



PRISM

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Survivors

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■ Danny sat in the tire swing that hung from the old broken down oil derrick behind his Oklahoma farmhouse. He watched the thick black diesel smoke billow out of his father's dark blue Freightliner as it meandered down their gravel driveway. He had seen him do this many times, still he marveled at how the man's huge hands and thick forearms deftly directed the truck and fifty-foot trailer backwards toward the road. The stench of diesel exhaust poured from the smokestacks but quickly dissipated in the constant westerly wind. Potholes that washed out after every rain, pitched the top-heavy rig back and forth as it crawled toward the road. Rain was a rare occurrence over the dusty flatlands, but when it did fall it came down intensely for a few moments and then quickly blew over. These sudden deluges washed out any loose gravel and pock-marked the driveway. Danny had the responsibility of keeping these holes filled, but the task often slipped his mind, just as any chore is easily forgotten by a twelve-year-old. A particularly deep hole dipped the passenger side of the tractor-trailer like a runner whose knee gives out in mid-stride. The resulting jolt bounced Danny's father momentarily off his seat and he slammed the brakes. He looked through his windshield toward the swing and shot Danny a clenched-jawed look.

Danny was accustomed to furious stares from his father and the tirade that usually followed. He learned at a much earlier age to keep his mouth shut during the verbal harangues. Bruises leave their impression on the mind and memory far longer than the body. There was a time when his mother defended him during the altercations, but Danny could hardly remember them now. He did not hate his father, but any love for him was replaced by a simple desire to live up to his expectations, or at least not to upset him.

Danny jumped down from the tire swing and headed for the house. He was scrawny for his age, but tall. His coordination had not yet caught up with his fast growing body, causing an adolescent clumsiness. His bony knees were scraped and scabbed from his numerous falls. Danny lowered his shoulder and leaned into the solid oak door, long since stripped of its finish from endless summer dust storms, and ran inside. He bounded through the living room and stirred awake his mother who was dozing in an antique rocking chair that seemed as old as the house itself. Danny had noticed that she slept quite often during the summer days and rarely left the comforts of the indoors during the hottest weeks. The farm was left in her charge when her husband went on the road and she handled the task grudgingly. She displayed no interest in feeding cows or

slopping hogs and passed most of the chores to Danny whether he could handle them or not. She told him he would have to learn responsibility eventually and chores were the best way. Danny never understood this but he took her word for it. When he did forget, his father's anger fell solely on him, since the chores had been delegated by his mother. An occasional reminder to her son was the extent of her responsibility as far as she was concerned.

"Is he gone?" she asked.

"He's backing out now," Danny answered. *I think he's mad, I forgot to fill in the potholes again.*"

Danny paused for acknowledgement. His mother stared at the ceiling, still slouching in her chair. The subject of her husband's anger no longer evoked any response. After a few moments, she leaned her head forward, almost far enough to look Danny in the eye, and dryly suggested that he check on the pigs.

The pigs were an experiment that Danny's father had taken on two years earlier. The man had grown up riding horses and herding cows on a Hereford ranch outside of Tulsa, but had never raised pigs. Danny had once begged his father to teach him how to tie a lasso and rope steers, but his frustration and subsequent wrath with the boy quickly ended the lesson. The trial and error of the hog experiment evolved into a rather smooth running operation, and Danny learned to handle most of the chores involved. Danny never enjoyed these responsibilities, but he carried them out as well as he could. He knew that there would be consequences if he didn't put forth his best effort, but in the back of his mind he knew even that might not matter.

The herd was small, two breeding sows and one boar, and so far

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they had not been any real trouble. In fact both sows had produced thriving litters in the first year and had proven capable mothers. Unlike bulls, however, the boar tended to be clumsy around the piglets and had stepped on two of the babies from the first litter, killing them. This incident threw Danny's father into a rage more out of embarrassment than anger, and after that each sow had to be quarantined with her newborns to avoid accidents.

Before his father had left on this most recent trip Danny had

helped him rustle the pigs into their small, enclosed maternity wards, Planks that Danny's father had pulled off the old derrick were used to enclose the individual stalls. The loadline chutes were made of steel gratings and attached with baling wire to the load-bearing posts of the flat-roofed pigpen. The walls of the pen consisted of thick chicken wire coated with two inches of gray mortar. Danny's father told him that this setup was best because it allowed the stink of the pigs to leech out through the walls and it could bow and bend in the wind without breaking- Danny didn't think it was not much to look at., but it seemed to get the job done.

Slowly trudging out to the barn, Danny approached the red plywood gate that led to the pigpen. The evening air was growing cooler and a northern wind caused him to fold his arms over each other and squeeze in as much body heat as he could. Distant clouds grayed the northern sky, and the smell of imminent rain convinced Danny to hurry up. He found the gate difficult to open as always and fumbled for a moment with the tangle of rusted wire that held it closed before giving up and climbing over the gate. Danny knew his father didn't want him crawling over, and he looked back over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't being watched, forgetting for a moment that the man had already left. He topped off each sow's water bucket and dumped a handful of powdered feed into each of their troughs, careful not to spill any. The younger black sow excitedly grunted and growled at the sound of the feed bag being opened, and paced directly behind the oil stained boards that separated her from her meal. The older, and generally more subdued sow, being well advanced in her pregnancy, lay still in the corner of her cell. Danny scaled up the feed bag exactly as he had been shown, and climbed out of the barn. He raced the fifty yards that separated the barn from the house and hurriedly shoved open the front door and slammed out the incoming weather.

That night, rain beat down the dust that traditionally blew across the Oklahoma landscape. Huge drops pelted the rusty tin roof of the farmhouse like a million pennies dropping into a metal can. The noise woke Danny from his sleep, Howling winds shook the walls of the old house that had survived so long in this infamous tornado country. Danny sat up in bed and pecked through the drawn curtains in his upstairs bedroom. Jagged lines of electricity flashed in the night sky followed by loud claps of thunder. The visibility from his window allowed him to see his old tire swing but, beyond that, the whole landscape was black. The lightning gave

quick glimpses of the flatlands around the property. Danny somehow enjoyed the rain. It happened so rarely that the novelty of the chattering roof and the flashing purple sky excited him. But just as

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quickly as the rain had arrived, it was gone. The roof was silent again, and Danny fell back in his bed and dozed off.

Danny's mother shook him awake the next morning. He shielded his eyes from the bright bulb overhead and squinted up at her.

"Hurry up. We gotta go check on those pigs. The barn roof blew off," his mother said. Danny eyes spread wide as he hustled out of his bed

He bounced to his feet, but straightened his back slowly. He stuffed his feet into his old work boots, not bothering to put on socks. For a moment, his father's face burst into his mind's eye. The man's jaw muscles flexed and his brow lowered. Danny shook himself from this dread and grabbed his jacket from the closet. He headed out to the barn and found his mother already there, staring at the decrepit structure. The roof was peeled back, half still attached and half swaying in the now dying wind. Danny increased his early morning pace and rushed to catch up. He started fumbling with the gate and experienced his usual trouble.

"Let's go, get that thing open," she prodded as she surveyed the destruction. Danny heard her yawn.

Danny finally unhooked the wire from the wooden latch and pushed the rain swollen gate open. immediately, the black sow snorted and started pacing. Danny ignored her and looked to the

other pen. He froze. The old sow was still lying down, now in deep mud. She had given birth in the night, and eight muddy piglets lay strewn about the ground, Only one was on its feet and free from the wet earth. It stood shakily at its mother's side staying close to

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the warmth her body provided. Danny's mother called to him from outside the barn, but the words didn't register. He could not escape the sight of the horror at his feet. Two of the babies lay free of the mud, but were obviously stillborn, Another was buried seemingly feet first, so that only its back and the top of its head were visible. Three more were crushed under foot in the night and were grossly twisted into the saturated earth. The last piglet lay on its back, wriggling, half smashed into the brown and green muck. Its eyes were still closed but its mouth was wide open, squealing. A gash ran from the base of its ribs on the left side to the back of its right hind leg. its mother's cloven hoof had stepped on the infant in the storm and torn open its belly. Mud caked its motionless hind legs, but its front feet squirmed in the stagnant air like a drowning boy grasping for a rope. The blood pumping through its tiny arteries gave its thin white skin a pale pink hue, but each burst of screaming flushed its face red. Puddles of brown water surrounded the unceremonious graveyard, and dozens of flies had already assembled around the bodies. They scurried from one corpse to another like tiny vultures scavenging what they could.

Though the grunts and barks from the black sow were growing louder, they were a strange comfort, almost soothing. Danny tried to focus on the abrasive, familiar growls coming from the adjacent pen, but the screams of the doomed baby cut through. It seemed to be crying only to him. He wanted to help it, but his fear trapped him like searchlights. Its front legs waved at him, beckoning for rescue, The noise grew unbearable but he could not leave. The piglet looked to be crawling from a grave, but the drenched ground pulled it back with every life-draining movement. Each squeal pierced deeper and deeper until Danny could hear nothing else.

"What's going on in there?" Danny's mother called into the wind-ravaged. bam. He had not noticed that she remained outside. Though he was thankful her voice had pulled him, away from the

incessant shrieks, he felt she should share with him in the horrors he had seen.

"Why don't you look for yourself?" obvious resentment resonated in his voice.

Danny's mother gave no reply. As he came out of the pigpen to discuss the situation and determine what they had to do, he saw that his mother had already turned for the house. His eyes dropped. His father would be home eventually. He would find out what had

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happened. Danny wanted his mother to see the disaster inside so that she would know that nothing could be done. Maybe she'd stick up for him like she used to. Danny was about to call out to her again, but she disappeared behind the oak door. Any decision would be his alone.

Danny turned back toward the pens. The mother sow lay on her side seemingly dejected; the noise did not stir her at all. The flies crept about her, jumping back and forth between her hindquarters and the pooled afterbirth that slowly mixed blood into the muddy ground. Occasionally, reflex would shake her tail, scattering the flies for a moment, but they would quickly gather again. The lone piglet that had managed to avoid the mud fed at her side. The sow shifted occasionally and the baby quickly stumbled out of harms way. It seemed wise to the knowledge that its four hundred pound mother could end its life with the slightest wrong move. Danny watched it and hoped.

The high-pitched wail continued, but the uproar from the black sow had ceased and Danny could no longer escape into it. He choked back the pained screams that echoed in his head, Danny's eyes ached and he could feel the blood pulsing through his brain. He wondered how the mother pig could lie there in the midst of this great tragedy. He ran his fingers into his hair and squeezed his scalp, grasping for some rationale. He could not comprehend her indifference. Desperation made him want to grab her by the ears and demand to know how she could sit idly by. She surely had to sense the torment that consumed her baby. She was a parent. She

should show affection for her fallen children, at least concern. Basic human decency demanded it. She had to hear the screams of the languishing infant.

A brief realization passed over him and he recognized once again that she was merely a pig. Her maternal instincts toward the dead piglets had shut down the moment they fell silent. Practicality, no doubt, overtook any grief she might have felt for the deceased and she focused her attention on the one that lived. Her inaction could be forgiven. But another survivor still cried, and she paid it no attention. Why didn't she do something? It needed help in the worst way. It was dead for sure, but couldn't she comfort it? Wouldn't a motherly nudge from her snout let it know that it was not alone in its misery? Maybe put it out of its misery...Danny didn't know if she wanted to and he didn't know if she even cared. All he knew was that she had turned her back on it. Her sin was not crushing it into the ground in the chaos of the storm, or splitting it open for the flies. Her sin was indifference, and Danny hated her for it,

Danny didn't sleep that night. He tossed and turned, occasionally dozing, but getting none of the escape from his reality that deep sleep usually provided. The piglet's squeals pulsed through his short, abrupt dreams, just as they had entranced him the previous morning. He woke to the chilling realization that he would have to rescue this infant from its plight. Its mother had disregarded it, but he could not. His pity had given rise to affection, and his affection demanded that he act. He would have to end its short, excruciating life.

Danny walked exceedingly slowly out to the ramshackled barn. The ground was considerably harder than the day before. The quenched Oklahoma soil had soaked up the rain leaving just a trace of dampness on the normally dusty ground. The sun, which had

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seemed to turn its back on these babies during their birth, once again radiated on the small farm, drying the remaining puddles. Danny's feet still squished in his boots, reminding him with every step that what he expected to find in the barn would indeed be there.

He made no attempt to open the gate. He had resolved to liberate one of God's creatures from an unspeakable existence and he had no time to fumble with a knot of baling wire- He scaled the rain-warped plywood and dropped to the barn floor. He looked into the pen at the fallen infant. Most of the pools of murky water had dried, leaving just the telltale cast footprints of the cumbersome sow. The mud the piglet was entombed in had turned to hardened clods of greenish dirt. Danny suddenly recognized the sweet sound of silence. He stared down and saw that the piglet's once pink skin was now pale blue. The deep gash on its young underbelly had scaled over, and only a few flies remained pestering the corpse. Danny sighed deeply and his chin dropped to his chest. Tears pooled on the bottoms of his eyelids and a single blink pushed them down his cheeks, He wiped them off quickly and turned to leave the barn, A level of relief that he had never felt before swept over him. Mercifully, death had evicted the misery that loomed over the barn.

Danny climbed the red gate once more and sprinted the fifty yards back to the house. The newfound joy he felt had to be shared, His mother would be glad that the siege was over, and that his personal nightmare had ended. A warm breeze threw up a cloud of dust from the quick-drying ground into Danny's face. Any other day he would have been irritated, but today it served as a signal that the worst was over. He passed the tire swing and gave it an exuberant shove as he ran passed the derrick to the house. He arrived at the porch and leapt the three steps that led to the entrance. He opened the heavy door and walked through the house. He found his mother in the kitchen making coffee. He felt like releasing all his emotions at once.

Breathless, he began, "I took care of the pigs. Oh, it was terrible...." The words came out in a rush. He paused to let his mother reply

She nodded, not turning to look at Danny.

"Only one is still alive. I was so scared." Danny tried to catch his breath, "One was in so much pain, mom." He waited anxiously, He waited for sympathy. He waited for a response.

"Dad's not going to be very happy," he prodded "but there was nothing I could do." She poured water into the coffeepot and turned and looked at Danny. His eyes brightened and he raised onto his toes,

She turned her back to him and opened a cupboard to grab a coffee filter. And did not say a word. ■