

“Gros Ventre” by Melanie White

The line ran almost three miles from the boundary of the Bridger-Teton National Forest, right back to the entrance of the elk refuge. It was pickup trucks and horse trailers, mostly, nosing each other's Idaho mountainscape plates or the blue Wyoming broncs. Some came from as far away as Utah or South Dakota, but they were few, idling in the shadow of the Teton County hordes.

Traffic was moving by the time Pam and I drove up just after eight in the morning. The Bridger wilderness opened its gate on the first of May to admit antler hunters, who poured in to scour the sagebrush hills of the Gros Ventre Range for the elks' discarded crowns. There was a trade in powdered antler for its healing properties, and serious hunters planned to sell horns to the medical market or to craftsmen for furniture designs, most of which ended up in the log-cabin mansions scarring the foothills of the Rockies.

Other treasure-seekers formed cowboy packs and made the outing an annual pilgrimage. They camped out in line, arriving a day or even two before the gate opened, drinking beer and talking horses and women in a place where there was plenty of one and not so much of the other.

“Sarah, we'll be lucky if there's anything left,” Pam said, squinting into the cloud of dust that rolled a mile ahead before blowing right, up Curtis Canyon and into the lodgepole pines. “These boys'll have cleared it out.”

I didn't care; I was going to mount up in the honeyed wilderness and ride through alpine meadows beneath a blue spring sky. That there was something else to look for was just the excuse.

The trailer juddered high along Sheep Creek Road until the trees thinned out and we reached a flat clearing. A cluster of women had set up camp chairs between trucks and were grilling on a portable barbecue, bacon fat snapping and smoke twining with wisps from their cigarettes. Cowboys pulled ready-saddled horses out of trailers, crushed their last cans of beer and sprang onto the backs of eye-rolling steeds riled by the hollering and green after the long winter.

Pam took her time unloading. She was born near Dubois and grew up with horses, but married a gas man who moved her down to Pinedale after high school. Two years later he died in a rig explosion.

She took the compensation money and bought an old ranch cheap, boarding horses and leading trail rides for tourists who trickled down from Jackson in the summer. One of those tourists turned out to be a rich second-home owner who came every weekend for five weeks before Pam realised he was hunting something other than big game or Wind River views.

Bill was a lot older than her and they'd never had children, but he'd given her horses. She looked after Bill now, and the ranch. Sometimes she let me ride for free after I turned up at her door a year ago, an Eastern greenhorn on the wrong side of thirty packing a failed marriage and a cowgirl fantasy.

I hovered behind the trailer while Pam backed the horses out and tied them up, looping quick-release knots through the trailer's metal rings. They were new horses, an athletic palomino and an appaloosa who'd got fat on winter hay. I handed Pam the heavy, hand-tooled saddles one by one and patted the appaloosa's meaty flank while she straightened the pads and cinched the girths.

"What are their names?" I asked. Pam tightened the last strap and straightened up.

"This one's Ataraxia," she said, nodding at the palomino with a wry twist of her mouth. "Bill renamed her. Some rodeo kid called her Minnie. Bill said he couldn't stand such a noble creature having a cartoon name." She pointed at the appaloosa. "You're on him."

"What's he called?"

Pam shot her thin smile, a snow crease in a rock face.

"Bambi," she said.

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We picked our way down a steep gully and across a stream before lunging up the other side, emerging from the silvery aspens to crest a hill. The land rose and fell in folds, some green-black with pines, others dusted sagebrush-gold. We navigated a furrow then started to climb the sagebrush

side. Each weathered stalk looked like an antler tip, from a distance, until we got right up close to find dry wood, or a bone picked clean.

After the morning stampede, the landscape was strangely still.

“A lot of people’ve gone higher,” Pam said, “or took off ahead. We’ll be seeing ‘em coming back with antler stacks like firewood.”

We were walking, Pam’s horse digging into the hillside and Bambi blowing gently in her wake. I wanted to gallop, kick my heels and ride towards the sky, but they were Pam’s horses, and it wasn’t up to me.

Once I drew level, Pam said, “I saw you at the Coach on Thursday.”

“Oh yeah?” I said. “I didn’t see you.”

“Just stopped in for a sixer. You were playing pool. With some guy.” Pam gave me an arch look. “He your boyfriend?”

I thought about it.

“No. But he’s a nice guy.”

“Probably not too many men to suit you around here.”

“It’s fine. I’m not really looking,” I said, and smiled, although it wasn’t strictly true.

Pam rarely strained to hide that she couldn’t understand what a woman who’d spent close to ten years working in a thirty-story glass tower was doing living in a rented cabin in the woods, organising art shows and playing pool in a bar on a Thursday afternoon with a ski bum five years her junior. Yet no Westerner thought working in a corporate office instead of ranchland and wilderness beneath an unbroken sky sounded like a good idea, either.

It was true that moving to Wyoming with enough money to play in Jackson Hole wasn't like living in the rest of the state, where most kids saw lunar emptiness in the space around them and dreamed of getting out as fast as they could to a place full of bustle and noise and commerce, which they took to mean life. And maybe some people did find a good life in those places, but I hadn't.

We broke into a trot along a broad ridge and I breathed deep the mountain air, much cooler than down below in the valley, where the dance of sunlight and clouds dappled the miniature grid of town with moving shadows. Earth rolled away from us and wide, from the now-green ski runs of Snow King in town to the sharp white peaks of the Tetons across the valley.

"That's Brandon Northcott," Pam said. I turned from the view to see a man coming towards us on the slope a little way below, leading a horse whose saddle bristled with the spiked points of a pile of antlers strapped down with rope.

"Nice haul," Pam said as Brandon drew level. He was younger than I'd first thought. Something about heavy denim and cowboy hats always made me think of grizzled old men in sepia-tinted photographs, like the ones beneath dusty glass at the historical society. But Brandon moved with athletic ease, breathing lightly, and his stubbled face was unlined, unlike most outdoorsmen who'd spent their lives in the dry, high-altitude air.

He stopped and the horse stopped with him.

"Thanks," he said, grinning up at her beneath the curved brim of his hat. "Found most of 'em up in the pines over that hill." He nodded behind him where the land swelled into a dark wave of trees that rolled up to meet red crags. "Didn't leave you many."

"You come up here with those Bar J boys I saw earlier?"

"Nope," he said. "Just doing my own thing. Me and Cody." He stroked the nut-brown neck of his horse, which turned and nudged him in the ribs. He glanced over at me.

"This is Sarah," Pam said. He nodded.

“Enjoying the ride?”

“Yeah. It’s so beautiful,” I said, just like a ninety-day-wonder, the breed of college student that swarmed into town every summer. “No antlers yet, though.”

“I reckon there’s still a few out there. Keep looking, you’ll bring something home.”

“Sarah lives here,” Pam said.

“I know,” Brandon said, then turned back to me. “I’ve seen you around.”

Suddenly I hoped to God he hadn’t spied me on the dance floor at the Tavern, stumbling across the Town Square after closing or slipping on the snowy boardwalk in my impractical shoes. I doubted he’d seen me at the sushi place or hosting openings at the art collective.

“Saw you at Mikai a few weeks ago,” he said.

“Oh. Yeah. I like it there. Sushi’s fresh,” I finished, lamely.

“Probably not what you’re used to in the big city.”

I bristled, already tired, after one year, of comments that reminded me, *you are not of this place*. Like the signs painted on boards or stamped out in metallic red-on-white at the end of dusty ranch driveways: *Private property. Keep out*.

“I’ve been here long enough to lower my standards,” I said. He raised an eyebrow, grinning bigger.

“Okay, then,” Pam intervened. “Guess we better get going.”

Brandon tipped his hat and walked on towards Sheep Creek, antlers rocking gently with Cody’s steps. I resisted the impulse to turn and watch them go.

“Brandon’s a good guy,” Pam said. “Grew up on the Northcott Ranch. He left for a while, then came back a few years ago. He makes furniture. Not the touristy stuff,” she added. “Real nice. Clean.”

“He married or anything?”

Pam cocked her head at me.

“I heard there was a woman,” she said, “down where he was before. Don’t know if they were married or what. Not any more, I guess,” she added, reading my wariness. “But you can’t tell anything from gossip in this town.”

She looked at the way ahead, where the knoll ironed out to a flat stretch of grass.

“How about a canter?” she asked, nudging Ataraxia into a graceful lope. I kicked Bambi on to follow, and my heart leaped in time with the hoofbeats.

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Reaching the woods, we wove into the pines where the trees weren’t too dense. The horses’ hooves, softly snapping twigs on the carpet of needles, amplified the quiet. It was shady and cool, and we ambled apart a little way. The horses side-stepped branches while we scanned the ground, although it looked like Pam had given up searching for a moment in favour of bending Ataraxia around the vertical poles of the trees.

The breeze caught a sharp tang, something metallic and faintly rotten, and wafted it downwind. Bambi snorted, jerking his head, and we halted. A ripple passed through him and the white of his eye flashed towards me beneath the spotted mound of his brow.

“What is it, boy?” I asked, leaning to scrub beneath his mane. He quivered. I gathered up the reins slowly. There were plenty of bears around — both black and grizzly — as well as mountain lions, though a bear was more likely. I didn’t especially want to meet one, even on horseback, and even

though harm rarely came of an encounter. I was still very much a greenhorn that way, happy to spot my wildlife through a car window or a long lens rather than close enough to count the whiskers.

I looked around, but the only thing moving seemed to be Ataraxia's pale gold fifty yards left, flashing through the trees.

"Come on," I said, nudging Bambi with both heels. He stepped forward reluctantly and I turned him in Pam's direction, working him onwards. After a little way, I noticed the buzzing.

To the right, curled within the gnarled roots of a fallen pine, something tan glistened beneath a swarm of black flies. I kicked Bambi a step closer and flicked the end of my reins toward the flies, dispersing the cloud. Four miniature hoofs appeared, tucked into a slim, speckled body. Two pointy ears and a small black nose rested in the shadow of the overhanging root.

"Pam," I called. "Come here."

She looked over. I beckoned, and she made her way towards us, pushing Ataraxia to a halt at Bambi's shoulder. We stared for a moment at the dead calf.

"Pretty fresh," she said. "Must have been stillborn. Maybe last night, or this morning." She cast a look back at the woods. "I'm surprised the coyotes haven't got to it yet."

She reversed and swung Ataraxia around.

"Better keep moving."

The calf's eye was closed, a soft black slit. It had probably never opened.

Something swelled in my throat, expanding like a sodden lump of bread. Blood pulsed in my temples. I leaned over the saddle and held on to the horn. Of his own accord, Bambi stepped around the tree root and followed Ataraxia.

Pam glanced at me when we caught up, then looked again. “Are you okay?” she asked. I was still tipped forward, pressure throbbing behind my eyes.

“Nature’s cruel,” Pam said, but I wasn’t thinking about the elk. I flickered a smile and tried to quell the churning in my stomach by focusing on the view: trees, sage, peaks, sky. Not white sheets and plastic blinds, store-bought cards and cut flowers.

“Yeah. I know,” I said, and gave my head a little shake, like I was silly.

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We carried on quietly for a while, looping around so the sun was behind us and following the alpine undulations homeward. Pam pulled a trail bar from her saddle bag and offered it, but I shook my head. She tore the ribbed end of the plastic with her teeth and chewed contentedly, the reins loose in her other hand. She always rode with reins long and easy, guiding the horse imperceptibly by shifting her weight, not like the English style of riding I’d grown up with, all hands and heels. Ataraxia’s neck stretched long, her body swinging gracefully over the uneven ground.

My eyes followed the curved rim of the hill above us, where tall grass waved full, blond tips like clean paintbrushes, blurring and blending the line of the ground against the canvas of sky. A still point, sharper than the rest, rose a little higher.

I locked onto it. Something clicked, an instant knowledge. I snapped the end of the reins over Bambi’s withers and brought them down on his shoulder, wheeling towards the point.

I crouched and urged Bambi into a gallop up the slope, racing even though there was no-one to beat. When we reached the spot, I rodeo-launched from the saddle before Bambi had stopped, like the cowboys in calf-roping contests. I knelt down in the grass, hanging onto the reins as Bambi stood over me and watched.

Pam drew up beside us.

“That was exciting,” she said. “You got one.”

Elation coursed through me out of all proportion. The antler was a beauty: not huge, but elegant, with six points. I slipped my hand around the shaft. It was smooth and cool as bone. The velvet had been rubbed off and white ridges streaked the golden surface up to bleached tips, like snow on the mountains after spring melt.

Pam had dismounted and was crouching beside me.

“We can tie it behind the saddle,” she said. “What are you going to do with it?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Keep it.”

Pam settled the flat side of the antler between the cantle and Bambi’s rump, tying it to small silver rings on the saddle flaps with thin strips of leather. I mounted carefully, swinging my leg high over the points, which made a fence of long teeth behind me. They bit softly into my shirt if I leaned back too far.

“Let’s get these guys home,” Pam said, nudging Ataraxia back down the slope.

“Pam,” I said. “Thank you. For the day.”

“No problem,” she said. “I’m glad you found something.”

We walked the rest of the way back to Sheep Creek, down the gully and back up the other side to the parked row of trucks and trailers. The hunters had rejoined their women — those who’d brought them — and dogs were tearing up the grassy verge. The cowboys who’d been drinking in the morning were drinking again, red-faced and roaring stories, comparing their finds.

Pam and I dismounted by her trailer and tied up the horses, leaving the ropes long so they could graze. I set the antler to one side and unbuckled Bambi’s girth, sliding the heavy saddle from his hot back.

“Sarah,” Pam said. I looked over, and followed her gaze behind me.

“Hey,” said Brandon, walking over. “Let me help you with that.” He lifted the saddle from my arms and carried it to the back of the trailer.

“In here?” he asked Pam, who nodded and winked at me.

Brandon came back out and headed over, hooking thumbs in the pockets of his jeans. Pam brought a bucket of water for Bambi then busied herself brushing Ataraxia.

“You got one,” Brandon said, spotting the antler on the ground.

“It was sitting right out in the open at the top of a hill. Kind of amazing no-one had seen it.”

He crouched down and picked it up, balancing it on open palms and appraising it like a work of art. He tilted his head thoughtfully and looked at me.

“Come with me a second,” he said. “I want to show you something.”

I turned to check with Pam, but she waved me away before I could ask.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” I said.

“Take your time,” she said, grinning.

I walked over to Brandon’s trailer with him, aware of eyes following us from barbecues and camp chairs. The guy from the Coach crossed my mind, fleetingly, then faded like a whisper.

Cody was dozing behind the trailer, but his eyelids rolled up at the sound of our steps. He stretched out his muzzle and blew softly. Brandon smiled, scratching behind the big bat ears.

“How long have you had him for?” I asked.

“In a way, half my life,” Brandon said. “He was born on my parents’ ranch. But then I moved away for a while, and when I came back, he was gettin’ to be an old man.” He plucked a handful of grass and lifted it to Cody’s snuffling mouth. “I had to sell the other horses when my parents died, but I kept him.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “About your parents.”

“Thanks.” He looked at me. “What about you? That your horse?”

“No,” I said, bowing my legs like John Wayne. “Thankfully.” He laughed. “Pam lets me ride her horses sometimes. She says she needs the help, and they need the exercise.”

“That one sure does.” He paused. “Is that why you came out here? To ride?”

“I had a cowgirl fantasy,” I said. “That was one thing.”

He nodded, with none of the surprise of my Eastern friends.

“You think Pam would let you borrow him again some time to come riding with me?”

“Maybe,” I said. “That would be great.”

He patted Cody’s neck firmly, twice, like shaking hands on a deal. He was still holding my antler in his other hand.

“Come see this,” he said, moving towards the cab of the trailer. He handed back the antler before rummaging in the passenger seat.

I stood back and waited, trying not to stare at the outline of his back stretching beneath the denim shirt, or the lean hips encircled by a brown leather belt. I swallowed and looked away.

“Here,” he said, untangling an antler from his pile and backing out. “Look.”

He held it up: a pale, six-point antler, curving left. He reached out and lifted my arm, so that my antler hung beside his in the air, curving right. They matched perfectly: a mirror pair.

“That’s amazing,” I said. “Do they really belong together?”

“I don’t know,” he said, looking at me steadily. “Sure seems like they might.”