about?” There was a pounding in Albert’s ears and his hands were clammy. Something about the tone of Heck’s voice was making him uncomfortable.

Heck continued as if Albert hadn’t spoken. “So, I’ve been protecting him all these years, but I guess we were both protecting you, too. I just pushed it down deep and pretended it didn’t happen.”

The more Heck talked, the more confused and alarmed Albert became. He was no longer sweating, but his damp shirt against his back felt cold and suddenly heavy.

“So, two weeks ago, Bo calls me and says I should go ahead and tell. He knows his time is about up, and he doesn’t want to take this to his grave. I’ll be glad to get it off my chest at last, too. We won’t be around forever either, you and me. It’s your story, really. Your secret. One you don’t know anything about. Besides, I thought we could try to make it right. We can report what happened. That’s why I dragged you out here. To tell you. To show you.”

Heck slowly turned his head, taking in the bare, flat earth and the distant sandy hills standing like movie set cut-outs, crisp against the hard, blue sky. “After you fired the rifle and ran away, back to the ranch house, Bo and I went out to the sheep pen. When we saw what happened, we were so scared we couldn’t think straight. Everything we did that night was wrong. Stupid, stupid kids,” he shouted, beating his clenched fist against his temple, and then he let his arm drop to his side. “It wasn’t a coyote you killed, Al.” His voice was quiet now. “It was the old man. It was Abuelo.”

“No! That’s impossible, I—”

“Me and Bo buried him right over there.”

Albert stood, legs trembling, and looked where his friend was pointing. At first, he saw nothing unusual. His frantic glance skimmed back and forth across the terrain toward the horizon: rocks, scruffy bushes and small trees, more rocks. He strained to see what Heck was pointing at. At last his eyes stopped at a mound of stones about a hundred yards away. He would have missed it if he hadn't been looking for it, looking for a place where something had been buried long ago.

He stumbled toward the rock pile; the sole of his shoeless left foot was scorched and pricked with every step. From somewhere inside the hum of insects around him came the faint bleating of nervous sheep, the pop of a gun, and the shouts of boys running out into the night. He thought of their bobbing flashlights seeking out the dark shape on the ground. Bile rose from his stomach, burning his throat as he reached the burial mound. The scent of his own sweat assaulted him, sour and strong. A sob filled his chest, strangling him as he stood looking down at the only marker on the grave: a smooth white stone the size of a softball placed carefully in a rusty pie tin.