

Being a 'cowboy'

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Uncle Carl has worked the oil rigs for as long as I can remember. We would never know if he was going to show up at Christmas or Thanksgiving until that day. It all depended on whether his boss gave the crew the time off or not, and that depended on the price of the crude oil. Sometimes he would drive twelve hours straight back from Saskatchewan to be with us. Other times he would be unreachable, working somewhere out on the flat, frozen land. One Christmas when he came home, he hadn't told anyone that he has lost part of a finger a few months earlier, and he made a practical joke out of it. He came up to me and did the trick where he pretended to pull part of his finger off, which is usually done by tucking the finger back and making part of the thumb on the other hand look like it was the detached part of the finger. This time there was no 'just kidding' part at the end, and he laughed for half an hour after I shrieked when I discovered that there was indeed a part of his finger missing. But I loved it when he payed attention to me even if he sometimes shocked me. I didn't even have any bad feelings for him after he accidentally dislocated my arm when he was trying to put me on his shoulders; I just cried until my relatives gave me candy and then we found out my arm had popped itself back into its socket on the trip to the emergency room. My uncles who work the oil rigs are often away from home for months at a time. They work fourteen-hour days or more through every season that the prairies throw at them. All three of them dropped out of high school as soon as they could, but now they earn more money than a lot of people who went to university. Life on the oil rigs is lonely. When I was a child, it was not unusual to get a drunken call from one of my uncles in the middle of the night, wanting to talk to all four of us kids. and tell us that he loves us. We would make jokes about it and warn each other as we passed the receiver, but I felt my uncles' isolation and identified with it. When my brother Jack died, they were his pallbearers. They carried his coffin without crying from the church to the hearse. I looked up at them when they passed by me and hoped to be strong like them. (...)

Sometimes in daydreams, I pictured myself as one of them, out in the middle of the prairies driving alone in my truck, blowing smoke out the window, and sleeping in hotels and temporary trailers. I would listen to Garth Brooks, Willie Nelson, and Randy Travis. My hands would be dirty with crude oil. I wanted to be a cowboy so that I could hold back my tears and protect my family. I used to smoke and drink, but then I quit both. I never learned how to drive, work the oil rigs, or ride a horse, but I did write songs about these things. I was not a cowboy in reality, but my heart always felt lonely enough to sing about it with conviction. When I'm scared, I stand tall and saunter around like my uncles. I make wry jokes out of the side of my mouth to protect myself. I have learned things that they don't tell you on the prairies, like that crying is a good thing, but I will always fall back on the kind toughness that I learned from my uncles whenever I feel completely alone.