

## Pointing Towards Chicken

by

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I adjusted my hat in the mirror, which was the only part of my room that looked even vaguely familiar now. My clothes, toiletries, bedding, even my Sony CD boom box had been stashed into the three piece, black Samsonite luggage set which my parents had bought for my trip to Fairbanks. Now I was taking them with me to my job in Chicken. The only things of mine left in Fairbanks were my computer, wall hangings, and school books, all which had been placed in storage during the past couple of days. Now, due to a not-so-thorough cleaning, not even the familiar dust balls remained in the room.

I checked my hat again in the mirror. It was a black cowboy hat with a brown leather strap circling the middle, and the crowning piece of my attire. Black Reeboks to black Levis to a black leather jacket made me look either menacing or ridiculous. I tended to believe the former. The only semblance of color I allowed was my white tube socks (the only type of socks I would wear) and a colorful shirt; on this day it was a light purple T-shirt with a fish pattern running across it.

I looked at my watch; it was time for me to be heading out. I was supposed to meet Otis in front of the museum by eight o'clock, and I didn't even know who Otis was. I remembered first hearing about him though.

"So how am I going to get there?" I asked the electronically distorted voice of Susan, who, with her husband Greg, was going to be my new employer. It was required that I leave the dorms by noon on May fifth, and she wasn't going to be picking up the other employees from Fairbanks until the eighth. I didn't have a place to stay in the duration as most of my friends were leaving Fairbanks that summer.

"Well, a friend of ours happens to be coming over on the fifth anyway. I think you could get a ride with him. His name's Otis. Here, I'll give you his number," Susan finished by reading me the number, though my thoughts were dwelling more on his name.

"Hello. Can I speak with Otis please?" I later found myself asking a secretary. Susan had given me Otis's number at the meat processor's.

"Hey, this's Otis," a Texas drawl came over the phone. It was definitely a Texan accent. It didn't twang like a southern one, yet it still had the familiar "awl" sound at the end of the words which immediately made me think "redneck."

"Sure, I can meet y'all there 'bout eight. I'll be drivin' a pick-up. Oh, I'll have a black baseball cap on so y'll know it's me," Otis replied later in the conversation.

"Okay. I should be pretty easy to recognize. I'll be wearing a black cowboy hat," I stated and then quickly wrapped up our chat.

"Are you ready?" asked my roommate Desmond.

"Sure," I exhaled. My throat was starting to get a little raw. It could have been the lack of sleep that was the cause. Since all of my bedding had been packed up, the little amount of sleep I did get was on a bare mattress with my jacket as a pillow. I didn't sleep much anyway. Janelle and I spent most of the night talking. She had just left me, with not too few tears, to go clean out her room, as she didn't have much time before her bus left for Denali.

Desmond and I waited by the glass entrance to the University of Alaska Fairbanks's museum in relative silence. With all my possessions packed in them, my bags were far too heavy for me to take them on the long walk to the museum alone. Otis wasn't able to understand my directions to the dorm, so we had decided to meet at the museum as it was the only place on campus that Otis knew of.

I was too nervous to sit on the nearby wooden bench as Desmond had, so I began to pace. Desmond was making his normal insightful remarks.

"That truck looks trashy enough to belong to an Otis," came from the bench. The truck did look bad enough, but thankfully it passed us by.

"I don't think running away to Chicken will solve your problems, Paul," Desmond said with such a look that I couldn't tell if he was joking or not.

"I'm not running away," I stated with false certainty. "I'm going there because of the job."

"Uh huh," Desmond was looking right at me.

"I am. I'm being paid six dollars an hour and room and board is free. Besides Janelle had already gotten her job for Denali," I could tell I was wavering.

"Whatever. Hey, that's a nice truck. Nope, it's driving by too," he was trying not to look at me now. "It's your decision. Not mine."

"I know," I had continued to pace the whole time.

Suddenly Desmond broke out laughing, "I bet that's it! With how your luck is going, that has to be the one."

The same terrible thought had crossed my mind when I first noticed this truck. It wasn't horribly disfigured, in fact it looked like a nice truck, but it was covered in mud and dust. A dirty, red four-wheeler with a gun holster attached was taking up the bed of the truck, and a full gun rack sat in the rear window of the cab.

I tried to slow my heart down as the truck didn't make the turn to come where we were. "That was *not* funny. Not a bit," I glared down at Desmond.

"Hey, look. It's coming back."

I looked, and it was. My heart was marking double-time as the truck began to pull into the lot across from the museum. Desmond was laughing hysterically at my predicament.

Otis was exactly the type of person I had dreaded he would be. He was wearing a dirty red baseball cap with a patch of the Confederate flag stuck on the front, the classical Alaskan-red flannel shirt, and a pair of dirty blue jeans held up by faded rainbow suspenders. He was a stout man, one who looks like a professional football player. His body seemed to be curved or expanded in the perfect shape to fit the mold of any couch or chair that might be at hand. He had the appearance of a man who enjoyed hunting and beer, two sports which I myself could never get into the spirit of.

I first hoped that this man wasn't Otis. He was, after all, wearing the wrong color of baseball cap. Still, my gut knew that the man approaching was my ride for the eight hour drive to Chicken, even before he opened his mouth.

"You're Paul?" he asked in the drawl which I recognized from our previous phone

conversation.

"Yes. Are you Otis?" I was so happy that I was able to do something other than just nod.

"Yep. These your things?" he asked as he eyed my luggage. I could tell he was thinking the same thing I was. The bed of his truck had looked pretty packed at first glance, and even more so at a second.

Otis hadn't more than glanced at my companion. "Well, I guess we can find a place for them somewhere. Uh, are you comin' along too?" he had managed to meet eyes with Desmond.

"No. I just came here to see him off," Desmond had changed his voice into its educated mode. This was a trick I had seen him do in front of interviewers, people of importance, and white people who might think that blacks did not know how to talk properly.

"Here, let me give you a hand with this," Desmond added quickly as Otis started to grab my luggage. Yet Otis picked them up without any problems. He then turned around and started to take his strong strides to the truck.

The moment his back was turned, Desmond started in with his silent laughter. It was as though the sound had been turned off. He was holding his gut and bending over to keep his balance, but not a peep managed to voice itself. I just glared back at him, hoping that my fear wasn't showing on my face.

Otis threw my bags into the back and started shoving them between the four-wheeler and the sides. I grimaced, thinking of my boom box and CDs, as Otis started cramming the bags in. I tried to turn my attention to the truck. I noticed that the bed also contained several coolers, a case of Diet Coke, and a case of beer, all of which Otis was moving around to make room for my stuff.

"I wonder how many of those he's had," Desmond pointed at the beer when Otis' back was turned again.

I glared at Desmond, told him to take care of himself, and jumped into the passenger side of the truck.

"Good luck," whispered Desmond. He then turned back towards the dorms shaking his head and laughing to himself.

Otis moved one of his guns out of his seat so he could get in. Otis mistook my look towards the gun as interest and began to tell me about the ones in his truck as we pulled out of the lot.

"I have a hunting rifle and a shotgun in the rack. That pistol there is to protect me from bears." He pointed at each one in turn.

"What's this one for?" I asked indicating a second pistol he had in the cab.

"That one's for everythin' else," he smiled at me. He then began talking about how cops wouldn't ticket him after they pulled him over and how the new concealed weapon legislation was just what Alaska needed. By the time we had left Fairbanks, he noticed that I wasn't as interested as he thought and so he changed the topic.

"What're you goin' to college for?"

"Life," I badly joked. Seeing it made no effect on him I started in on the speech I usually give my parents and professors, "I'm undeclared right now. I was going to be an engineering major, but it just wasn't for me."

My favorite topic has always been myself.

"So what're you goin' to do?" Otis asked with apparently genuine interest.

"I was thinking of going into English. I'd like to be a teacher. My parents aren't too thrilled with the idea," I do not know why I added that in.

"It's not their problem," said Otis. "Y'all have to be happy with your own life. It doesn't matter what they might think. Though sometimes it's good to listen to them, sometimes you just need to shut them out."

I smiled, somewhat surprised at my new acquaintance.

We were talking about college and how my goals were similar to those that he had for his son when we pulled over for the first stop that trip. I was really beginning to enjoy myself despite my original prejudice. Otis was a very friendly and amiable man to talk to, and I was starting to value his opinions.

We stopped at a tiny grocery store off the side of the road. It was part of a clean structure which held several shops. Otis parked off to the side, next to the beginnings of the forest that surrounded the establishment. He exited the truck, walked a little bit into the woods, and relieved himself.

At first I wasn't sure what he was doing. The store here had running water and electricity; it even had a flush toilet. There was no reason for him to expose himself to nature that way. But the moment I heard the wet thud on the leaves, I knew it was true. I was trying to find something else to take my attention when Otis called me over to the back of his truck.

"Look at them beauties," he said proudly pointing into one of the coolers. Inside there was easily a dozen thickly-cut, raw steaks. Otis picked one of them up, "I cut them myself. These are going to be our dinner tonight. This big one here's for Greg. I had to bring some other meat up for them anyway, so I decided to bring these along too."

I tried to control my shudder. The steak was certainly thick, but it was oozing its juices at me. I had a supermarket mentality of food; I was always associating *wrapped* with *fresh*. I also could not keep from thinking about what he had just gone into the woods for.

Seeing the raw steaks just sitting there exposed insured me that my gag reflex worked, but I managed to politely smile and say, "I can't wait."

We went inside the store and I located a flush toilet before I met up with Otis at the deli counter. The sight of cooked food raised my spirits again, especially when Otis offered to pay for anything there that I wanted. I ordered a package of chicken strips and spicy french fries, and picked up a container of honey mustard to dip them in.

Before we went back in the truck, Otis pulled something out of the back to bring into the cab. I began to work my way into the food. The chicken strips were still moist in the middle and were made perfect by just the right amount of spice added to their crisp batter coating. The

french fries were large chunks of potato that though crisp on the outside were still soft and warm in the middle. Not to mention that the honey mustard I had to dip them in sweetly nibbled on my tongue. I began to think of this trip as heaven.

Otis hopped into the cab and started up the truck. Before he pulled back onto the road he handed me over a Diet Coke, set down two more cans in the seat between us, and opened a can of his own. It took me a blank second to realize that one of the cans between us and the container in his hand were both beer cans.

Desmond's earlier statement pounded through my temples: "I wonder how many of those he's had." I tried to pretend that it wasn't happening, but it didn't work. Quickly I opened my own can and tried to settle down the fear. Ugh, I had forgotten that it was diet. Maybe I could still jump out of the truck. All quick rationalizations passed through my head, but I was in a position to do nothing. So I sat in humbled silence and tried to seek salvation in the greasy bags on my lap.

We made one more stop before I had finished my first can. Despite Otis's intake of alcohol, his company was still quite enjoyable, and our conversation was still interesting. I was a little uncomfortable with him, or maybe it was with myself, until he came out of the gas station with ice cream. He was forgiven. We started up our trip again in good spirits.

A little later I finished my Diet Coke and was just holding onto it, when Otis crunched his beer can, opened up his window, and tossed it out. I closed my jaw before he faced front again. I tried to keep my eyes straight forward and pretended that I saw nothing. We drove for a little while more with me holding onto my can as the sole savior of nature.

"How long is it goin' to take you to drink that?" Otis asked.

I swallowed. Then I brought up my can to my lips, pretending to drink some imaginary last little bit.

"Just roll down your window and toss it out. Be sure to throw it hard enough though, otherwise it'll just end up in the back."

I crunched my can and lowered the window. Then, trying not to think about it, I tossed the can out.

But I did think about it. I stayed with that can as it sailed through the air and then landed off the side of the road in the ditch. I watched from its vantage point on the ground as we drove away from it, irresponsible. Crumpled, discarded, not even the chance to rot remained. Many of my sentiments rested with that can, as did I myself. Covered in dust, this trip would only be the first test of my character which I would fail. I still had a lot to learn about myself and the world around me.

Desmond had accused me of running away from my problems. He was right. I was running away from all of the difficulties that life seemed to be handing me. Yet, while I was running away from those problems, I was unknowingly running head on into reality. There was going to be a collision that would change my life forever. I did have a lot to learn, but it wasn't something that college was going to teach me. Chicken was going to be my school, and Otis, my

first tutor.