

*When I was small I studied US geography,
The teacher said: 'Would you stand up
and list the states for me?'
My knees began a-knockin',
my words fell out all wrong;
Then suddenly I burst out, with this silly song:
Used to be a lot of states
fifty all-in-all
But now there's just the North and South
divided by The Wall.*

FELIX CALLAHAN



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The two brothers fled through the mesquite and along the valley ridge. Some way behind them came the Callahans, stocked with rifles and rage and vengeance.

Garrett thought that he ought to be used to it by now, it being a week since Bethlehem Callahan had given up her thin ghost, but he wasn't. Some part of his mind was back there with Bethie, watching, hidden, as she lay dying, and maybe it always would be. He pictured her egg-yellow soul coughed up out of her chest and into the wind, where it would join the rest of the dead as they swooped over the living left behind on the Colorado plateau.

Dyce watched his brother side-on but knew better than to say anything. At least they were making good time, not running, exactly, but moving fast, following the course of the Yampa River and zig-zagging over the places where they would leave heavy tracks. The morning had been fair and, anyhow, they could take a couple of rain showers and keep going as long as the chafing wasn't too rough. The jeans they'd traded in Glenwood Camp had been a bad idea and the boys had swapped them some days back. Now they hiked in cargo pants like an advert from the adventure catalogue they'd used for fuel – one where the dudes were outdoors because they chose to be, not because they were being chased across the country by lunatics.

It was only the wind that slowed the boys down, because then they had to find shelter until it died. No one was crazy enough to be outside when there was a chance of new viruses blowing in – crazy, or suicidal.

The stopping didn't hurt their escape much: if they were hunkering down someplace then the Callahans were doing the same. Stopped like a paused TV, Dyce thought, reruns of the Road Runner and Coyote in a rictus till the dogs stopped their barking outside and Garrett pressed play again.

Dyce had learnt to feel the wind's slow rising in his sinuses, a primitive thickening between the eyes as the air pressure changed and the cells responded, as if he were regressing: now man, then amphibian, reduced at last to bacteria, ready to start the cycle all over.

He was grateful that no one traveled at night. That was one quick way to meet your maker, and it could be something simple, too, something laughable and deadly at the same time – a missed turning, a wayward root, a blind fumbling for a place to shelter from a sudden gust, a rabid field mouse striped with panic.

The boys checked each other a couple of times a day without knowing they did it. Their ears had become attuned to the cough that turned wet, the sneeze that propelled a virus six feet through the air to the next carrier. So far, so good. Dyce laughed at himself. Being pursued like cowboys in an old-time Western, and all he could think was that he wasn't sick yet. *God darn, boy! You git goin' and don' stop till you hit the Klondike!* Garrett looked at him funny, and Dyce sobered up.

"Member that time Dad took us to that cave up Salida way?"

Garrett nodded, saving his breath. It was hard to forget. Turned out to be the last road trip they'd all take together

before he died, before even the dregs of gas ran dry and folks left their cars abandoned on the roadside – the American Dream scoured for cloth and stuffing and engine oil and radiator water that turned out to be bitter with standing. Any color, Henry Ford had said. Any color as long as it's black.

The rock face had looked close enough until they were all out in the dust, treading the soft shale. Dyce had on his Batman pajama top, Garrett remembered that, a size too small already, and that their father offered to carry their backpacks even though he was sick by then. Proper sick, pale as paper. They scoured the cliff face, searching for the orifice their father had sworn he'd seen through the Lark's busted windshield. When they all got up there it had disappeared.

'We were up there for, like, days.'

'Months.'

It had been half an hour, max, but Dyce wouldn't ever forget the feeling of clawing for purchase on the smooth, impersonal stone, praying for a crack to open up and let him in; the relief when it finally did. He bet that sex didn't come close, though Garrett said different.

That scramble among the rocks had stood them in good stead. Now they fled through the rocky landscape, sticking to the trees. *Cowboys and Indians*, thought Dyce. *And the Indians always lost*. He remembered – how had he forgotten? – that Garrett and his friends used to tie him to a bristlecone pine and poke him with whippy little sticks until he cried. He had never told. Eventually they had stopped whaling on Dyce. There was a little retarded boy called Teddy next door, and Garrett had discovered that he was mute. One time they left him trussed up for the whole afternoon. His mother hadn't come to find him, or seen the rope burns: she was just happy that normal kids

wanted to play with him. *It wasn't me*, Dyce told himself. *I was just watching.*

'Garrett.'

'What?'

'Wind's rising.'

'You sure?'

'Can't you feel it?'

Garrett shook his head, the faint scars of his old acne making shadows on his cheekbones. 'You're the sensitive one, *virgin.*'

Dyce let it go. He ran his hand through his hair. He would need a haircut again soon. Garrett just let his grow: he was the only guy Dyce knew who didn't look dumb with a ponytail.

'You know we need to start looking. Be dark soon either way.'

Sometimes the looking was quick – a shack, an abandoned mine shaft, some convenient opening in the side of the earth that welcomed them in, as if it had been waiting. Other times they spent an hour or more searching for a likely spot, somewhere they could bed down before full dark. Once or twice they hadn't been able to get there, and those nights weren't worth the stretching out: the jeebies from dusk till dawn, praying the wind stayed away. *Except it's not a nightmare*, Dyce told himself. *This is just how it is.*

The boys stopped and dropped their packs, the buckles jingling like spurs. They listened for a minute, for steps approaching, the sound of a rock loosened by a misplaced hand or a scrambling foot. One of the advantages of sticking to the ridge was that you were always looking down on strangers approaching. Weird how you got used to the vigilance. *We be some baaad-ass outlaws*, thought Dyce.

They stretched and Garrett's backbone clicked. He wasn't used to lugging twenty pounds around the whole day. They'd gotten a bit too comfortable in Glenwood.

Garrett gave Dyce a little push. 'You go.'

'Man!' Dyce tried to stop his voice rising in a whine. Garrett was too old to be pushing him around that hard: it hurt. 'It's your turn!'

'Yeah, but it's your thing.' It was the closest Garrett would get to a compliment, Dyce knew. He sighed. Another concession. Somewhere in his head there was a list.

'Look after my bag.'

'*Duh.*'

Dyce wasn't two paces off the track when the leaves and grasses began to twitch, as though they too were lengthening, cracking their spines. The wind had come quicker than he'd figured, which he knew meant it was going to blow hard, an all-nighter. He tied his cloth mask around his face, just in case, and went back to fetch his bag. Garrett didn't say anything but Dyce read his eyes peering out from above the mask, hard with fright: *You better find something DOUBLE quick. I'm watching you, little brother. Impress me.*

He beckoned. There had to be a rock face below them.

The boys dropped off the side of the ridge, sliding where they could, clawing at silver beard stalks. The lip of rock above gave some shelter, a few more precious seconds to search, the difference between a full night's sleep and twelve hours of suffering.