The Buffalo Statue

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The man looked at me through the TV. He was somewhere fake but real all at once. His mustache meant that he was evil and so did his crooked smile and his crooked teeth. There was a gun at his hip. A real one, I think. Or real to him. I felt my gun at my side, but this was a toy because the real thing was dangerous. I was too dangerous to hold real dangerous. The TV had eyes. The TV was eyes, and the eyes moved away from the bad guy and to the cowboy. He was tied to the train tracks and this made my hands fist and the sound I couldn't help bubble up from my throat. They said things, but I was too angry to listen. He was fake, and the train tracks were fake, but still there was good and evil and even though I had watched it one-hundred times, my rage was real because good wasn't supposed to get hit by trains.

It was all black and white.

The door opened behind me, but I was too busy being angry and watching the TV watch them. Hey, buddy, he said. It's been a while, he said. Happy birthday. He came beside me and watched along while my eyes flicked from the screen and across the wall and beside me, up and down, side to side, like spiders running everywhere.

I came down special to see you, buddy. Thirty is a big one. He wrapped his arm around me, let the weight of it press into me. It sunk down burning. Then I remembered the next thing the TV sees and his arm didn't bother me so much. You still like this show? Good. The cowboy had escaped.

I leaned into him, head on shoulder.

We ate with Mommy and Daddy and they talked a lot with Brother as I stood beside the table wearing my leather vest and my cowboy hat and my cowboy boots, with my gun tucked into my underwear—those were white. Brother looked different and for a while I couldn't figure out why, but then I realized that his face looked like Daddy's old face. I started to tear up and threw my banana on the ground because I didn't want my face to look any different, and if he got Daddy's old face then that meant that Mommy's was the only one left and I didn't like makeup.

They told me to hush and I did and Brother told me that he had something special for me. A trip. Something exciting, he said. They said that I had to wear pants and this made me cry again, but soon Brother and I were driving north and he was talking to me like I was going to talk back.

Mom and Dad sure look old, don't they, buddy?

We drove through town and he told me that things looked the same. He pointed out new buildings and the new reservoir on the south side of town and the bright mural painted against brick near the elementary school. I smoked my first cigarette there, he said. After he pointed out everything new, he said again how it was the same. It has the same sunshine, light, he said. As I remember it. I didn't understand, but he nodded like this was true and I believed him.

The old folks were strange this morning though, he said. Do you ever go to the lake with Mom? I went to the lake this morning and all the old folks looked the same but instead of looking at the water, hearing it, they're looking at phones. It's sad.

They look the same but are different and the town is different in ways but because of the fake town he has inside him it's the same.

We kept driving.

Halfway to the surprise we stopped at a little rat-colored building that Brother liked because it was time for hot chocolate. We parked and I sat inside the car while he swung his knees out with the rest of his body, and then walked farther away and disappeared behind the door. After a while, while I sat there humming, he came out from behind the door holding two small white cups. When he got back in the car he was shaking his head like something was wrong, but I didn't know what because he had what he had come for.

Everyone here is just like back in the city, he said. Those kids in there were exactly like the old folks from earlier. When I was their age I would be spilling shit and hollering, just causing all hell to break loose. But they just sat there, in a circle, like—like little prayermen, looking at their phones, not saying a damn word. It's a shame. We've declawed them.

I drank and he drank and we kept on driving. He didn't talk anymore and I thought about how driving was always like this—it makes people talk at me and then it makes them real quiet. I watched the hills build on themselves and then flatten out. I watched the grass for a long long way growing forever.

We parked. I looked up and there was the sun, hot and white. I looked down and there was my shadow like a little black puddle I was standing in.

Brother told me about the park. He told me about how much fun we would have. He talked about the sights, the activities and the food, while our puddles followed us.

At the front gate the metal shined and there was a big white box with a woman in it. She had long rope hair. Hi there, folks. Welcome. She talked about the park and scanned something on Brother's phone and then I thought we were allowed to go inside, but we weren't. She kept on talking about people and other things. She sounded like the short commercials between all my TV shows, talking too fast. While she talked Brother's face looked like a question and her face got real red. Then she took a big breath and it paled again. Oh, and we've got a petting zoo for the little ones and the best corndogs on God's green earth, I swear it. She smiled. Y'all have fun now.

Right away there were too many people. I didn't like that. There were loud families and people in costumes and kids. There were even horses walking around. It smelled like tires and dirt and something sweet and my stomach hurt looking at it all.

It's just like your westerns, Brother said. He nudged me. You get to be a real-life cowboy. He took a step forward, blocking the sun with his hand.

For a minute I thought about what he had said. I had never seen a real-life cowboy. I didn't even know they existed. I thought all cowboys lived in TVs and books about a long long time ago. Brother was smiling and he took my hand and started walking me. In the distance, roller coasters lifted like birds.

We walked around the park and I decided that it was definitely real—the buildings, the people, the horses. It all looked like my TV shows but it all felt fake and I didn't know why. It wasn't fake in the same way, a fun way, like my toy gun or the TV shows. We walked past a place called a saloon. We then went through old looking candyshops where little kids begged and cried, past barbershops and barnyards, and into a large brown building with real things displayed in glass boxes all along the walls. In the back there was a smaller room where you could buy fake toys which looked like the real things in the glass boxes in the fake building. I started to get upset. It all reminded me of a TV show Mommy and I had watched where a man died and someone brought him back to life and then he was a monster, and green. It was like they did that to this park one-hundred times until they did it so well that the monster looked the same as the man but felt just as scary. The park was a fake place about a real thing a long long time ago but the park wasn't trying to be like the real thing but instead a different fake thing of which I was unaware and I didn't understand how you could make a fake thing out of another fake thing and then do it all again one-hundred times, or why you would want to.

I pulled and ran away.

By the time I reached the saloon again, Brother was panting like a dog hands on knees. Damn you're fast, he said.

I took a seat on the wooden steps leading up to the saloon. I was hungry.

Hungry, aren't ya?

Around us were many food carts with round people cooking and selling and eating from them. Brother left me alone on the steps while he went up to a woman dipping. She smiled a white smile at him and handed him a little basket. I turned backwards as someone left the saloon, and its batwing doors flapped and creaked and stilled again. Under I could see women's dresses spinning on the floor like water. Brother sat next to me and handed over the basket.

We could go sit in there, he suggested. Might have A.C.

I said nothing. Started eating.

For the next hour we sat in shade as the sun lowered from its hanging and soon revealed us in its light. Brother had gone and gotten that beer, but now it was finished. His hands now cupped uselessly in his lap. I looked up and everything was moving. Cowboys, clowns, real people, horses and some goats were gathering in the middle of the square. The man at its center looked like me—he had a vest and a hat and boots—but had deep lines in his face and tan skin. At his side, a toy gun, like mine, flopped fishlike. Ladies and gentlemen! he cried. The bank robbery will begin in five minutes!

Will the O'Malley gang escape? a woman cried out.

Or will we stop them? said another.

People dug in their pockets and pulled out phones, and during this time I sat up very straight. Brother was looking at me now, his eyes looking like Mommy's eyes before she tells me she loves me.

The doors behind us exploded and five men burst out of them holding onto their belt-buckles and shouldering toy rifles. One carried a sack painted with a bright green dollar sign. They surrounded us and yelled things into the crowd. I watched as one tucked a tag back into his neckline and another scratched his butt. Their leader said something mean about the sheriff's mommy and I reached for one of their toys but he swatted at my hand like a bug.

You'll never get away with this, O'Malley! the sheriff said.

Then they advanced.

After it was all over I felt like I had been tricked. It wasn't real. The good and evil here was a lazy good and evil that I didn't care

about at all. I thought about why my TV good and evil was different and I thought maybe the goodguy and badguy that the TV watched really thought it was good and evil and these people didn't. That made a big difference in the realness of fake things. That and their guns only sounded like popcorn not guns. In the end, the sheriff handcuffed O'Malley and took him away. My brother sighed and looked at me. Wasn't that fun, buddy? He wasn't good at pretending either.

As the goodguys and badguys went away, the others went into the crowd which had formed around them. A scaly old man, with black glasses covering his eyes and a cane poking the ground before him, moved towards us. Dodging people. Snaking through. I remembered there was a kid in school who wore dark glasses and used a cane and I remembered that he was no fun in hide and seek. Now reaching us, at the foot of the stairs, the old man grinned a wide grin and took out a camera. Flash.

Lovely smiles, gentlemen. Why don't we try that again.

Again we were flashed.

Beautiful. Just wonderful stuff. He took a third picture, and I moaned and quickly got to my feet.

Hey, why don't you cut that out, said Brother.

Don't mean to bother. Only trying to capture precious moments. The best a blind man can. He smiled that smile which made my bones hurt. Photos available in the giftshop. Cheap, cheap, cheap.

I rushed past, and from behind he said see you around, gentlemen.

I ran for a long way, to the very back of the park where a chainlink fence stood and further tallgrass grew. The people's noise had died. Only their footsteps walking about in the air and I thought I could hear the wind.

Brother started saying things, but the words were dull. I held onto the fence and looked and then I sat in the grass and looked more. He sat beside me. Soon he put his arm around me and we began to gently hum together as a plane passed overhead through the blue blue sky and we watched it all get smaller and we joined together somewhere that wasn't right here or right now until something switched and the world again became itself.

I stood and together we walked along the boundary. Soon a stream began and the plainness of where we were changed into a park with benches and old people and children in strollers.

Then we found it.

It was standing sadly in a patch of yellow grass, its eye-paint

scratched and blurry. I could tell it was a buffalo because of the way it was and the way buffalo looked in my books and from the one time I saw a living buffalo and Daddy told me the sad story about how people came and killed lots of them. The statue wasn't a living buffalo but still it was not fake. It had real sadness in it. I could see in its body that it used to be a part of a tree and that whoever made it wanted that tree to be remembered. It knew about things it couldn't understand and when I looked at it it made me feel more real than I already was. It was old and scarred and kind of ugly but it was the only thing with real love in it for one-hundred miles except for Brother next to me.

I walked near and touched it.

You like that one, buddy? he asked.

I sat down in the yellow grass and touched its treehooves, grooves, all kniferaw. Brother asked something but again I did not hear. A few hours passed, and after Brother had gone and left and gone and left, he told me that it was time to leave and I bellowed and I cried. He took me by the arm, dragging me away with tears running down my face and snot dripping from my nose. In the car he held my hand and told me he was sorry but that it was getting late, that Mommy and Daddy would worry if we weren't home soon, that they would miss me. We drove and I looked out my window and he looked out his. Next time buddy, he said. Next time we can go look at flowers.