

Prairie Son

The Beast was a true prairie son, a cowboy to the end.

He'd been at the homeless shelter on the sunshine coast for quite a few months. Waiting for a bed to come open in short term housing, for him & Lil.

I'd been working at the shelter for over a year & had gotten to know The Beast & Lil quite well. They were two messed up people who fed off each other's addictions & fear of being alone. They had a mutual pact to grow old together.

One night just after dinner, there was a disturbance at the front door of the shelter which I had to attend to. Wild Man— who had been barred from the shelter for being aggressive & disrespectful-- was ranting on & on at the door about having a steak to cook & wanting to use the stove. I explained to him that he either goes or I call the police. He left. Everyone in the shelter now feeling upset & scared. Mission accomplished as far as Wild Man was concerned.

John-- my work partner-- tried to settle things down & assure everyone Wild Man was gone. I went back to doing the dishes.

Something was missing, something was not right. I was feeling edgy, but I just put that off to the Wild Man's antics.

As I was finishing up I looked around & noticed The Beast was not about. Usually during dishes he'd sit at the kitchen table, picking at whatever was leftover. Keeping me company with stories about his life.

'Anyone seen The Beast?' I asked, no one around the table had. I put the dishcloth down & went into the TV room.

'Where's The Beast,' I asked, a few heads looked up, no one had seen him.

I was getting worried, this was odd. Now that I thought of it, I hadn't seen The Beast at dinner. I would have normally checked up on that, but Wild Man's antics had distracted me.

I needed to check on The Beast. I went to his room. It was a mess as usual. Two bunk beds, four guys living in a room just big enough for one. The smell, ode to body odour & fart. Tiny window in the wall covered with a towel to keep the light out. Dirty rug on the floor. Shoes, socks, pants & shirts scattered about the room like a bomb had gone off. Scavenged junk, strewn in corners, waiting to be sold or traded.

The Beast was on his bottom bunk splayed out. Legs draping over the side, one foot on the floor, the other dangling down hovering over the ground. His head face up, snorts like a snore spouting from his mouth. His huge beast body lying on top of the sheets, chest moving ever so slightly up & down like a throbbing mountain.

Something was wrong crashed through my head.

As a young boy-- not more then six—The Young Beast had been playing tether ball in the schoolyard of Lethbridge Public School. He was playing a little bit to hard. Showing off, he hurled the ball wildly & hit a pretty little girl-- who wasn't looking-- right in the head. He thought she was dead. She fell to the ground as if she had run into a wall. It was pretty bad, she was crying. He remembered the blood on the dusty play ground. The supervising teachers ran over, frantic. The Young Beast stood looking on in a panic. What in the world had he done, he was just trying to have some fun. They were picking her up & pointing at him. He knew whatever was coming down he was in trouble. They carried her into the school & took her to the couch in the principal's office. One of the teacher's had the presence of mind to grab the Young Beast by the ear-- as he stood frozen in fear—pulling him hard along behind.

While The Young Beast waited on a chair-- in the foyer-- of the principal's office all attention was focused on the injured girl inside. The teachers were hovering over her showing exaggerated concern. The child, now showing signs of recovery, basked in the attention. She was normally a lonely little girl. Her Dad had run off & her Mom expected her to do more around the house then a pretty little girl normally should.

There was a discussion amongst the teachers about whether or not they should get the doctor. Should they contact the mother someone said. Did anyone know where the mother worked, we must get that information on her file. But now's not the time to worry about paperwork they all agreed. By this time the little girl was sitting up with a mess of tissues stuck to her head. She was sucking on a lollypop that the principal kept stocked for just such occasions.

Meanwhile The Young Beast waited alone dangling his short legs from the chair. This wasn't the first time he'd been in the principal's office. The other times had been mostly for fighting. Though there was that time he got sent down from class for farting so loud that when he looked around feeling so proud, the teacher had said how rude & sent him to the principal, to deal with what she just couldn't handle.

This time he had a pretty good idea of what was in store for him. Back in those days there still was the strap & he was pretty sure it was going to come to that. He just hoped & prayed that they wouldn't tell his father. If they did the next day at school, he'd be all black & blue.

The secretary behind her desk was looking at him. She knew The Young Beast. He'd been in trouble before. Chewing her gum, listening to the radio, trying to type. She was just 17, in a quaint prairie town you start to work young. She always tuned in the radio-- which she had insisted on as part of the job-- to the closest big city station, Calgary, Regina, Bismarck South

Dakota. She liked rock n roll, Elvis, Jerry Lee, Little Richard. The principal, her uncle Bob, who of course got her the job, always telling her to turn it down, what will the parents say.

The Young Beast liked listening to the radio. They had one at home & he listened to The Lone Ranger & Stories of Zorro. He didn't even know there was music on a radio until he was sent to the principal's office.

He'd sit watching the secretary's tits bouncing in her sweater as she listened to the music of Jerry Lee. Her long blonde hair moving like summer wheat in the wind. He sure didn't mind the wait.

Today was especially hectic due to his playground antics. All the teachers were in the principal's room causing a commotion, concerned about this poor little girl-- what will her parents say. The music on the radio was turned up loud. The young secretary straining to hear her music, over the sounds in the principal's office.

Then the music abruptly stopped in the middle of an Elvis song. A voice came over the radio. It got everybody's attention,

'News Flash, President Kennedy has been shot '.

The news flash changed everything. Everybody became quiet. Even the secretary seemed concerned. The Young Beast heard some mumbling in the principal's room. The principal came out & told him to just go home. The Young Beast had no idea what had happened. He didn't care-- scrambling out the door without looking back—he couldn't believe his good luck.

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The Beast needed help. I got John, who came in, had a look & said we had to dial 911. I dialled 911 as I helped John pull the Beast off the lower bunk. One hand punching in the numbers on the phone, the other cradling The Beasts head. John gently guiding The Beasts bulk off the bed. The Beasts belly flopping about like a big bowl of jelly. A concerned crowd was peeking through the door looking at The Beast now lying on the floor. Eric—The Beasts friend-- stepped up to help but John motioned him away. John tilted The Beasts head back & a white foam spittle started coming out of The Beasts mouth.

A para medic came on the other end of the phone & started to give me instructions. I relayed these immediately to John who was in control of saving the life of The Beast. John anticipating the para medics instructions;

'Tilt the head back-- clear the airways-- start giving chest compressions.'

Foam coming out The Beasts nose. His mouth filling up with white.

John was working hard pushing up & down on The Beasts enormous chest. The Beasts flab flowing like rolling waves on the sea. Voice over the phone was in a deadly serious tone now, telling me what to say. I listened intensely. It was essential I not misconstrue a word or direction. The Beasts life depended on my mind being clear.

‘Ok follow my count, don’t be afraid to tell him to press down hard,’ said the voice on the other end of the line.

John looked up, drips of sweat highlighting the desperation on his face.

I relayed the count in a calm firm voice. John listening with his ears, eyes focused on The Beast.

‘One two thousand, two two thousand, three two thousand, four two thousand, how’s he look?’ asked the voice,

‘He’s still foaming,’

‘OK we’ll pick it up. 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &, is he breathing?’

John was really working now starting to show signs of desperation fatigue.

‘Little gasps,’ I replied.

The Beast was gurgling sprawled out on the floor like a big oversize teddy bear.

‘OK, keep it up, ambulance should be there soon,’ the voice said,

‘Yea I hear it now.’

‘Get someone out there to direct them in.’

I looked out through the bedroom door past the curious onlookers & my eyes fell on Jesse. She was just coming through the front door to start her shift. A true angel of mercy. Beauty unsurpassed, long black hair, movie star face, legs in lululemon pants highlighting curves in all the right places. I looked her directly in the eye & told her to go direct the ambulance guys in.

Away she went. Great way to start a shift I thought.

‘Ok done ‘I said to the phone.

‘Ok, 1,2,3,4,1,2,3,4, is he breathing...’

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The Beast had been out of high school for a couple of years. For a good prairie boy, the oil patch provided the perfect place to be wild & free & make some money.

The Beast started up north, in oil camps, making good money. He quickly got a reputation as one you could count on. One who had your back on the rig & in town when they were at the bar having drinks.

He didn't mind standing on the upper platform of the rig at 40 below in mind numbing blowing snow. Making sure the casings were on right tight, as the pipe plummeted up & down slow.

He never flinched when a well needed capping. Mud & muck slapping his masked face like little shards of glass, but he always completed his shift.

The bosses had noticed. They knew you needed to be a little bit crazy to do the job.

This was back when there was beer after shift & bags of marijuana were showing up at the camp. The Beast indulged with healthy curiosity.

He was a hard drinking-- here let me try some of that-- kinda guy.

Standing outside the sleeping shack on a cold aurora borealis night. Taking a piss-- beer in one hand, joint in the other-- all is quiet. Only sound, is the rig-- lit up like a Christmas tree-- clanking in the background. Good times good money he'd think, taking a sip & wriggling the last urinary drips from his prick. Joint hanging from his lip.

It was rugged work for rugged men. Tough prairie bred men. The Beast fit in like a hand in a glove.

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The ambulance attendants arrived on the scene like an explosion. They knew instinctively what to do.

John was replaced without losing a beat. They hooked The Beast up to a couple of things & went to work.

The voice on the phone long gone. Not even a goodbye.

The sound became one of pings & trills as the machine picked up The Beasts breathing & heart rate. Everything a whirlwind of intensity. All eyes focused on The Beast-- who's barely breathing. A sour body odour smell started to fill the room.

One paramedic doing the compressions. Another clearing the foam from The Beasts frothing mouth. Strapping an oxygen mask over The Beasts quivering pale lips.

The Beasts belly rippling like an ocean swell with every compression.

I knew it was not going well for The Beast. It was taking too long & they were working desperation hard.

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The Beast did well in the oil business.

He'd met a nice Tofield girl on one of his forays from camp into the city. She'd been partying in Edmonton with the Tofield Girl's Club on their 'Night Out' weekend in town.

Six months later they got hitched. Right out of the post they had a couple of girls. The Beast not yet thirty.

He bought a nice little prairie acreage just outside of Tofield-- a small prairie town an hour east of Edmonton.

Called into camp on a regular basis up to three-week stints. Back home, big colour tv, enough land to call your own. Pick up truck in the oversized garage.

Freedom reined in-- wildness subdued. Living the life.

It didn't look good for The Beast. The paramedics were working harder then before. You could feel the urgency & determination.

I heard one of them-- a beautiful long-haired serious girl-- say into the mike in a beautiful English accent,

'No, hee doesn't seem to be reesponding.'

It all blew up in a blizzard.

The Beast was in town to pick up some milk & munchies for family movie night.

It had started snowing just after he left the house. It didn't look too bad he had thought. He'd probably be home way before it started really coming down.

In town at the Tofield Shell, at the counter paying for his chips, cheezies, dip, doritos, milk & mix he ran into Ray an old friend from the rigs. They decided to go to the bar for a beer.

By the time they got through having a few beer & shots the weather outside had started coming down for real.

The Beast looked at his wrist watch & realized he had to leave. The wife & kids would be waiting.

‘Well Ray I gotta go, good seeing ya, let’s try & stay more in touch.’

The Beast drained his glass slapped Ray good naturedly on the back as Ray tried to make him stay,

‘Come on, stay for one more.’

‘No gotta go.’

And the Beast left into a nightmare of wild wind & blowing snow.

Not good he thought. He had a mild buzz, probably a bit too much, but not a problem, he’d driven drunk all his life.

By the time he got out of town he knew he was in serious weather.

The road was just a guess. He drove on instinct. Feeling the pavement underneath the snow-- trying to go slow. Driving into a tsunami of white.

A big rig was coming the other way much too fast. The driver was heading to Edmonton hauling a load of sticks he’d picked up in Saskatoon. He was white knuckling it through the storm, blinking himself to stay awake. Regardless of the weather, he still had time to make.

The Beast had left his lane ever so slightly--according to the police report—The Beasts front end just clipping the rigs oversized front bumper. The Beasts truck catapulted end over end.

The Beasts mind went instantly blank as he projectiled threw the front windshield. He woke up in Edmonton General-- busted back, broken ribs, lacerated face, concussed head. The Beast lived the rest of his life in pain.

He got hooked on pain pills, cocaine & beer. Eventually he couldn’t pay the bills. Lost his house & his family.

The Beast was just past forty.

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The fire truck arrived at the shelter. Still no real response from The Beast. The firemen came in-- looking like a rugby 7's football team taking the field-- carrying all their gear. Attired in arrowhead hats & braced up raingear.

They lifted the beast in a mighty heave onto a gurney & carried him down the stairs. Ambulance lights flashing in the black parking lot down below.

I was watching The Beast as he passed me by. I was trying to catch his eye, catch a stare but there was nothing there, only a lifeless glare.

[illegible]

After his personal ruin The Beast made his way to the coast. Following the drugs.

He settled in a homeless squat, just outside of Vancouver, on the banks of the Coquitlam River living on cocaine, meth & beer. Riding the rapids on the river in an oversize inner tube for fun. Refusing to remember what he was trying to forget. Wild & free a distant childhood memory.

He hooked up with a partner in pain. Lil pleased his drug crazed needs when she pulled out her teeth & got down on her knees. They came to the Sunshine Coast ten years ago to visit Lil's sister & never left.

They'd been on a drug fueled bender forever together. Through endless screaming, comradery & tears. They coupled like two boxcars. Living off druggy dreams of what they both knew will never be.

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All the homeless at the shelter were huddled outside, underneath the canopied smoke pit tent. A chill filled the night air. Dull hanging old Christmas like light bulbs swinging ominously in a late-night breeze. The Beast was being wheeled across the courtyard on the gurney by the emergency team. Silence descended like a shroud. A faint voice was heard from the back, 'We love you Beast'.

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A couple of days before all this, The Beast & I were having a smoke in the smoke pit at the shelter. The conversation interrupted constantly by The Beasts hacking guttural coughing spasms. The Beasts big belly stretching out an old-- to tight-- grey t-shirt underneath an unzipped faded hoodee. Pair of old dirty grey sweat pants clinging loosely to his hips, belly exposed hanging out like a slab of meat, slip on slippers on his feet. His puffer in one hand, smoke in the other.

The Beast was upbeat, holding court. His black brylcream locks falling across a vast—scarred—forehead, wrinkled with wear. Waterfalls of outrageous dark eyebrows draping down over slitted brown eyes, trying desperately to avoid encroaching age. A delicate nose which gave him charm. Dark-- wind ravaged—unshaven rugged face always two weeks away from a razor. Lips stained with tobacco, mouth showing no teeth, except a single one on top-- always just about to fall out.

When the Beast talked, he spoke with a voice well used to speaking into the wind. He was talking about fishing. An angelic look took over his historically handsome form. You could feel the wind & water in your face as he proselytized about setting the hook & trying to teach his young friend Crazy how to catch the big one. Between laughter & frustration he told the tale of three trout swimming right there by the boat & Crazy jigging like he was pulling up roots. The Beast finally saying to Crazy give me the rod & pulling those three trout out of the lake himself-- smooth as silk-- one two three.

‘You want trout?’ he said to me. ‘they’re in the freezer, fresh trout.’

‘No, I’m fine, thanks though,’ I replied. Now I sorta regret not accepting his offer.

Who was to know?

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The Beast died. He had a heart attack in the ambulance. Didn’t even make it to the hospital. Lil circling the parking lot like a crazed dog. Screaming obscenities at the para medics. Unable to deal with the horror. Her terror so deep, refusing to believe The Beast was gone. She knew.

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The next night I was sitting on my back deck at home. The wind was howling. Blowing the age-old cedars, rising from the ravine, every which way but loose. Branches stretching like toffee.

Trunks fighting hard to hold their ground. It was violent. I could feel The Beast in the air—finally able to breathe-- raging wild & free.