

## ERIC NEUENFELDT

### *Wild Horse*

I ARRIVE HOME to find Adam striking the townhouse's mailbox with an aluminum bat. Our neighbor Eileen is sitting in a bent lawn chair in the snow with a mildewed comforter draped over her shoulders. She pulls on her Pall Mall and cheers for my son as he pummels our mailbox. Bear wags his tail and barks every time Adam takes a swing. The mailbox begins to break away from the building, but that isn't enough to persuade me to shout at him from the parking lot. I've just gotten off my shift at the prison, and Adam has more fight in him right now.

By the time I reach Adam, he has beaten the mailbox off the building and it has fallen into the ratty boxwoods beside our door. His coat has gone missing. He tucks his arms inside the sleeves of his T-shirt. Bear trots over to us and tries to jump up on my chest, but I tell him to stay down. I set my hand on Adam's shoulder.

"Easy now," I say. A few pieces of junk mail litter the front stoop of our townhouse.

Adam doesn't acknowledge me. He drops the bat and takes off down the sidewalk toward the complex's playground. If I give chase, he will just evade me and disappear into the wilds of the Sleepy Hollow trailer park next door. I watch him as he works his way into one of the playground's small tunnels where he often hides and stares at the wild horses pacing in the sanctuary in the distance. Some nights he will stay out there for two, three hours, long after the sun has lowered behind the Sierra. I watch over him from the window above the kitchen's range while I heat a frozen dinner and Bear sleeps at my feet.

My wife hasn't sent Adam a letter in months. A year ago, she skipped town with a long-haul trucker ten years her junior, leaving Adam in my care. She was good about sending him letters about her travels. Maybe she also felt some level of obligation to tell me her whereabouts. The

letters mostly contained irrelevant details of her trip, as she liked to call it. She won a c-note playing penny slots in Elko, spent an afternoon glow bowling in Salt Lake City, got violently ill from a gas station hot dog in Rock Springs. A rather aggressive ostrich resided at a private zoo outside Salina. Oklahoma City had an expansive dance hall where a group of cowboys taught her how to two-step. Her last letter arrived a month later, just after the first snowfall here on the eastern Sierra slope. The letter was postmarked Coos Bay, but didn't include a return address. *You won't hear from Mom for a while*, she wrote. I pretended I hadn't read the letter and asked Adam how his mother was getting along. Our potpies rotated in the microwave. He put on his coat and Red Wings and headed out the door without saying anything.

"That boy of yours has energy," Eileen says. She burns another crater in the chair's arm with her cigarette and tosses the butt into the snow bank along the walk. Bear nuzzles against her leg, and she plays with the tips of his soft ears. "Kid has been beating on that mailbox since he got home from school."

"What happened to his coat?" I say.

"Lost it."

I collect the mail before the wind blows it across the complex's quad and stand shuffling through the envelopes to see if Linda has written Adam, though I know she hasn't.

"Don't tell Benny," I say to Eileen. "He gets upset about things like this. I can hang it back up myself."

She sips jug wine from the Diamond Mountain Casino travel mug she always keeps close to her. "Oh, Breaker. You need to tell me what's in it for poor old Eileen," she says.

"I'll give you a raise to ten an hour to watch over Adam," I say.

She takes another swig of wine and considers my offer. Bear lets out a low woof when she stops playing with his ears. When Linda left, I turned to Eileen to watch Adam after the bus drops him off. Most nights I return home to find Adam shooting hoops in the moonlight. Eileen will tell Benny to toss some Ice Melt on the slick court, then retire to my townhouse to pick the lock on the small liquor cabinet where I keep my bourbon. I often find her passed out on the recliner in the family room, illuminated by the glow of the evening news on television.

Eileen raises her thumb toward the sky. “Eileen has expenses.”

“Fifteen.”

“So generous. Corrections must pay well.”

The prison doesn't. The small junior college where I served as athletic director experienced sweeping budget cuts in the fall, and the board reduced my position to half time and eliminated my benefits. I started teaching remedial reading to inmates in the prison's continuing education center for extra money, though I haven't been in a classroom since well before Adam was born. I am struggling to hide my incompetence from the educational administrator. He is a fair and kind man, but has begun encouraging me to return to coaching football at the high school next fall, where I have a standing offer to coordinate the struggling offense.

“I hope you know he's a good kid,” Eileen says. She glances up at me. Her eyes have yellowed, the life drained out of them long ago. “He's going to make it, that one. He'll be just fine when his mother returns.”

“I know,” I lie. A few months ago, Adam's teacher reported that he had started carving deep grooves into the lip of his desk and wouldn't speak to other kids. Soon after, the principal expelled Adam from the after-school program when he choked another boy. The boy had made a passing remark about the state of the athletic department at the college. When I arrived to pick up Adam, the boy's mother was evaluating the spots of bruise on her son's neck. I apologized but knew Adam would be marked until he graduated or abandoned Susanville for Portland or San Francisco.

Adam has always gravitated toward Linda's Southern Californian impulsiveness and shunned my Midwestern reserve. I spent my adolescence hurling my body into other kids on the muddy football fields of Milwaukee while Linda wandered the boardwalk and talked revolutions with gypsies in Venice Beach. In high school I brooded over athletic scholarships and a collapsing knee. Linda skipped school to get stoned and surf until the sun fell over the Pacific.

“You know,” Eileen says. “This town used to be a good place to grow up. We'd walk down to the river and catch trout. We'd walk to the movie theaters uptown. The sawmill's whistle would go off at the end of every shift. We could rely on things like that whistle.”

Eileen likes to lament the fall of the sawmill and blame the prisons for the downward course of her life. Half of the town's population consists of inmates at High Desert State Prison. The other half is made up of correctional officers and ex-mill employees and people waiting for someone on the inside to get paroled. Most residents scrape by with part-time work at a motel or IGA or the college between contracts at the military depot an hour away.

I suspect Eileen is living in Susanville while she waits for someone on the inside. She doesn't seem to know anyone around town beyond her transient daughter who stops by the townhouse to do a load of laundry and smoke a bowl on the playground. Eileen never questions her daughter and the shirtless men with face tattoos she brings around. Eileen just offers them a frozen pizza and a place to rest their heads for the night. I admit to listening to their conversations through the wall.

"Sometimes I think this town will get back to what it was," Eileen says. She pulls the comforter tighter around her body. "We're going to be just fine."

I pat Bear on the back and motion for him to go inside. I call for Adam. He crawls out of the tube, but keeps his back to me. He makes a snowball and rifles it at the basketball hoop. It explodes against the backboard.

WHEN ADAM FALLS asleep on the sofa, I take a bottle of Deschutes out of the fridge and rouse Bear and nudge him outside. He stumbles out the door and sniffs the snow bank along the walk. I use the door's strike plate to pop the cap off the bottle, a trick my dad taught me the afternoon he handed me my first Pabst. We'd been cutting flagstone for a patio he was laying for a wealthy couple who lived near Lake Michigan. The bottle's cool sweat felt right against my dust-chalked hands. We stood in the couple's garage and drank in silence until we emptied the bottles. I often think of leaving Susanville to find stable work in a city like Stockton or Fresno, a city where I can afford a house with a garage, a place where I can teach my son the satisfaction of the small trades, where I can offer him his first bottle of Pabst.

The evening is cold and still, the moon bright over the valley. It is the first night in weeks we haven't had a rush of low clouds over the mountains. Bear and I cut through the clearing behind the complex

of townhouses to the iced-over pond where Bear likes to chase the mule deer that come down from the deep snow of the mountains.

Winters in Susanville made Linda stir-crazy and pushed her into the casino and tavern, she claimed. But I often thought it was my workload before I went down to half time—the lost hours spent tracking down prospects who failed to meet the academic requirements to maintain a Division I scholarship, the evenings inside the sweaty gymnasiums, the Sundays counseling homesick student-athletes in my office on campus. The hours added up to nothing more than a cut in pay and a broken family in a remote mountain town. Could the family have driven her away? Had she decided to leave years ago, in the bathroom of our dumpy studio apartment in Reno as she held the pregnancy test? She was 20. I was 28. We were still trying to find our direction, our way. I was working long days for a consulting firm that tracked statistics for college coaches. She called me into the bathroom one morning, and I found her sitting on the toilet holding the drug-store pregnancy test.

“I’m too young,” she said, flipping the test into the wastebasket.

Linda hadn’t wanted to move to Susanville and resisted the idea of embedding herself in the community. “We don’t fit in here,” she said. I kept telling myself she’d adjust, that anyone could adjust to this place.

I take Bear past the lone trailer home in the clearing and toward the reservoir. The light of a television bounces off the drapes, and the silhouette of someone inside crosses the window. The trailer’s door opens, and a flannel-clad drunkard steps onto the makeshift porch. He slurs something at us, but he’s too far for me to hear. Bear barks and goes to drive the man away, but I wrangle him by the collar and move him along. The locals turn at night. Their drink brings out a streak of country-mean unkind to imports like myself. This is the time of night you’ll see old pickups lurching down Main, bald Goodyears crossing double-yellows. You’ll see townies pouring out of the bowling alley’s bar at close, cracking knuckles, chasing traveling salesmen and state auditors into the parking lot. I worry about raising Adam in a choked-off place like this, that I don’t take him down to Reno or San Francisco enough, that one day he may catch on with a group of drifters and disappear into the wilds of eastern Oregon.

I saw the same tendency in Linda. Mid-conversation, she would stand, slip on her yachting shoes, and withdraw into the night. At

first, she wasn't gone more than an hour, but that hour became two and three and then entire days. I would wake Adam, bundle him up, and go out into the cold to search for her. Early on, I found her at the tribal casino outside town, talking to older men over a cigarette and a Lagunitas. Then, I would find her around town—drinking rail whiskey at the tavern uptown, standing out on Main trying to hitchhike to Reno, crashing at rent-controlled apartments full of meth-traffickers and transients.

The last night I saw Linda, I had tracked her down at the Riverbend Inn where she was holed up in a room with the long-haul trucker. She was using again. I knew before the door to their room even opened. I knocked and caught a right hook from the trucker as soon as he opened the door. As I went down, I spotted burnt squares of foil and cashed lighters. I like to remember that I saw Linda as I stumbled to my feet, but I know I only heard her voice from inside the room. She was saying go, get out, go.

I release Bear and stumble over the uneasy terrain of the clearing, try to avoid rolling an ankle on the rocks breaking under the cover of snow. The terrain of Susanville, the valley where the high desert chokes off the dense patches of the Sierra's forest, is always shifting. The uncertainty of the terrain prevents the wild horses in the pasture from attempting to break free. The only thing they can do is walk the fence, look out over the expanse of the sagebrush and juniper.

Bear reaches the pond and sniffs along the contours of the shoreline. He has never had an interest in venturing onto the ice. The threat of the ice giving out reminds me of playing pond hockey in the park as a kid. We'd play close to the shore, so we would stay upright, leg stuck half a foot below, if we punched a skate through the ice. We'd heard the story about the neighborhood kid who'd skated out to the center years before. The ice in the center was thin and gave way when the weight of him passed over it. The police didn't recover his body until morning.

I've often thought about the seconds the boy went under, what it would be like to hear the ice cracking and pause, knowing you're going under. I imagine the ice breaking on a brisk night when the moon is full and bright and shining down on the pond. I imagine the creak and the ice breaking and the rush of going under. The water taking hold

of my body and the fight leaving me. I imagine my last glance upward, seeing the tree-shadows dancing on the surface the moment just before the mind switches off.

I'M HALFWAY TO the prison when the school calls about Adam. I pull into a shuttered gas station where a man in Carhartt overalls is loading rusty propane tanks into the back of a pickup. He stops and sets down a tank when he sees me. The high desert wind kicks up a swirl of snow and road-trash. He stares me down as cigarette butts and plastic shopping bags blow around him. I take the phone off speaker so I can hear the principal. Her voice cuts in and out, but I catch something about a scuffle and Adam in the nurse's office. His face. The call drops before she can finish.

I turn the car around and get back on the highway toward town. A thick layer of clouds hangs over the Sierra, dumping snow down to the ridgeline just above town. A CalTrans plow drops sand on the road in front of me. I slow behind it and sand pelts my windshield in its wake. We drive through snowed-over stretches of empty land outside town, past the abandoned farm machinery and collapsed barns. The plow's driver keeps it at an even 35. I tap the gas pedal so my Pontiac's alternator doesn't quit. When we reach the city limits, the driver drops the plow's blade and clears the snow spilled into the road. The blade sparks along the gutters of Burger King and Grocery Outlet and Dollar General.

In the school's parking lot I find a single lifted truck parked at an angle occupying the two visitor's spaces. The rest of the lot is crowded with beater Oldsmobile and Buick sedans. I find a spot cut off by an ice-hardened snow bank and roll the Pontiac up on it.

The community safety officer is pacing in the pick-up circle outside the school. I say hello to him, but he just eyes me. He caught Adam with a book of matches on school property a few months back. The book had the casino's logo printed on it. Adam had found them in the light jacket Linda left behind in the townhouse's front closet.

Inside the office, the administrative assistant starts to greet me, but Mrs. Prchal, the principal, intercepts me.

"I'll walk you to the nurse's office," she says.

We walk through a hallway lined with lockers students have

defaced with skateboard company stickers and profanities scratched into the paint. The edges of the lockers are bent out from attempts at vandalism. There aren't any posters encouraging students to join afterschool activities or athletics. The school discourages students from hanging around beyond the final bell.

Mrs. Prchal's eyes are sunken and hollow, the flesh around the sockets gone loose from three decades in a low-performing school system. Her suit is pilled and mended in the places where the original threadwork has given out. She has run the school for years, and parents believe she is the only person in town capable of maintaining order at a school where children of prisoners and prison guards collide. Her position at the school gained her an invitation to serve on the college's board, where she organized the movement to reduce my position as athletic director to half time.

"Your son is a very disruptive child," she says.

"His mother moved away. He's adjusting."

We stop in front of the door to the nurse's office. I hear the nurse ask Adam if he needs a new bag of ice. He tells her to leave him alone.

"His teacher isn't a disciplinarian. She believes she can help the troubled ones find their way with compassion." She pauses and looks off into nowhere. "We live in very different times."

I walk into the nurse's office without saying anything. The nurse points to the patient room off to the side and smiles. She's the kind of person residents of the town should see only on television screens, hair professionally styled, clothes tailored to her figure, like Linda during the good years before we moved here.

Adam slouches in a chair, blue icepack over his eye. The fight stretched out the neck of his T-shirt. He doesn't move when I lower myself to a knee and greet him.

"Hey, buddy," I say. I remove the icepack from his face. A brushstroke of blue colors the skin beneath his eye. When I examine the injury, he clamps his jaw tighter and trembles. His eyes are empty and far off—Linda's eyes. He looks through me.

ADAM CONTINUES TO fight after I put him to bed. I hear him stirring and kicking the walls in his room. He grunts and swipes

the reading lamp off his nightstand. The old bed frame creaks as it twists into a new shape. His heels hit the floor and he stomps.

The wind has calmed and heavy snow has begun to fall. Benny is out there with one of his assistants. He drags a bag of Ice Melt around the complex's walks and tosses handfuls of it on the pavement. The complex's handyman is messing around with the snow blower over by the maintenance garage. He has the guard over the blade removed and beats on something in the motor.

I get my coat and pull on my Red Wings. Bear is resting on his side against the door, deep in sleep. His paws twitch. I gently shake him from his dream and tell him to go get Adam. He blinks a few times, flips over, and leaps up the stairs. I go to the basket of unfolded laundry in the family room and fish out a fresh pair of socks and a sweatshirt for Adam. I carry the clothes to the base of the staircase. Adam appears at the top with Bear at his side.

"Let's go for a walk," I say.

"I hate walking," he says.

Bear pays no attention to Adam's protest. He nudges Adam's legs and herds him down the stairs. "Bear!" Adam shouts as he plods downstairs. He stops and wrestles Bear to the floor, but Bear breaks free and playfully nips at his hands.

I hand the sweatshirt and socks to Adam and open the front closet to get his boots and my old Chicago Cubs coat.

"It's snowing," I say, handing him the coat.

He pulls it on and it hangs off his narrow frame. "I hate snow."

"We'll have a snowball fight."

I open the door, and Adam reluctantly steps onto the front stoop. Bear races out the door and tumbles in the snow. He barks and runs circles around us, kicking up snow and ruining the fresh blanket fallen over the quad's lawn. Adam picks up a fistful of snow and fires it at Bear. The snowball bursts on Bear's back, but he just shakes it off.

Eileen is standing in her doorway, smoking. She blows a cloud of smoke into the sky. "That's some shiner you have there, kid," she says to Adam.

"Some dumb kids at school," he says. He lowers his head and pokes his boot's toe into the stoop.

"Hope you got a shot in," she says. She flicks her cigarette onto the walk and retreats into her townhouse.

Bear takes off across the complex's quad and jumps up on the handyman. The guy stops and scratches Bear's ears.

"Where do you go at night?" Adam says to me. He looks right at me for the first time since Linda left us.

"There's a pond across the fields," I say. "I can take you there."

Adam turns toward the darkness of the fields. In the distance, the silhouettes of the horses move through the pasture. The horses are always restless during heavy snowfall. They walk the pasture's fence together, looking for gaps. They look out beyond the fences and see us, then the open stretches of high desert, land like the Nevada wild they used to freely inhabit.

I pat Adam on the shoulder. "Follow me," I say.

We cut through the fresh snowfall and pass the handyman and dead snow blower, the few cars in the parking lot, and walk into the fields. The snow is deep and gives until our boot-soles hit the ground below. Bear sniffs out the trail, catches it, and we follow him through the darkness.

We pass the grove of scrubby pine and the trailer home and row of gutted cars. The trailer casts dim light across the clearing. The trailer's owner stands at the door, watching us as we make our way toward the pond. He cradles a beer can and doesn't wave. When I look away, I fight off images of Linda: Linda holed up in a camper with the trucker, Linda listening to coastal rain slapping the aluminum roof, Linda pulling on a glass pipe, Linda underneath another man.

The owner whistles at us and shouts a warning about trespassing. The boom of his voice startles Adam and Bear, and they take off toward the pond. I give chase, boots punching through the hardened snow and ankles threatening to roll on loose rocks underneath.

Bear stops at the pond's shore. Adam rushes past him and presses on. He doesn't feel the ground underneath his boots change or the slick of the pond's ice. I stomp through snowdrifts and patches of grass, but I'm too late. He's already heading toward the center. I fight through hard coughs and call out to Adam. He doesn't turn back.

