

Only God knows what a man lives with in his heart that he won't tell his family, his friends, or himself, but that haunts his very soul. Anyone who knows him can guess it, for it's the thing men are born with that keeps them from crying alone in the world.

## **THE CUT OF PRIDE**

BY

JAMES A. MISKO

When the sheriff turned his key in the lock I woke up and looked at the opening door.

"You can go," he said.

It took me a minute to loosen the kinks of sleeping on the jail cot, something I was certainly not used to. I had slept on various kinds of bedding since leaving the security of a paycheck with room and board at the motel in Seaside, but nothing as uncomfortable as this place.

At the front desk the deputy handed me my pack. It was dirty, the pockets open and my ID tag broken. It had been searched and that was okay. There wasn't anything in there that would scare anybody. Clothes, some dried fruit, jerky, and a couple of apples I had picked off trees as I left the valley.

"Don't change directions when you leave town," the sheriff said.

I nodded and threw a pack strap over my shoulder. It looked like a good clear day on the Oregon coast. That was a rarity.

“What’s the shortest way out of this burg?” I said.

He jerked his thumb at the mountains rising on the eastern edge of town.

“Up over those, huh?”

“Yep,” he said. “Highway goes through. You ought to be able to find your way.”

“Where’s the highway go?”

“Willamette valley, Eugene, Salem, Roseburg—wherever. Just get outta here.”

Outside I checked my wallet. Five hundred dollars left. I must have high graded the wine and steaks with that pretty assistant manager at my last stop. I thought I left Seaside with \$800. Technically I wasn’t a vagrant, but I could see the sheriff’s point. Sitting on a curb, pack on my back, long hair, beard, I could have been wanted for something somewhere. He just needed time to check me out and I had no fear he would find anything. After all—it was 1955 and some of the Korean War vets were raising hell but I wasn’t among them.

I checked my notebook. It was where I recorded thoughts and ideas and impressions of places and people. That was what writers were supposed to do. I’d learned it in college from a poetry professor who thought someday I might write decent fiction. I didn’t know how many things I needed to record before I could start writing from the notebook. Most of my early stories and articles came fresh from an experience that I hadn’t had time to record.

Normally I worked my way stopping here and there to gather writing material, make a few bucks, met new people. I was heading back to graduate school to get some more writing classes. The work in Seaside ran out when the summer season ended.

I was friendly with mountains. I liked everything about them except the poison oak at the lower elevations in Oregon and California. If the highway went through the mountains to the valley there would be game trails, foot trails and logging roads that would lead the same way. I decided to hoof it over the mountains. I could head northwest from Bandon, come close to Coquille and connect with the highway there. I had a month before college opened.

Down the street half a block was a Mom and Pop store. I picked up a half pound of raisins, three apples, some beef jerky, and a sack of M&M's and then left the main street and walked into the coastal range that smelled of early fall, leaves on the hardwoods just beginning to blush, the hint of moisture in the air from the early morning fog and patches of clouds. I thought I smelled mushrooms but didn't take the time to look for them.

Imprinted in the mud overhung by fern fronds was a fresh elk hoof print. The tracks drifted uphill at a good angle and showed signs of four animals; their hoof prints left a clean impression in the damp soil.

The uphill slogging was heavy work. Sweat beaded on my brow and trickled down beside my eyes. Hiking up mountains was not something I had done all summer at the motel. Several times I stopped and peeled off first my jacket, then my sweatshirt, ending up in my tank top with OREGON blazed across the front.

By late afternoon I was almost to the crest when the trail spilled into a natural amphitheatre carpeted with ferns, a small round basin maybe twenty yards across in the middle of which was a small spring oozing the most delicious water I had tasted in six months. I bedded down there. I gathered dead branches from beneath the drip line of the firs, shaved some starter chips and coaxed a decent fire that released straight smoke tendrils into the gathering darkness. While the tea water heated I broke and piled dead wood to feed it through the night. Compared to the city jail this was a five star motel.

Just after dawn, which was coming later each day as fall crept in, I breakfasted on spring water, jerky and an apple, then shouldered my pack and followed a game trail to the top. It led through heavy vegetation and old growth firs that had probably been there when Lewis and Clark wintered over on the coast. It was getting lighter and I could see patches of blue sky through the thinning tree branches straight ahead. I was cresting the pass and in ten steps the landscape changed.

Like opening a curtain on a window I could see in all directions the silent charred destruction of an old forest fire. I paused to look at the mute testimony to a searing fire that had at one time wiped the side hills clean of life. There was no wind. I could hear nothing.

I started through the burn. The tops of young fir trees seeded by squirrels and birds were now ten feet tall. It was like walking on foam going through the green grass and springy undergrowth that takes over after a fire. It had been logged and charred stumps of cedar and oak and fir stood like blackened soldiers guarding the landscape.

Two thirds of the way through the burn the trail passed beside a fir stump that loggers call a barber chair. I tugged off my pack and sat on it.

It was peaceful. If there was a way to make a living trouncing through the mountains I would opt for that. Lonely though. You'd have to come to town every so often to get stuff and talk to some people. The summer I had spent on the forest service lookout had been like that. Days with just me and my dog then a one day trip to town, shop, get back and suck in the solitude.

I drank water and let my eyes get used to the distance.

Far below me was a sturdy barn tucked into the crotch of two ridges, painted brick red. Below and to the right squatted a one story farmhouse with a sag in the roof sided with plain lumber and a front porch held up by four posts. Off to the left there was a pile of peeler-core firewood. It was in a heap beside a dirt road. The road had been cut into the side of the hill and crawled up to a three story skeleton of a house gray and austere.

The house was set like a monument on a level piece of ground overlooking the entire Coquille River valley. A brick chimney rose up three stories and stuck out of a rusty tin roof that was steep enough to fend off rain and snow. Plywood covered the windows. The two doors that I could see were open. Below and to the right was a cobbled up shed and the shiny top of an Airstream trailer reflecting the sunlight.

A movement caught my eye. It was a dog walking from a shed behind the woodpile down the dirt driveway toward the farmhouse. The dog limped, taking cautious steps until he slowed to a stop at the edge of the driveway and sat down. Then he tilted back his head and let the front legs slide forward until his body rested on his stomach. He surveyed the driveway before settling his head on his paws. Occasionally he raised his head and looked from side to side.

Behind the dog and the house was a pile of tin cans that reflected the sun from their weathered surface like mirrors. There was an outhouse, and to the left behind it, a stack of wire pens that looked like discarded rabbit hutches. A large area had been

leveled out and graded to drain downhill toward the river. It was fenced and held ten long metal-roofed sheds positioned parallel and looking like some sort of military barracks.

My eyes watered from the glare off the roofs and I lay back and rested. I breathed in the cool coastal air and wondered how far I had come since morning. Sometimes I could get thirty to fifty miles in a day if I pushed it. Hadn't done that all summer; probably hadn't come more than six miles. The dog barked and I sat up.

A pickup truck drove up the driveway, stopped and backed up to the low shed across from the house. The driver emerged and dropped the tailgate. He unloaded three calves into a corral. A woman came out of the house and shouted, "How many?" Every word amplified as it drifted up the hillside clear in the damp morning air.

"Three," the driver said. He lifted up the tailgate on his pickup and reached over to pat the dog.

The woman turned and went back into the house to emerge in seconds and gave the man something. He nodded his head, folded it and put it in his pocket. Then he doffed his hat, climbed in his truck, closed the door and spun his tires in the soft mud.

The woman returned to the house. The dog went through the process of sitting, stretching out his legs and resting his head on his paws. Quietness enveloped the place, and swallowed everything that had happened.

The calves started milling around in the small corral and bawling. I could tell from the sounds they were new-born.

Little threads of steam rose from my thighs and arms as the sun dried my clothes. The river out beyond the house was flowing high and muddy with debris from the recent flood caught in the low tree branches along the banks. Tops of fence posts outlined the near fields where they stuck above the water.

I stretched out my leg and grunted into a kneeling position. I felt a kink in my back tighten up and then recede. I used to be good at sleeping on the ground. Maybe I'd lost the knack. I got up, hitched up my pack and followed a cow trail down toward the house.

The dog barked.

As I passed by the house I could see people looking at me through the window. The woman who had dealt with the man for the calves walked out through the rough lumber door. A gust of heat from the house followed her out and touched my face with the odor of frying meat and potatoes and fir pitch burning and the close smell of people together with old clothes and tobacco.

“What do you want?” she said. Her head was cocked and her straight hay-colored hair, which looked home cut, hung from the part. Dressed in gray sweats and black rubber boots, she looked as stern as a battleship.

“Wondered where I was.”

“You a convict or something?” She crossed her arms in front of her chest.

“No,” I said. “Get many of those around?”

“Enough to make it worth questioning.”

“I’m on my way to Eugene. Came over the mountains instead of taking the road.”

“Looking for work?”

I shook my head. “No. I’m headed back to the University.

She smiled. “I need a hand. Why don’t you stop here for awhile?”

“If you’ll just tell me where I am, I’ll find my way to the highway sooner or later.”

“Well—you’re on River Branch Road out of Coquille, Oregon in the United States of America. Now put your stuff in that trailer and come on down for dinner. We can always set another place. It’s what we do around here. Feed things.”

“I’ve just left a whole summer of working. Not wanting to do that right now.”

She looked straight at me. “I don’t want you if you can’t take responsibility and if you can’t learn you’re no good to me. I got another guy working for me and he can’t learn. My old man’s not much better and I’m in a hell of a fix. I’ve got two cripple boys in there and nobody to take care of them. I can’t be both places at once. I need someone like you to help with the mink.”

“Mrs...”

“Helner. Rose Helner.”

“I just need to keep moving toward Eugene. I’ve got fall classes to enroll in and things I need to do before that happens.”

“What can you do?”

“Do? Well most anything,” I said.

“Huh,” she snorted. “Last fella said that I fired him in a week. Said he could do anything and I caught him fixing the wiring on one of the mink sheds all wrong and he admitted it. Said maybe he just thought he could do anything.”

“Well—I wouldn’t try something I know I couldn’t do, but there isn’t much man invented that a man can’t figure out if he uses his head,” I said.

“That’s right. Can’t isn’t in my dictionary—is it in yours?”

I twisted my head and smiled. “No. Impossible is though.”

“Impossible is in everybody’s book.” She looked me over with intent gray eyes and a smile formed on her face. “You look sturdy enough to do the work. Ever worked on a mink ranch?”

“No. And I don’t intend to.” I slipped an arm through my pack strap.

“Start this afternoon. First month is \$200 with room and board.”

I chuckled. “Do you ever take no for an answer?”

“Haven’t lately.”

“Well—sorry to disappoint you but I need to be moving on. I take it that road at the end of the driveway heads somewhere.”

“Turn left and it goes to Coquille. Turn right and it goes to Seven Devils Road.”

“Thanks. Been nice talking to you.”

“Wish you’d stay. I sure need help and you look like you could do a good job of it. Just try it for a week and see if you don’t like it. School will still be there this winter. If you’d stay it would give me time to find another man and you could leave then.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. Goodbye, Mrs. Helner.”

I turned left at the road and had walked about a quarter mile when I heard a horn beeping behind me. I pulled off the road to let them by. The car stopped beside me. Rose Helner leaned out of the window, her hair fluffing in the wind.

“What’s your name?” she said.

“Jeff. Jeff Baker.” I kept walking.

She idled the Buick along side me. “Jeff. Come to work for me. I need a man and you remind me so much of what my son’s would have been. I know we’ll get along fine.”

I shook my head. “Mrs. Helner, I’m headed for the University.”

“Just give it a couple of months. I need help now.”

“I’d like to accommodate you but I can’t keep putting things in the way of my life.”

“You’re young. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you. Just give me a month or two.” She stopped the car and I turned to face her. “What so important about that school that it can’t wait two months?”

“Look. I’m twenty-four. I’ve got enough money for school. I’m going to be a writer and I’m going to school now. Thank you for your confidence but the answer is no.”

“I like a person with goals. Got those myself.” She sat in the idle car and I walked on.

Half a mile down the road I caught a ride with a logging truck into Coquille. He dropped me off at a Laundromat near the sawmill that had a public telephone. I called Dave in Eugene to tell him I was on my way.

“Better bring plenty of money,” Dave said.

“And that means what?”

“Tuition has just gone up to \$800.”

I dug out my wallet and counted my money. “I’ve only got \$500.”

“You’ll need to find some work then. How long you going to be getting here?”

“Depends on if I keep walking, hitchhike or buy a bus ticket.”

“I’d hustle up here if I were you and see what you can find for extra work.”

“I’ll think on that. See you soon, my dime is running out.”

With tuition at \$800 I was short and behind at the starting gate. I was going to be in debt all year even if they would let me start without paying full tuition. At the A&W Root Beer drive-in I bought a burger, shake, and fries and sat on one of their outside benches that had lovers initials carved in the seat and table.

I could probably find work; I always had, but clearing \$300 during the semester was going to be hard on part time work. The Korean War Vets were hustling and getting the good jobs. They were getting the girls too. Apparently young women could listen to war stories for hours in the backseat of a car.

A heavy gray cloud bank drifted over the sun. That was enough sun for an Oregon day and it looked like rain coming in from the coast where it always came from. The rain was either with or followed by the wind, daring you to stay dry and warm. I put the rain cover on my pack, dug out my poncho and hat and started out.

All I could hear was the rain driving down on the roof and my poncho as I stood outside the window. Mrs. Helner recognized me and opened the door.

“Come on to the porch out of that rain,” she said. “I hoped you’d come back.”

“How long do you need me?” I said.

“As long as you’ll stay.”

“Four months okay with you? Can you find someone by then?”

“Always have.”

“And the pay again?”

“\$200.”

“Plus board and room?”

“Plus board and room.”

“After that?”

“It’s up to you.”

“What’s the highest you’ll pay?”

She cocked her head. A smile formed on her face tracing lines that I hadn’t seen there before. “I don’t know. No one’s ever gone that far.” She sucked in her cheeks.

I smiled. “I will.” I stuck my hand out from under the poncho and she shook it.

“You’re all wet,” she said.

“That I am.”

She kept her smile and her gray eyes softened. “Stow your gear in the trailer house there and come have a bite to eat.”

I stashed my pack inside and sat on the bed. The place smelled musty and damp. On the window ledge were old cigarette butts, shrunken and brown stained with age.

The trailer had a wood burning stove for warmth, a sink, cupboards, a bed, a small mirror and an Esquire calendar. It was dirty and unkempt like the rest of the place. I turned on the cold water, dashed it on my face, combed my hair and walked over to the house.

The knob was fastened to the door with a piece of wire. I pushed it open and looked into a tableful of upturned faces. I saw half a dozen red-haired kids, a man of about forty years, a heavy-set woman next to him, the woman who hired me, a round-shouldered man of about fifty with gray hair curling around his temples, and a young man in a wheel chair with a wide-eyed expression that looked more past me than at me and who responded to my greeting with a half smile and exaggerated motions.

“What’d you say your name was?” the woman said.

“Jeff Baker,” I replied. The heat was oppressive.

“This is Ralph and Olive Johnson and their kids, this is Paul and West and that guy in there,” indicating a white emaciated figure, “is Ronny.” He appeared to be about thirty. He had a white patch pasted over his left eye and lay sprawled on the davenport in the next room.

“Glad to meet you,” I said, trying to pass the few words around to them all. A vapor rose from a tin can on the back of the stove that smelled like tar and kerosene and pine pitch and burning nettles.

“Sit down there,” she said, indicating a chair just vacated by the man she had called West. I sat down and watched the old man walk away from the house. The rain had stopped and he had put on a sweatshirt to go with his coveralls, both of which looked to have been worn for a year or more without change.

“That’s my old man,” she said.

I smiled and felt uneasy being the only non-eating person at the table.

“We’re like pigs here, mister, just fill your own plate and get to eating.”

The woman called Olive handed me a plate and I took my first conscious breath since coming into the house. The heat made me listless. I longed to be eating from my pack out in the open air but I took the plate and scooped a little of the food on to it.

The milk was raw and unpasteurized and warm and it felt slick as I drank it, the lumps of cream sliding off the back of my tongue.

Paul, the son sitting at the table in a wheelchair, was about twenty-five and disabled. His eyes looked blind. He seldom blinked and retained that wide-eyed frantic expression all the time. When he let his head come forward and looked down it was with that sullen passiveness that blind people sometimes affect that looks like meditation. He ate with his hands and drank milk from a quart jar which he drained in one long drink, broken only by sounds from his lips and throat which ended with deep gasps for breath.

My skin crawled from the searching heat and the smell of house dust and fat meat frying and warm milk. My stomach wanted to turn over. I ate little and talked less. They wanted to know where I came from and how I happened to be coming over the hill instead of by the road and why I was walking and about my whiskers. Dinner was over none too soon. My mental facilities gained control out in the cool, damp air coming in from the coast.

Back at the trailer I pulled out my notebook and sat with pen in hand looking out the dirty window onto the driveway. The dog was looking up at the window and when I smiled at him he wagged his tail. I opened the door and he came over and stuck his nose into my hands. He was probably half Collie and half Australian Sheppard. We cemented our relationship right then and there. Then I did two things. I took a rag from the closet and washed the window inside and out and took my notebook and sat on the bed with the trailer door open while I pet the dog with one hand and wrote with the other.

*Walked over Coast Range for two days after night in jail at Bandon. Stumbled onto a mink ranch out in the boonies. The owner, Rose Helner, gave me a job. I took it because I'm awful short of money. I didn't ration my summer's earnings well. Now here it is fall and shelter, food, and money make a good combination. Plus—I've got a place to my self where I can write.*

*This place and the people are unusual. There are two young men—they call them boys—who are handicapped. Paul, the younger one, gets around in a wheelchair. The other one, Ronny, seems unable to move other than on the couch.*

*Too dark to see what I'm writing now. More later. Oh yeah—making \$200 a month + room and board. Not as good as the motel work but I should be able to save it all and get back to school for the second semester in January. Nothing to spend it on out here.*