Dustin Allen

1st Period

“Road to the Hogan”

Aunt Jane calls it The Mule. Less technically, it’s a two-seater buggy of sorts. You might call it a souped-up golf cart. Clunkier, yes, but safer than the four-wheelers I used to ride on as a boy when I’d traipse across more than 5,000 acres of ranch land in West Texas. Originally, Jane managed twice that much property before the local *powers that be* dammed up the watering supply to ensure proper irrigation of crops (well, lots of hay) and basic water supply needs to what few residents call Coleman County home. These days, pumping stations with too much financial pull divert this blue gold to Abilene: an act Jane considers and “unconscionable sin” as it has slowly but surely depleted the land of its most fundamental natural resource.

Nowadays, the place is riddled with gnarled mesquite trees, prickly pear cactus, and dense layers of bone-dry dirt, dust, and caliche. It’s near impossible to pick up much speed on the drive in to the main house along miles of unpaved roads without incurring some damage to your vehicle. Better take it slow anyhow as a white-tail buck could dart across your front fender at any moment.

In fact, the ranch has been home to many such wild game over the years. Some of them are tame, or as close to it as such rustic environs might allow: hundreds of heads of cattle raised and sold annually; sometimes horses in the stable or the odd pig; a loyal dog or two, as well as feral cats galore to serve as alarms for rattlesnakes and, less helpful, decrease the song bird population.

What Jane failed to tell me was that there was a new beast roaming the countryside.

Before we get to that, though, it needs saying that Jane isn’t, by definition, my aunt. Before I was born, she married my Uncle Randy, so she became family by default even after she divorced my uncle when I was still a child. Truth be told, she’s more family to me than most people with whom I share the name Allen.

Jane is the type of person whose mere presence makes you want to give greater consideration about what you say. At the same time, she is open and welcoming enough for you to say just about anything to her. As a father, I felt it would be a shame if my son, Mason, now only six-and-a-half years old, didn’t grow up as I did at least having met this wonderful person I call my Aunt. Not only that, but my boy, all-too accustomed to apartment living in Murfreesboro in his short life, should experience the vast landscape of the ranch itself.

With this in mind, I made sure to set off a couple days in our summer vacation to visit. Usually, a Texas trip is a regular excursion on our time off when we visit my parents in Crowley (just outside Dallas-Ft. Worth area), so another three-hour drive west isn’t so much of a chore. Once you arrive on the land after criss-crossing non-descript county roads that seem to have the same sun-bleached fields, windmills, and barbwire fences for countless miles, it’s all too easy to get lost. One dirt road looks much like the next dirt road; each one eventually forks off into the brush toward some other dirt road. I have yet to map it all out in my head, which is why my Dad does most of the driving.

On this particular trip, though, I *was* the Dad. This meant I had to do the driving with my son when I hopped on The Mule and half-listened to Jane’s seemingly simple directions to visit the spiritual epicenter of the ranch: The Hogan. If you’re not aware, a hogan is a traditional Navajo shelter used for ceremonial purposes. Its function wasn’t all that different for Jane as my Uncle Randy was said to have conducted meditations days on end there. In my mind, it sounds ludicrous and brutal to perform such an act, since Texas doesn’t provide the mildest of summers and poisonous snakes are in abundance.

What West Texas does best, though, is sunsets. There may be much I’ll never miss about living in Texas, but the sunsets are legendary. Seeing as the hogan is situated on top of a hill overlooking the ranch, it provides the perfect vantage point. Wanting to not appear like the city boy I was, I didn’t listen to Jane’s directions and, well, let’s just say a wrong turn at the ranch can lead to interesting results.

Before we get to that, you should know about Lefty. The ranch has seen many such dogs through the years. Feathers was the first I recall. He had clumps of ticks on him so thick I’m surprised he had any bodily fluids left in him. The story goes he ran off into the sunset with a pig and was never heard from again. Next, there was Molly, who was very much a lap dog and wasn’t nearly so adventurous. Others followed, I’m sure, but the most recent addition is a lovable bulldog-mutt mix with too much spunk for his own good. This is Lefty.

Jane has an evening routine of jumping in the truck and making Lefty run ahead to burn off some of his boundless energy. Dirty as he is, Jane still likes him up in bed with her, and it’s best that he’s wore out.

This particular evening, Mason and I took on the chore. Lefty ran ahead of us and we followed. If we took a turn, he cut back through the brush and again took the lead. One such turn had us slowly climbing a rocky incline with Lefty already well over the horizon. We could’ve more easily walked the distance up, but I thought my boy would get a kick out of the bumpy ride. Besides, the last thing I wanted to hear was the sound of a deadly rattle in the underbrush while on foot.

As we peaked the hill, it was clear we’d taken a *very wrong* turn. The sun was almost level with the landscape, beating a luxurious amber, and finally on its way down after another hot day. What we didn’t expect was the perfect silhouette of a full-grown donkey. Black against the sky and braced for a fight, the donkey brayed hoarsely and bared its bricked teeth in Lefty’s face. Flecks of spit shot from its open mouth in anger as Lefty planted his paws firmly without flinching.

I’ve since been told that the she-mare, which goes by the name of Hillary (a not-too-subtle political jab there), is fairly harmless. I have to admit, my first reaction to the scene as I topped the hill with a donkey and a dog ready to brawl, was to laugh. My next reaction, though, was when my Dad genes kicked in. Lefty soon took off and the donkey, still reeling from the confrontation, turned its eyes on us.

I tried to oh so casually wheel the ATV around, maybe let the beast know we meant no harm. It quickly became apparent, as snorts and hoof stomps followed us, our slow descent down the rocky trail might not end so well. Of course, we made it out alive. No heroics were required on my part, no dramatic act to protect the life of my only son. We just made it to the bottom of the hill and the donkey had wandered off.

Truth be told, though, that moment was the only time I felt fear while at the ranch. It seems silly now, but in the moment, I admit, I was *afraid*. Of all the ways to have met a grisly end in the wilderness, boxed to death by a donkey was never a thought. Don’t get me wrong, I’ll still keep an ear out for rattlesnakes on the trail and a suspicious eye for spiders under the toilet seat. But now, I have one more threat to my senses sharp for: The Mule.