



Photo courtesy of Todd Kincaid

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Rabbit Drive

TODD KINCAID

Scofield gnawed a piece of jerky, grinding grit from the plains as he chewed.

“Hell fire,” he said. “It’s even in the meat.”

Harper took off his hat and banged it on his boot and a rain of black dust fell from the brim. “That’s nothing,” he said. “I can’t even milk my only cow. Teats are bleeding from the dust. Rest of ‘em starved or smothered in the storms. Some say we will too.”

Scofield chewed the jerky for a long time and then struggled to swallow it. “Well,” he said, “them cowboys tried to tell us.”

Harper scoffed and spat on the floor. “Ah, to hell with them,” he said. He held a hard frown on his face until his jaw trembled.

Scofield looked out the window, which was pitted and scratched by the dust. “They sure knew what the land would do,” he said. “Now there’s nothing for either of us.”

“We had wet years before,” Harper said. “We’ll have ‘em again.”

Scofield looked down at the back of his hand. It was raw from the blowing sand. He shrugged but Harper was not looking at him. “Eight years,” he said. “Whoever heard of such a thing?”

“Not me,” Harper said. “You coming to the rabbit drive?”

“I reckon.”

“That field out by the dugout is overrun. You can hear ‘em scattin’ around out there. Nothing left in that dead field that don’t have bites out of it.”

Scofield shook his head. He looked at the window and thought about things. But then his head got heavy and he shook off the thoughts and took another bite of jerky. He touched the flask in his pocket while he

chewed.

“Ever thought about going west?” Harper said. He dragged his fingers through the dust on the table in front of him.

Scofield shrugged. “Don’t believe them handbills, I reckon.”

Harper nodded. “I guess I don’t either. If it was that grand, folks would keep it to themselves.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. If they got fruit, somebody’s got to pick it.”

“Be work, I guess.”

“Beats piling up wheat to rot.”

Harper nodded. He let out a sigh and ran his hand over his face. Then he stood and stretched his spine and tugged at one of the buttons on his workshirt. “I’m gonna shuffle on back. Might have some of that stew waiting on me if I’m lucky.”

Scofield followed Harper to the door and watched him step down off the porch and walk across the hardpan. As he passed where the gate used to be, wind pushed a wall of dust across the yard and Harper turned his back to it and lowered his head. The grit fluttered his clothes for a moment, rising to a whine, and then died. Harper took off his hat and tapped the dust out of it and then walked into the distance, kicking up gray clouds as he went.

When Harper was out of sight, Scofield watched the horizon for a long time before he started for home. Then he walked down the main road toward his cabin, stopping now and then to bang grit from his shoes. He saw stunted trees against the fence that followed the main road. Piles of tumbleweed had tangled in some of the wire. At the top of the last hill he looked down the road against the horizon, thinking of the past. He fished a handkerchief from his pocket and took off his hat to mop the sweat. A teaspoon of grit spilled from the brim when he tilted the hat. He wiped his forehead, put on the hat and walked down the hill, his feet sinking in the sand.

Karen was working the water pump when he came up. She stopped working the handle when he got close and stood away from it with her hands on her hips, her dress moving a little in the wind.

“I don’t know why you bother,” he said.

She shrugged and gathered a loose portion of her dress to wipe her hands. Her hair was tied up but some of it had fallen. “It’s something to do, I guess.”

“Saw Harper down at the Wilson’s old place,” Scofield said. “He asked us to the drive too.”

Karen was still eyeing the water pump, breathing hard. She nodded. “Might just as well,” she said.

“Where’s Will?”

“Told him to move that wood to the other corner of the cabin. Damn centipedes are burrowing into the wall. Bet he ain’t doing it though.” She turned to look toward the cabin, shading her eyes with one hand. One of the knuckles was bleeding.

Scofield left Karen and walked around the corner of the cabin. Part of the wood had been moved and part was still there. He moved a few more pieces and then stopped to look across the field where there were a few tufts of dry grass. Somewhere in the grass he heard tapping, like a rock hitting the side of the cabin, and walked toward it. He found Will behind a tuft of grass sitting in the dirt. One leg was outstretched and he was hitting his boot with a fence rail over and over. When Scofield’s shadow fell over him, he looked up.

“Seen you whacking at your boot there,” Scofield said. “How come you’re doing that?”

The boy looked down at his boot. He tapped his boot again. “I guess to hear it,” he said. A wind came through the grass and they both lowered their heads against it.

“Ain’t but half of that wood moved,” he said. “Your mama was looking for you.”

“Centipedes come out,” Will said. “They was everywhere.”

“Well, that’s why you’re moving it.”

“I know,” the boy said. He whacked his boot again, just once.

“Knock ‘em against the cabin. They’ll fall off.”

“Some of ‘em hung on,” the boy said. “They was coming at my hands. How come they’re so mean?”

“I don’t reckon it’s meanness. You was taking their house, knocking ‘em silly. I guess we’d all come out.”

“They get in our house and eat the wood. They sting us sometimes. How come they do that?”

Scofield thought for a moment. He turned one

pocket inside out and got a little dust in his hand. He feathered his fingers and gave it back to the ground. "It's what they know how to do, I guess. They can't eat the dust."

The boy stared straight ahead and tapped his boot again. "I'm afraid of 'em," he said. "Seems like they come at night when they know I'm scared. Seems like they know I move the wood."

"Night's just when they do things. Like them coyotes we used to have. Some animals just like the night."

"Them centipedes like the day too. They ain't afraid of nothing."

"Well, they don't know to be, I guess. Not much room for a brain with all them legs."

"How come they know where the wood is? How come they know we're asleep?"

"Wood's where they live. It's where their food is."

"How come they get in the beds?"

"They're looking for more food, I reckon. Maybe they can't sleep and they take a walk. It's hard to figure a thing like that."

The boy whacked his boot and said, "It sure is."

Scofield shoved his hands into his pockets and stared down at Will, who was now digging in the dirt with the fence rail. He listened to grass stalks breaking in the wind and watched the stick. The sharp end went in like a knife and came up balancing a pile of dirt that the boy then dumped back to the ground.

He nudged the boy with his shoe. "You can't sit out here all day and shovel dirt," he said. "Your mama wants that wood moved."

"I know," Will said. "But I'm afraid of them bugs."

Scofield scratched his chin. He looked back at the house and then down at the boy again. "Go on down to the Harper's and see if they can spare some water. I'll move the wood."

Will stood and threw the stick into the dead grass and then ran through the sand and across the yard before turning on the road toward the Harper's. Scofield watched him until he disappeared then walked backed to the house and moved the rest of the wood. Near the bottom of the stack a centipede scuttled from a crevice in the wood and got halfway up his hand before he brushed it off into the dirt. Gnashing his teeth, he

stomped it over and over until it nearly broke in half. Waves kept going through the animal's legs and it kept moving, pulling itself over piles of sand. Scofield stomped some more, now digging his heel in and grinding the animal into the loose dirt until it was underneath. Then he stood panting and looking at the dirt and before long the bug was out again and dragging the dead half of its body toward the house. He stooped and piled dirt on the animal until it was gone again and then dug both hands under the dirt and threw the whole pile toward the dry grass, yelling, "Son of a bitch," as he threw it. He saw the bug's broken body fall out of the cloud of dirt and watched it lie still on the ground for a while before it started to trundle toward the grass. Then he looked at his hands to check for bites and stalked back toward the front of the cabin, mumbling things to himself and breathing hard.

Back inside the cabin, Karen was at the table drinking a cup of water. Some of her hair had fallen and when she leaned her head toward the cup a shock of it fell against the cup. Scofield saw a silver strand in her hair he hadn't notice before.

"I actually got a little from the pump today," she said. "We can sift it and cook with it, I think."

He nodded and stood staring into the corner. He was thinking of the centipede and where it might get to and what might happen to it with its body half shattered. He thought of himself stomping the dirt with rage swelling in his throat, and of the boy so terrified of his chore there was nothing to do but sit in the dirt and hit his shoe with a stick.

"I sent Will down to Harper's for more water, if they have any," he said. "He's afraid of the centipedes."

Karen nodded and pushed her fallen hair back and held the cup up to offer him a drink. He shook his head and sat at the table with her. Neither of them spoke for a long time. A wind kicked up outside and cascades of dust fell through the cracks in the roof. They both watched them fall to the ground and then sat staring at the piles as the wind died again.

"Place'd fill up before long if people weren't here to sweep it out," Karen said.

Scofield nodded.

"Maybe that would be best."

Scofield cleared his throat and said, "Maybe."

Karen was looking out one of the windows. She swallowed and touched her own throat. "I'm not sure what to do next."

Scofield ran his palm over his mouth, rasping his whiskers. "I wish I had a clue, myself. None of us had figured for this."

"You think we should have gone west?"

He looked west as if to find the answer. "Half of them came back. Some of them starved. I guess if I starve, I'll do it here, where at least it was a home once."

Karen stared at the table and took another sip of water. Somewhere in the roof of the shack a beam

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creaked and then popped like a rifle. Another cascade of dust fell. "The preacher made rounds earlier. I couldn't think what to say to him."

"He's got a tough job these days."

Karen rubbed her hands together and then touched her own chin. "My mama would kill me if she knew what I thought."

Scofield shrugged. "She'd think it too, most likely."

Karen shook her head. She looked into the cup and decided against drinking. "Her mind never seemed to turn. The harder it was, the closer God was."

Scofield thought about that. Then he shrugged. He stood and walked to the window, where he watched the glow of light from outside.

Karen wiped the table with her palms and dust fell to the floor. She dusted her hands and looked up at him. "Well," he said. "We had green grass for a while, a least."

Scofield turned to look at the window again and nodded. "That grass would fantail out like water that first year. Never seen anything quite like it."

"Preacher said we should be thankful for that."

"I guess I was at the time. But you are where you are. And now we're here."

He watched Karen think for a long time. She tilted the cup and looked into it and then pushed it aside. When she looked up at him he looked at the window again.

"Rabbit drive today," she said. "That field's over-run."

He nodded. "It's a terrible thing," he said. "But I guess there's nothing else to do."

He couldn't stay in the house and spent the afternoon behind the shack. He kicked the wood and wandered into the grass to look for the centipede. He looked at the horizon for dusters, holding his hat just above his eyes. The boy came back and they stood at the fence

for a while talking. The boy kicked at the sand that had drifted over the bottom rail and sent avalanches down the slope and they stood staring at the result.

"Harpers didn't have no water?"

The boy looked back toward the Harpers' and then back at the fence rail, which he kicked again. "They said they was saving it for the drive," he said. "Couldn't spare none. That seems mean."

"Nah, people have to decide things. They don't know what will happen."

"But we're coming to help them. Seems like they could help us out."

"We ain't just helping them. Helps everyone when we cull the rabbits. Even us."

The boy shrugged. He was hugging the top rail and kicking the sand. He watched the dirt almost without blinking. "I don't understand how things work," he said.

Later, they gathered the crowbar and few pots with wooden spoons and walked down the road to the Harpers'. They all watched the horizon and no one spoke and as they walked the toes of their shoes threw clouds of dust. Near the Harpers' the wind came and they stood in a huddle by the barbed-wire fence, heads down, while it tore at their clothes and stung their hands and faces. No one spoke except for Will, who shouted, "It stings, Paw," and then clapped his hands over his eyes. Scofield spread his hand on the crown of the boy's head but

didn't speak or move to cover him. When the wind died, they stood blinking with dirt powdering their eyelids and cheeks and then turned to walk the rest of the way. They took turns spitting and wiping their noses with a stained hanky from Scofield's pocket.

At the Harpers', the men were gathered near a fenced-off field and all of them clutched crowbars, heavy sticks and shovels. The women and children stood in a loose group near the Harpers' dugout holding pots and spoons or sticks to hit the pots for noise making. Harper had built a low wooden fence around the field and the men stood admiring it and talking about how serviceable it was. Scofield strode into the group with his crowbar held up before him. He nodded at Harper and at the other men but none of them spoke yet and no one shook hands because of the static.

Scofield stood looking at the scene and had a strange feeling it had all happened before. Not just that they had done this before, which they had, but that he had lived this very day and was now careening through it again with no way to stop it. He looked at the women and children and then at the men and then took a long look at the field where the rabbits would die, and at the horizon, where he could only tell land from sky by the darker shade of gray and by the silhouettes of broken plants and fenceposts. A swirl of dizziness went through his head and he clamped his hands on the crowbar even though he knew it wouldn't steady him. He thought again of the centipede and the waves running through its legs as it drug the dead half of its body back into the dust. Then he tried to think of the past, when the high grass had fanned out from his plow like a wave on the ocean. But the past wasn't there anymore and he only saw the gray fields of his neighbors and behind them on the flat sky he saw black dusters taller than mountains, swallowing the fields as they came. He closed his eyes and held them shut and took a long breath and coughed it out.

The men lined up on the side of the field with no fence and behind them the women and children lined up with their pots. No one said anything and there was no signal. They stood for a few moments watching the field and then the women and children began to bang the pots. Some of the men stomped. After a while the men

inched forward, shoulder to shoulder, and the women and children followed. At first, no rabbits came and the men stopped to let the pots ring. Then they started forward again and the panicked rabbits came out. Little ones first, and then the big ones. Seeing the line of men, they skittered left and right and then headed away from the noise, stopping to sniff the air. The men kept moving forward and the pots rang and more rabbits came. Now they were colliding and leaping over one another. Scofield could hear their claws in the loose dirt and he could smell them. The rabbits were now piling up near the back fence and some were clawing at one another. A big male tried to leap the fence and snagged himself on the line of barbed wire at the top. As the men got closer, he threw kicks with his hind legs, scraping the wooden part of the fence and sending a twang through the wire. The other rabbits boiled in a pile near the fence.

Scofield took the first when it ran in a panic toward the men's feet. He swung straight down with the crowbar and caught the animal's spine and it lay twitching, mouth open, at his feet. He hit it again, this time across the head, crushing the skull and driving the mouth and face into the dirt. Now his heart pounded and he was taking gulps of air as he moved toward the pile of animals. The other men were swinging at the ground and some of the rabbits were shrieking, a sound like broken air hoses. A small rabbit broke from the group and froze in an opening, its nose twitching at the air, and Scofield took a wild swing at it, snapping the back leg cleanly enough to leave it hanging as the animal tried to run. A man named Nesbitt saw it and stomped it, then swung at it with his cane, hitting only dirt. The animal screamed and clawed at the dirt with its hind leg swinging and then Nesbitt swung again, this time with a two-handed grip, and cracked the animal's head, unhinging its jaw and spilling blood into the dirt. All the men were swinging and stomping and rabbits were shrieking. Thrown dirt kept falling onto Scofield's hat and then rolling off the brim in front of his face. Some of it went down his collar and into his shirt, which for some reason sent him into a rage. He swung the crowbar into the pile of rabbits over and over and was breathing so heavily now that he blew strings of spittle through his teeth. The men tired as the rabbits died and toward the