

BY WILLIAM KITTREDGE

# THE RIVER RANCH

VERNON, THE SPRING HE WAS FOUR, BAREFOOT IN button-up blue pajamas, developed a love of leaving his grandfather's rockwork house in early sunlight and making his way through the cookhouse garden to the fringes of the apple orchard planted by his great-grandparents, among the first settlers in the Pelican Lake basin. He stood transfixed by undulating flights of water birds lifting from swampy meadows and from the reeds along the mysterious Lost River, so named because its single sod-banked channel, off downstream toward Pelican Lake, threaded out and its waters vanished into marshes, only to reappear as seepage into the shallow lake itself.

Mallard drakes and dun-colored hens, canvasbacks and blue and green winged teal and redheads and the snow geese and Canada honkers and Sandhill cranes and pelicans, avocet and phalarope, snipe and tiny wandering

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oceanic birds, all swept along in acrobatic flocks. Wings sighed, great birds clamored incessantly as they circled off toward nesting grounds beyond boreal forests in Canada, to distant tundra and Alaskan river-mouth estuaries. "They can't keep still," Vernon's redheaded mother said. "It's not a sin. It's their beauty."

Those words, for that little boy, were unforgettable. Nellie, "a high-headed wonder" according to his father, stood with Vernon in her violet silk nightdress. He hugged her hips and she rubbed at his head while glancing back toward the house, to see if anyone, her husband, or Vernon's grandfather, Virgil, might be watching. "Women," she said, "if they want it, should be admired and watched. Like birds. Everybody knows that." Soon the lilac would blossom.

Nellie also told Vernon that he was saving her life. "Without you I could be stone cold crazy." In those childhood days they were living up a narrow stairway in Virgil's isolated River Ranch mansion, built of black volcanic stone by Vernon's great grandfather. They lived above the kitchen in tiny bedrooms designed for cooks and maids.

"Can't think I stood it so long," Nellie would say years later, affecting a dumbfounded gaze. "I was a nursing cat in that cage. It was *reptilian*." She pronounced each syllable. "Dutch got us out of there."

CHEWING A WOODEN MATCH that tasted of sulfur, Virgil Wasson, the grandfather, swung a heavily framed bedroom window open to morning. Holding his left hand silhouetted against the sunrise glare coming off the distant ice fields on Mount Shasta, Virgil studied for signs of tremor; 55 years and holding steady.

It was the 10th of May and the gnarled cottonwood along the banks of the Lost River and the Lombardy poplar were broken into new green leaf. Virgil flicked the matchstick away, found his pinch bottle of Haig and Haig and downed a swallow straight from the neck and then another. This was an every-morning ritual.

"Look at you." Dottie Mallory, the elegant grandmother, dark eyed in her bluish velvet nightdress, had come through from her own bedroom. Virgil held out the bottle of Scotch. "Looking for a shot?"

"That's not it."

Virgil wondered if there was time for this. "You might get," he said, "what you want."

She swept up the skirts of her nightdress and fell back onto the rumped sheets of his canopied bed, her body pale and softening in the middle of life, knees upraised, faintly smiling as she whispered. "Anything." They had all the time in the world. Virgil wasn't due down in the cookhouse for a half hour. Soon enough he'd be riding out with his horseback crew trailing after.

A BLUE-ENAMELED TIN CUP of coffee in hand, anticipating crisp bacon and over-easy eggs, Virgil stood outside the screen door into the cookhouse kitchen, watching his saddle horses drum along on the hard summer sod of the Modoc Field, driven to a morning gallop by a wrango boy.

Fine geldings, the herd constituted Virgil's *caviata*, Morgan and Standard Bred cross, 63 of them, more horses than anybody needed. How many was up to him. He could name them as they wheeled between the fire-hardened juniper gateposts and into the round willow-walled corral—Snip and Brewster, Lever and Buckets and Fandango, all of them, as dust spiraled counter-clockwise into a morning where water birds were flying and calling.

Virgil's second son, the sarcastic Bobby, 27 years of age and his father's primary *vaquero*, a gleaming steel brace strapped down his withered left leg and under the sole of his snake-hide boot, was forming the first loop of the morning in a light-weight rawhide riata. "Got an idea?"

"Rocking Chair," Virgil said. This was a traveling day, and Rocking Chair was an easy-riding traveling horse. A long-boned bay, Rocking Chair circled in the herd under the spiral of dust. Bobby flipped the loop and Rocking Chair stood ensnared. One loop: it was a matter of pride with Bobby.

Virgil eased in carrying a hackamore woven of rawhide and led Rocking Chair to a bait of grain by the saddle shed. The next morning, Virgil would be up on one of his quick little roping horses, Brazo or Kit Kat. They would head out into the juniper hills to the east and a branding fire on the open range. Ropers would drag calves to the fire. Cowhand days were much the same except for shimmering summer heat and dust and thin winter snow on slick frozen ground.

Of two empty plates at the breakfast table, one belonged to Vance DeLoria, a long-time Great Basin buckaroo who three days ago had drifted off to Klamath Falls claiming toothache. Vance was no doubt drunk in one of those houses with women and quiet with the knowledge that he was fired and free to gather his bedroll and saddle and hit the road when done with his sporting. These things happened with Vance, who was as calm and good as a man got with horses until he was overcome by his old urge for Ancient Age and women. Vance would go down and find work in Nevada. He'd be back in a year or so. Virgil would shake his hand and hire him with no hard feelings. Anybody but a fool would employ Vance DeLoria. But Virgil was at ease with such men and their careless freedoms and excellences, their comings and goings.

But Dutch: where was his elder son? Before the babies, before Dutch found Nellie, he'd go off down a whiskey road on occasion. No more, Dutch ran work in the fields, in charge of fencing, haying crews, cooks and their cookhouse vegetable plots, irrigating and mowing and stacking 4,000 tons of loose meadow hay. Dutch was boss on Virgil's fee simple property and Bobby was cow boss. Virgil owned the land and cattle. He was everybody's boss. That was how things were divided.

Dutch's ranch hands and eight of Bobby's buckaroos silently passed platters and bowls, pounded round steak and fried eggs, boiled spuds and milk gravy. Bobby sat in a Captain's chair at the far end of the table. Dutch should have been in his own Captain's chair, alongside Virgil, at the head end. "Papa," Bobby said in the ironic voice he cultivated. "Where's your boy?"

"He's married. He has children. He'll be along."

"Shit," Bobby said, grinning up and down the table. "We should all be married. All you'd ever want. Pussy and late for breakfast."

Virgil eyed his plate. A horse breaker laughed. "You fuckers." No one responded. The horse breaker rode the rough string and was not worried about his job. Young hard-handed fellows like him, who got to name the horses they broke, could drift down to Winnemucca or Elko and find another job in a day or so.

Virgil smiled. "I wouldn't mind a couple more of those eggs." He turned back to Bobby. "Anyway, here comes Dutch."

"Nellie sleeping on your shirttail?" That was Bobby, when Dutch got to the table.

A YEAR LATER, ON A GOLDEN autumn afternoon Dottie and Virgil drove to Klamath Falls so Dottie could shop and lunch with her ladies and Virgil could sit at pinochle with his ranchland cohorts. Dutch and Nellie had the rock house to themselves and she was putting a special dinner together, wine and new red candles and French recipes.

Vernon, now five, found Dutch at the oval oak dining room table



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Dottie kept so immaculately polished. Dutch was propped back on two legs in the chair where Virgil always sat, Dutch with his boots up on the table. A .30-30 with the bluing worn off rested across his lap, the walnut stock cracked and wrapped with brass wire that gleamed in the last sunlight. It had been stacked alongside the shotguns and rifles, a light .410 shotgun for quail and heavier 10 and 12 gauges for ducks and geese and two .30-06 rifles for deer hunting with scope sights, the family collection leaning in a corner of the dining room.

"Décor," Dottie had said. "A statement. We're the kind of people who have weaponry in the dining room." Dutch gestured toward Vernon with the rifle barrel. "Little man," he said. "Plug your ears."

The .30-30 roared in the room, glass shattered and out in the orchard a doe feeding on the rotting apples fallen from twisted ancient trees dropped, inert as killed creatures are when they fall. Splintering glass rebounded from the screen over the window, into blue-flowered plates on the table, glass glittering in a heavy white bowl slopped full of dark green spinach. Nellie screamed in the kitchen. Dutch ejected his cartridge, the casing clattering to the floor. He took Vernon by the hand and led him to the doe in the orchard.

After whetting his pocketknife, then the slicing of the jugular, Dutch held Vernon's hand into the hot steaming wash of blood. The entry wound was tiny in that narrow ruined head. The exit was exploded, a seeping cavity inside sharp splintered bone. After Dutch went off for a rope, cheesecloth, a hatchet and a wheelbarrow, Vernon explored with his fingers.

"Don't ever shoot yourself," Dutch said when he came back. "Unless that's what you want. Keep that idea in your head." Whistling softly, Dutch hung the carcass from an apple tree.

In dimness of a childhood bedroom, Vernon would recall the red liver glowing like a slick massive creature that had kept its life, and coils of glistening intestines steaming and looping around Dutch's hands as they slithered from the rib-cage of that strung-up doe after he was done skinning her, before he split the backbone with the

hatchet. Dutch wrapped the quarters in cheesecloth, loaded them into the wheelbarrow and wheeled them to hang and cool in the woodshed.

In the house with Nellie and the younger children, Max and Ruth Ann, nowhere in sight, Dutch washed up in the kitchen sink and, after scrubbing the drying flecks of blood from Vernon's fingernails, poured himself two inches of Scotch, dipped a finger into the glass and deposited a burning drop on Vernon's tongue. That drop lingered in Vernon's memory.

Nellie had cleaned up the mess. She silently reappeared and fed them on leftover ham and beans. Then, far in the night, she pulled Vernon from sleep. She was frantic as she dragged him down the narrow stairs behind Max and Ruth Ann. A rifle shot echoed from outside as she herded them into the steel-walled firebox in a down-stairs stonework fireplace. "We'll just wait," she whispered.

Dutch was out in the darkness, firing through windows at lighted bulbs in the high ceilings, bullets puffing into ornately painted plaster, white dust floating down onto the Italianate tile flooring. When he came inside, Dutch was trembling, sweaty and grinning, like he'd just discovered a nest with fantastic tiny animals crouched in that sooty firebox.

Nellie stood and faced him, wiping her smudged hands on her white nightdress and radiating tentativeness like she might be approaching a rabid creature. "You love me," she said, letting each word fall.

Vernon would wonder what their first promises had been and which had stayed true and how she could know it was some abstract thing like love that Dutch wouldn't give up on as she reached out with the hem of her nightdress to wipe at his sweat. "Now stop," she said, and Dutch slapped at the air with his rough hand, as if trying to reject the language that had stopped him so securely, and then he ejected a final cartridge to clatter on the floor, as if in disgust with what had happened and his failure to do whatever it was he intended. Nellie touched at Dutch's cheek. "Don't go at us. You start in on me or these children and you've given it all away. I'll put the babies back to bed."

The next morning, a vastly silent Dutch measured the window frames and drove to Pelican Lake and had panes of glass cut and puttied them into the frames and patched the holes in the screens, weaving wire to fine wire. Both he and Nellie seemed intent on covering up evidence. To no avail. Virgil and Dottie came home, and Virgil was a grim customer.

"Sheriff called me in Klamath," Virgil said, stepping in close to Dutch. "Said he heard there was shooting out at the ranch. Wanted to know if anything was gone bad."

"Dutch can go around with a crazy man inside him, that's what I told him. I said that crazy man got loose and went shooting. The sheriff laughed and said you boys, you got your crazy men." Virgil stepped back. "You got Nellie covering your mess like a slave. What's the matter with you?"

"Crazy man," Dutch said. "You got it right, crazy man."

That round of shooting constituted "the final trick" for Virgil. Not long after, Dutch moved the family to a second floor apartment in Pelican Lake, a tree-shaded federally developed farm town serving the Pelican Lake Drainage and Reclamation District. "See where you got us," Nellie said, ironic but vastly pleased to be out of Virgil's stone house.

Vernon filed that memory of Dutch's rampage under untouchable. Nellie brought it open again. Vernon confessed he was unable to trust any woman but her. She told him that men and women, adults and children, everybody, had stories kept secret. "Dutch's family, your family," she said, "learned isolation. They live like it was the dark ages. They built castles on hilltops and defend them like animals. It's no way to be. After that night, I wasn't going on with a crazy man. I was going to take you kids to Santa Barbara. I told him so. Dutch let me inside. We spilled our secrets. We still do, in bed. We don't go nuts."

"What kind of animals?" Vernon said. "Prehistoric?"

"This isn't school," she said. "Give up playing cute. Kill your own spooks. You can't get it done with jokes." <HDI>