

Tony and Horace

The farm looked deserted and two dogs approached warily as I got out of the car. One of them had crossed blue eyes and the other was shaved up to her neck, making her head seem ridiculously large. I pulled out some salty crumbs from my pocket and offered them a paltry treat. It was enough. Moments later they were licking my palm and I had my first Californian friends. The smaller, shorn one nudged my wrist with her nose and I felt compelled to share my last jerky ration with them. As they voraciously fell upon the dried strips of meat, I surveyed my new home.

I stood below the barn, a two-story structure painted ochre with a new pine staircase leading up to a small apartment that I would soon inhabit. A mountain bike with thick studded tires straddled the balcony rail. Lloyd Frame had told me the other intern was arriving the next day and I should go ahead and make myself at home. Perhaps the bike was a gift. Maybe these rural types were already going out of their way for me. It seemed unlikely, but I climbed the stairs and peered into the window. It was dark and the room seemed empty through the blinds. The door was unlocked and as I turned the knob, exposing a little angle of dark space, a furious black mass roared ferociously inside. I briefly saw its phosphorescent Baskerville fangs gleaming white against the nebulous background as the door slammed shut and its head crashed into the flimsy wood. I backpedaled to the balcony rail with my arms outstretched and collided with the bicycle. I struck its front end and my maladroitness effort to grasp it by the front wheel succeeded only in tipping it over the edge. My arm reflexively shot out and caught the fat part of the seat and held on for a moment, but inevitably the metal beast slipped away and I watched in slow motion as it executed a graceful swan dive into the gravel drive. It struck the rocks with its front wheel and bucked sharply, raising a cloud of dust. It bit into the rocks and flipped over backward, smacking its handle bars against a portable green latrine surrounded by a sea of foxglove.

I realized it was a sturdy machine as I watched the wheels' aluminum blur. When their revolutions were slow enough I focused on a single spoke until a slight tinge of nausea came over me. As I turned to retrieve the bike, I noticed the great black monster within the apartment poking his snout through the blinds. He watched me with calculated judgment in his intelligent gaze. It

occurred to me as I watched him fog up a small circle on the glass that he no longer found me threatening. Instead, he compelled me, with powerful mahogany eyes, to clean up my mess, or else.

The evening was brisk and a foggy curtain draped over the setting sun. As I bent over to inspect the bike for damage I heard footsteps emerge out of the barn.

"What's up buddy? Can I help you?"

He had a sharp hooked nose and thin ruddy lips, slightly parted, exposing a straight thin row of small teeth. His large leathery ears poked out of the sides of ears of a mesh hat advertising a feed store in Maine.

"Well, I've been here ten minutes and I seem to have already made a couple friends and a mortal enemy." I nodded over at the two border collies who were laying in the grass near my car. "They love me, but the hellhound upstairs wants to rip me to shreds. I thought this was an organic farm. What are you growing here anyway?"

He laughed and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "Who, Horace? nah, he's a real--oh, you must have tried to go into the apartment. I'm sorry, man. I didn't realize you were here already. Lloyd told me the interns were showing up tomorrow." He paused and scratched his head. "You are interning here right?"

"That's me."

He smiled and extended his hand to me. Nice to meet you. I'm Tony."

"Likewise," I said and we exchanged a firm handshake. "My name's Robert Freed."

"You go by any nicknames?"

"Yeah, the usual. Bobby, or Freed. You?"

"Not really. Listen, I was just finishing up stackin' these bales. Lloyd's down in Orange County and Brenda's visiting her sister in Guadalupe. You hungry?"

I was starving. "I could eat, sure."

"Well, here. Come on."

"Okay, but I should bring the bike back upstairs. There was some commotion when I met Horace and it took a bit of a spill."

He waved it aside with his hand. "I've had that thing for years. Believe me, that's nothing. I slid under a semi in Colorado Springs and me and the bike both rode away in one piece. Leave it I'll get it later."

I followed him into the barn and a couple of swallows darted above my head. It was disorderly and possessed the appropriate olfactory proportion of dank musk and dried straw.

"There's the bathroom," he said pointing to the right and we entered through the next door into the kitchen.

The room was small, but clean and packed to the gills with furniture. Two bunk beds stood stacked beside a window overlooking the stable and a couple of chickens minced through the yard blithely. A cheap sink and a small range and dorm room refrigerator ran along the wall. My compulsive eye passed over the stove top searching for grease spots or specks of oil. Everything was spotless. My gaze fell upon the television perched above a whitewashed dresser in the corner.

"Not exactly roughing it, are we?" I asked laying down on the bottom bunk.

"There's a router in the next room, too. Do you have a computer?"

I nodded.

"Okay. I'll get you the password." He turned to leave and stopped just before he left the room. "Are you vegetarian?"

"Never."

"Should I grab a few beers?"

"Perfect."

He returned a few minutes later with a plastic container full of rice and ground beef smothered in chili. He had a three bottles in his other hand, a plastic bag and wore a mischievous grin.

"What?"

"I want you to meet somebody. Ace!"

Instantly, the giant black Labrador I had met earlier meekly entered the room with its bobbing against Tony's leg. "This is my bodyguard," he said scratching the dog's head with the routine touch of love that has been perfected over years of companionship.

"This is my boy, Horace," he said and the dog's ears quickly perked up and a smile spread across his face. His teeth were exposed, but now they were devoid of animosity. His tail wagged powerfully and the enormous head, like a black hunk of obsidian, nodded in agreement. For a moment I disappeared as Tony adopted the odd yet ubiquitous tone reserved for conversations between humans and animals.

"You're just a big baby, Ace. Who's this new guy? I bet you guys are going to be friends, aren't you? Go say, hi."

He shook the dog's head in between his hands and brought him close to his face. Ace made a sound that could not be confused with anything but pure joy and gave his master's nose a quick kiss. "Go ahead, now. Say hello." He dropped back down to all fours and walked over to me and placed his head on my knee.

"Sit, Ace," I said and he did. I extended my hand and without a word he placed his giant paw in my palm. "Lay down, boy. Roll over. Play dead. Play *dead*, now. Play--"

"You won't get him to do that," Tony laughed. "Get over here, Ace."

The dog immediately jumped up and returned to Tony's side.

"Why not?"

"He used to do it when he was a puppy, but after we went out on the road the first time I could never get him to do it again. Play dead, Ace!"

The dog growled and it howled and shook its head.

"That's odd. Why do you think that is?"

"He just got really protective of me. Seven years of traveling with someone will do that to anybody."

I nodded.

"I guess I remember where it probably changed for him. We were walking across South Dakota and had set up camp in the Badlands. There was a full moon and neither of us could sleep so we set out on a moonlight hike."

"That's not very smart," I said opening a beer and offering it to him.

He took a big swig and licked his lips.

"No, it wasn't. But there was plenty of light and I had a lot of adrenaline in my system.

"Adrenaline?"

"So anyway, we walked around for hours until we came to this plateau that overlooked this incredible valley that was lit up by the moon. We were messing around and I was trying to get Horace to stand still while I backed up to take a picture. But he kept running over to me as soon as I would move away with the camera. Finally, the only way I could get him to sit still was to command him to play dead. So when he was laying down I moved back to get a good angle, with the moon and the canyon and Horace in the shot. But I stepped too far back and I slipped off the edge. I don't know if you've ever been

to the Badlands, but those hills are just dried earth, not rock, so everything just crumbled under my feet and I rolled down about three hundred feet. I hit my head pretty bad on the way down and I passed out. When I regained consciousness, Horace was licking my face and these two rangers were lifting me up and putting my arms across their shoulders. They gave me some water and carried me out of there in the morning. I was lucky. It was just a broken ankle and a mild concussion."

I looked over at Horace. His body was twisted and his snout buried in his leg hair, in pursuit of some vermin.

"So, you're saying he waited there with you until someone came along in the morning?"

Tony shook his head and smiled out of one side of his mouth.

"He went all the way back and brought back the rangers."

"No," I said in disbelief. "How far was it back to camp?"

"Five miles or so."

I was agape. "And he was able to find you again in that labyrinth?"

"He led them straight to me. They told me afterward that he knew exactly where he was going."

"That's unbelievable."

"Yeah, so after that he never played dead again."

We sat quietly for a few moments and I watched Horace as he groomed himself. He was now cleaning his groin with a long puce tongue that looked like a shoe horn. Tony picked at a scab on his calf muscle. There seemed to be an aura around them. They seemed carelessly at ease. They were two figurines that could have been picked up and dropped anywhere in the world to fit in perfectly.

"Why were you walking across the Badlands?" I said breaking the silence.

"Oh, we've crossed the entire country on foot. The first time I started from the coast of Virginia by myself."

"Is that where you're from?"

"No, I'm from Boston, but it was too cold to start walking from Massachusetts in January, so I took a bus down to Virginia."

"It's hard to misplace you're accent. How far did you make it?"

"All the way."

"Where is that?"

"San Francisco, the first time."

"How many pairs of shoes did you wear out?"

"A few."

"Yeah. How long did it take you?"

"A little over six months."

He reached into the plastic grocery bag and pulled out a dvd and handed it to me.

"I made a documentary while I was on the road."

The copyright on the case said 2002.

"How long have you been doing this, Tony?"

"I was twenty-five when I took the first trip."

"How old are you, now?"

"Thirty-seven."

"You know," I said. " I can tell you're used to answering these types of questions from people who probably think you're mildly insane. I'll bet you got interviewed a lot on the road."

He laughed.

"Yeah, well, I was trying to get a feel if there's still any community left in this country, so I hit up a lot of public access television stations and once they found out my story, a lot of them featured me on some of their programs. I ended up getting a lot of media attention. It kind of surprised me. There was this girl who saw me walking through downtown Kansas city and she just swerved off the road and ran over to me and said that she had seen me on MTV and that she wanted to buy me dinner and let me stay at her parents' house for the night."

"...And?"

He looked at me innocently. "Of course, I accepted. I was dirty and sweaty and here comes this attractive girl offering me a shower, a clean bed and a decent meal."

"Come on. Don't make me beg."

He laughed again, enjoying the interview.

"It was all perfectly harmless, man. We drove to her parents' place which was a beautiful Victorian mansion. A lot of money in that family. I cleaned up and--oh, it was kind of strange," he held up his index finger as he recalled a forgotten detail. "When I finished showering, I stepped out of the bathroom to change into some new clothes and I was still wrapped in my towel. Right then her father came into the room and I guess she hadn't told him about me yet

because he just stood there and his eyes got big and he started breathing really heavy. Luckily, she came in and diffused the whole situation before it could spin out of control."

"Lucky for you."

"Oh, yeah. He was a big guy, too. Afterward, though, he really warmed up to me. Once we all sat down to dinner together, we were all laughing like we had known each other for years. They were all bicyclists. Loved the feel of the open road. I guess that's how they could relate to what I was doing. Asked me if I needed anything--clothes, food, even money. They wanted me to go on a ride with them down to Carthage. It was incredible. They knew me just a few hours and they were basically ready to adopt me as a son."

"That must have strengthened your hope in community."

"Yeah," he said. "It did. "I met a lot of inspiring people. Some miserable ones, too. For most people, though, seeing me do what I was doing brought out feelings within themselves that they had buried, or dreams that they had either given up on or compromised."

"Witnessing someone living an unfettered life has a tendency to really affect people. What about the miserable ones? What was their perspective, jealousy?"

"Maybe, a little. But the most common theme among the people who gave me grief was fear. They just didn't trust me. They thought that because I was living a tramp's life, I was up to no good and just trying to--"

"That's not surprising," I interrupted, becoming animated. "We were raised by generations who have a very concrete idea of what defines success and happiness and, to them the boundaries of responsibility and morality are very rigid. I'm sure there are a lot of people who entertain the idea of doing what you did, but social conventions have been so deeply ingrained into their souls that they'll never be able to escape. To them they are just romantic notions that exist only in books or," I pointed at his movie, "in films."

"Hmm," he nodded. "You seem to feel pretty strongly about this. So, what brought you out to an organic farm in the middle of California?"

I quickly collected myself and reclined back down on the bed.

"Me? I just held up a few banks on the east coast and I'm lying low until the heat cools down. Who would ever look for a bank robber here?"

He smiled and leaned back in his chair. He stretched out broadly and Horace immediately stood up, as though this was a rehearsed cue.

"You might be surprised."

"I doubt it, but why?"

Tony stood and ran his hand through his thinning hair. "Well." He paused and searched carefully for his words. "Let's just say that there's a lack of communication around the farm. You'll see soon enough."

"Alright, wait a minute," I said. "That's no way to deliver an introduction. What exactly are you getting at, Tony?"

His phone rang. It played the theme from *I'll Fly Away*. "It's Lloyd. Let me just take care of this and I'll be back in a few." Horace was already out the door and I could hear his nails clicking on the cement floor. A few words floated into my room as he left the barn. "Yeah, he seems fine, Lloyd. I wouldn't worry."

I tried to make a few phone calls, but there was no reception so I walked out the other side of the barn and sat on a bale of straw and watched the remains of the sun disappear into the ocean. I couldn't actually see the Pacific, but I knew it was there. I tried to gauge my mood and it wasn't readily apparent. I started at the extremes, but I felt neither joy or despair. A chicken hopped out from around the corner pecking at the ground, unaware of my presence. Its comical strut and repetitive clucking sounds transported me to a farm I had visited on an elementary school trip in Ohio. Somewhere, in a tattered shoebox of desultory photos was a grinning little boy cradling a squirming shoat. A silo gleamed in the background. The Holsteins' udders felt strange and squishy, but the milk was good. A wonderfully pungent smell saturated the air. The mysterious invisible amalgam of life and death and rebirth touched me. It was so simultaneously exciting and bizarre and abstract that when I got home I declared my desire to be a farmer. Now, I searched for a trace of that olfactory remnant and I was disappointed to find that it was all described. Even with a single functioning nostril I still knew that the smell of hay and straw came from bales piled high on pallets beside me. Mounds of horse manure bulged out from under a large tarp next to the road. Somewhere a fire was devouring a wooden feast. To my dismay it, too, was perfectly visible, a ragged orange ripple in the neighbors' smoky front lawn, tended by two figures clothed in flannel who stood guard around its perimeter.

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"Lloyd says hello. He went down to Anaheim to see about one of his properties, but he said he'll be back tomorrow," Tony said flipping his phone shut. "Have you met anyone here yet?"

I shook my head reflexively and then realized that I had indeed met Lloyd Frame. "No--I mean, yes. I met Lloyd last Thanksgiving when I came down to have a look at the place. He seemed like a decent guy. He gave me a couple Anaheim peppers and some cauliflower to take with me. They didn't make it to Colorado, though. I ended up throwing them on the compost pile."

He shrugged. "Yeah, well, there's plenty more where those came from. How long are you planning on staying out here?"

"I told them at least six months. Maybe more if the money makes sense. From what Frame told me it seems like it might be worth sticking around for a while."

He stared ahead and smirked.

"What?"

"Nothing. I mean, I'm sure that you and Lloyd worked out your contract and--"

"Well, it wasn't exactly a contract. It was more of an understanding." I paused and thought about the rather ambiguous financial conditions stipulated in his emails. "It was strange how he ended each sentence with ellipses."

"That's Lloyd."

"Alright, enough with the cryptic innuendoes. What do I need to know about this place?"

I have always found myself in possession of an inordinate amount of strangers' personal affairs. Perhaps they confuse my reserved taciturn nature for interest. Or maybe the sound of their own voice is so comforting to them that they mistake the vapid look upon my face as a green light, or more likely, an anonymous chasm which will accept and forever harbor their transgressions. Regardless, in this modern world of callousness and indifference, a pair of open ears and sealed mouth is a rare find. That combination of burning auricles and pursed lips betrays a false sense of sympathy to adulterers, thieves, braggarts and reprobates that leads them to bestow upon me an abject heap of base confessions. Their amoral squawks do not surprise me anymore. They often allow me to suppress or even shed my own guilt and shame. I have come to look forward to the noisome vagrant's tale of woe and his long history of misfortune and his legacy of crime. I will gladly buy him a mouthful of junk

breakfast in exchange for an earful of his sordid deeds. And it is he, who in the end is left stupefied as I silently walk out on him and his filth when I have satisfactorily judged him and had my fill.

Thus, I was more or less expecting a comparable scenario when Tony began to apprise me of the troubles on the farm. He had come to San Luis Obispo five months earlier after years of searching for the right place. He was finally looking to put down some roots.

"And you think this might be it? Here, the farm?" I asked.

"I feel something powerful keeping me here," he answered. "When I first came here I immediately felt a powerful sense of purpose; like my life was taking on some kind of direction."

"You fell in love with farming?"

"It wasn't that. I've been a farm boy all of my life. I've done every kind of farm work you can imagine. Before I came here I was working on a cattle ranch up north and before that I was baling hay. No, it was more the personal connection I made with the family. I really connected with Brenda, and her son, Ronnie, really needs a father figure in his life right now so I've kind of taken on a mentor role with him."

"Where's the father?"

"He lives in Los Osos, but he's not really involved in Ronnie's life. He hasn't been for a long time and since Brenda's not any kind of disciplinarian, Ronnie pretty much runs wild with no authority."

"Lloyd never became the father figure with the boy?"

"In his own way he tries, but it's not healthy. He constantly disrespects and berates Ronnie. He thinks that Brenda is too soft on him and so he overcompensates by really riding him. He thinks that tough love is the answer, but what he doesn't realize is that Ronnie has never even had much love in the first place. Unfortunately, it's gotten to the point where all communication has broken down. Lloyd has his unflinching opinion of how things are supposed to work and Brenda, she's so non-confrontational that she ends placating her son instead of disciplining him."

"How does Ronnie deal with all of this?"

"Well, first of all, he's incredibly smart so he's learned how to manipulate his mother and ignore his stepfather, but he's also really angry. I've been helping him with his schoolwork because he got expelled about a month ago and now he's home schooled."

"For what?" I felt I could ask anything.

"Fighting," he responded as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"I guess it's not that surprising."

"No, it's not. He's angry and I really can't blame him. Right now there's no one in his life who he can trust or depend on. And he's become so used to getting his own way that his life has no discipline."

"How old is he?" I asked.

"Fifteen."

"He'll be approaching the crossroads soon."

"Yeah, I know," he said and his voice was loud and strained. He took a deep breath and sighed. "If he doesn't straighten out in the next couple of years, he might never be able to."

"Well, Tony, you've certainly championed a noble cause. I just have to say, I'm a little surprised at your candor."

"Hey, I like to be up front with everybody. If there's one thing that this place needs it's more communication."

I nodded. "I just assumed that people were more tight-lipped around the farm."

"Not this place," he said shaking his head. "You've been warned."

He left me to my own thoughts a few minutes later to go help Ronnie with some geometry homework that was due the next day. The sun was gone and only a few stars glimmered across a slate-colored sky. I went back to my room and unpacked the few things I had brought and drank the last beer Tony had brought. I walked outside and shivered. It was March and still cold. A chorus of bullfrogs began croaking somewhere in the distance. At first I could discern between their voices, but more and more joined in until their bellows grew so loud that they surged into a single deep rumble. Then abruptly, as if cued by a conductor, their symphony ended. It would have been a flawless performance if not for a lone dawdling baritone who missed the cue completely.

