

# **FAR ENOUGH**

## **A WESTERN IN FRAGMENTS**

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Black  
Lawrence  
Press

*Thanks to Elizabeth Quinn for publishing an earlier version of Far Enough in High Desert Journal. Thanks as well to Mary Clearman Blew—for the vision in the first place.*

*This one's for Edie, my little sweetie.*

# Winter-born

Willie Benson lost his right thumb at the Newman branding in the spring of '92, the ninth year of drought along the Musselshell River Valley. He was roping calves and accidentally headed a big, winter-born Angus. The calf jerked hard on the rope, eyes going wide and white. Willie braced down on the saddle horn and dallied up quick but caught his thumb just under the knuckle. Days later, sprawled on a chair at the Ryegate Bar, Willie told his friends he felt rope grind hard down on bone. He said his horse reared back, the calf's tongue lolled out—*and my goddamn thumb popped clean off.*

# About the Blood

Wade Newman, Willie's boss and owner of the RL Ranch, the biggest spread of private land all down the river, knew the work day was done. He had thought they might finish his fifteen hundred head of calves in just three days, but once they got Willie loaded into the cab of someone's pickup and sent off to the hospital, the cowboys started passing a fifth of whiskey. It wasn't even late afternoon, the sky wide and hot with dust. But Wade figured they might as well open up the beer coolers and put on the steaks. He knew Willie's thumb would be the big story tonight at the Ryegate Bar, and as he flung hunks of meat to the fire, he thought about how he'd tell it, the loud bawl of that heavy calf and the rope's sudden, rip-tight twang. He took a cold drink of beer. He'd tell about the blood.

# Next Time

Willie Benson was only twenty when he lost his thumb and not legal to drink, but Wade Newman handed him a bottle of Jim Beam as they left the hospital anyway. Willie got drunk quick and stayed that way most of the week. Pulling into the gravel lot next to the Ryegate Bar, Wade waved down Tim DeJagher, the county sheriff. He slipped DeJagher a fifty and told him Willie and his buddies were going to have a bit of a party, just cut loose and not bother anybody. DeJagher nodded and leaned further into the open window. He pointed at Willie's bandaged hand, told him he was glad to hear it was just a thumb. Then a grin broke over DeJagher's thick face—*but watch out, Willie, it might be your pecker next time!*

# Free Beers until Midnight

Wade Newman paid for everything at the Ryegate Bar the night of Willie Benson's party. He had Russ Crandall, who owned the place, grilling out back and Edna, Russ's wife, pouring free beers until midnight. Wade sat up at the bar, sipping bourbon. He rested his elbows on the lacquered pine, his boots on the brass rail below. He watched Willie, who was leaned back in a plastic chair at an old wood table over by the poker machines. He saw Willie's thin legs scattered underneath him, his right arm tight at his chest in a sling, his left arm lying across the carved up tabletop in a puddle of beer. Wade could see Willie's head move in slow, drunken circles, and he wondered how Willie felt about the whole deal, if he had room to feel with all that booze on his brain. He watched Willie swing his left arm out from the pivot of his shoulders, grab a glass of beer, and take a long, hard drink.

# The Night's Freeze

Willie Benson's father, Dean Benson, had been a full-time poker player and sometime logger. In the winter of '88, behind in a big game of stud at Two Dot, he started hauling logs out of the mountains north of the valley in early February. One morning before sunup, hungover from a long night at the Ryegate Bar, Dean worked his way to a ridge above a dry creek. The wind was cold, blowing hard scirms of snow across the ground, and Dean set a cut wrong and dropped a pine across his back. Tim DeJagher found him three days later, stiff and blue with the night's freeze. Daisy Benson, Willie's mother, cried hysterically between drags of her cigarette at the funeral, then moved down to Billings to take a job serving drinks at Tracy's Trucker Lounge. Willie, in the middle of his junior year, knowing there wasn't any room for him in the apartment above Tracy's, stayed with the Newmans and told folks it was so he could finish at Ryegate High School. Wade had never thought much of the Bensons, but he liked Willie's polite and thoughtful answers to his questions and so taught the boy to rope and ride and gave him a room in the main house, even had him take his meals with the family. Wade's wife, Vera, started hauling Willie to Congregational Church services on Sunday and picking up library books for him when she went into Harlowton for groceries. Willie did what

he could for the Newmans in return: cutting grass in the summer, shoveling the walk on winter mornings, cowboying for Wade on the weekends. He even showed Jackie, Wade and Vera's only child, how to gut a trout on her twelfth birthday.

# A Summer without Rain

Wade Newman wasn't supposed to get the RL. He was the youngest of three brothers, and Robert Newman, Wade's father, had wanted to give the ranch to the oldest of his boys, Franklin. But in the spring of '83 the drought hit, and Franklin Newman got religion. When his father asked if he wanted to take over the RL, Franklin told him a summer without rain was a sign. He said he saw calf blood washed across the rimrocks riding home one evening, said the locusts were next—and *Daddy, I don't want any piece of earth keeping me from heaven*. Robert Newman stared hard at his oldest son, then told him he could either start praying for rain or pack up and go shovel shit for a living for all he cared. Franklin Newman left that evening. Junior Newman was Robert's next oldest, but he'd broke his neck riding bulls at the Brockton Rodeo years back and spent most of his days drinking cola through a straw and watching soap operas on the television in the front room of the main house. So, after running the biggest ranch along the Musselshell for nearly sixty years, and even though Wade spent too much time at the Ryegate Bar and not enough time fixing fence, Robert turned the RL over to his youngest son. Wade and Vera moved into the main house, the river dried, and two months later, while Wade took his lunch in town, Robert Newman died sitting in an easy chair.

# The Way the Wind Stacks the Snow in the Pines

Caleb Meyer ate lunch at the Ryegate Bar the first Friday of the month right at noon. He ordered the same thing each visit: hamburger steak with grilled onions and mashed potatoes and gravy. His beard was thick as a magpie's nest, and he smelled of vinegar and sheep. He lived up north, almost a day's ride, near the foothills of the Snowy Mountains. No one knew how long Meyer had been around or if he had any family. Wade Newman, who liked to watch Russ nod in agreement as he catalogued the people of Ryegate and their ancestry, christened Meyer the official town derelict. But during his senior year in high school, Willie Benson cut fourth period class every Friday that Meyer was in town. Willie would come down to the bar where Meyer told him stories about tracking bobcat along Bascom Creek, the way the wind stacks the snow in the pines, or how the mountains drove his mother mad. When they were doing fiction in senior English, Willie wrote down the one about Caleb's mother and the mountains. He got an A, and, at the top of his paper, his teacher wrote—*Beautiful!*

# A Damn Fine Cowboy

Willie Benson had told Wade and Vera that after he graduated he wanted to go to the vo-tech school over in Great Falls, learn to be a lineman—*make some money with the power company, maybe buy a little place up there and help my mom out.* Vera smiled, told him that was sweet and honorable and that a lineman was a fine occupation for a young man. But Wade shook his head. Cattle prices were down and the rain still hadn't come and Wade was worried about the ranch. He told Willie he couldn't let him go—*you're a damn fine cowboy, and I need you on the RL a few more years, Willie, at least until the drought breaks.* So when Willie graduated from high school, he moved out into the bunkhouse with the other cowboys, and the day after Willie lost his thumb, before the doctors checked him out and Wade picked him up to go to the Ryegate Bar, Willie called the technical school in Great Falls. They told him a guy had to have two thumbs to hang on a power pole—*Sorry.*

# River Bottom

Jackie Newman didn't feel right about Willie Benson. She turned fifteen the day she watched them haul Willie, all bloody-armed and bawling, from off his horse and into the cab of someone's truck for the ride to the hospital. She was out of school for the summer now, helping her mom cook for the cowboys who didn't take their meals at the Ryegate Bar, and it was Willie's first day up and around after his party, after all the booze. Still not used to eating with his left hand, he kept fumbling his fork, and the other cowboys called him Stumpy and laughed. Jackie walked back into the kitchen. She didn't want to hear their laughs that sounded like tires grabbing gravel, didn't want to see the chuckle and shake in their long bony necks. She tossed her apron on the counter and ran down to the barn. She saddled her horse and rode to the river where she found a hole of water that hadn't yet dried. Jackie stripped off her t-shirt and jeans and stepped into the river and lay down, letting the warm mud and water ooze around her shoulders and hips, down her legs. When Willie came home with A's on his papers, Jackie's mom made him read them to the whole family. Jackie loved the one about the woman all alone up in the mountains. She loved how the mountain creeks ran cool and clear, how trout fought the swift water. She had lived in the valley all her life and never imagined the world could be

that way. And with the Musselshell so low each spring, she hadn't caught a trout in almost two years. She reached her hands down to the river bottom and pulled up great handfuls of black mud.