

Bad Dirt

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ON A NOVEMBER DAY WYOMING GAME & FISH WARDEN Creel Zmundzinski was making his way down the Pinchbutt drainage through the thickening light of late afternoon. The last pieces of sunlight lathered his red-whiskered face with splashes of fire. The terrain was steep with lodgepole pine giving way on the lower slope to sagebrush and a few grassy meadows favored by elk on their winter migration to the southeast. Occasionally, when the sight lines were clear, he caught the distant glint of his truck and horse trailer in the gravel pullout far below. He rode very slowly, singing of the great Joe Bob, who was “. . . the pride of the backfield, the hero of his day”;^{*} in front of him walked the malefactor without hunting license who had been burying the guts of a cow moose when Creel came upon him. The man’s ATV was loaded with the hindquarters. The rest of the carcass had been left to rot.

“This is a protected no-hunt area,” said Creel. “Let’s see your hunting license.”

The ruby-complected senior slapped the many pockets in his hunting jacket. The jacket was new, with the price tag still affixed to the back hem. It was the flashing of the price tag that had caught

^{*}Terry Allen, “The Great Joe Bob (A Regional Tragedy),” *Lubbock (on Everything)* (Green Shoes Publishing, BMI, 1978).

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Creel's eye through the trees. Now the man pulled out his wallet and foraged.

While he waited Creel Zmundzinski listened for a sound he did not want to hear.

After a long search the man handed Creel a cardboard rectangle. It was a business card, and its information contained, along with phone numbers and a greatly reduced illustration of Chartres Cathedral, the words

Reverend Jefford J. Pecker
Persia Ministry

"Where is that, Persia?" asked Creel, thinking of Iran, as the 323 area code was unfamiliar to him. He thought he heard the dreaded sound in the distance.

"Per-SEE-uh, California," said the reverend, correcting his pronunciation in a loud, nasal voice.

"That your church?" asked Creel, studying the illustration. Yes, down in the clump of willows at the base of the meadow he heard the wretched bawl of an orphan moose calf.

"It's quite similar."

"But it's sure a long way from a hunting license." His voice had become very cold. The minister did not know it, but of the fifty-three game wardens in Wyoming he had connected with the one who most hated moose cow killers who left orphan calves to figure things out for themselves in a world of predators and severe weather. For Creel Zmundzinski was an orphan himself who, after his parents were gone, lived with his aunt and uncle on their ranch in Encampment. But truancy, bad friends, and eventually, breaking and entering got him into the St. Francis Boys' Home. Smoldering with anger at the injustice of life and full of self-pity, he continued to cause trouble whenever a chance came. He

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might have graduated from St. Francis to the state pen in Rawlins but for Orion Horncrackle, an aging Game & Fish warden.

Warden Orion Horncrackle had enjoyed the finest kind of boy's life. He and his three older brothers had been brought up in the Buffalo Forks country of the Snake River, astride the continent, camping, riding, and hunting the Beartooth and the Buffalo Plateau wilderness in the 1930s and '40s. After World War II his surviving brothers took over the family ranch, and Orion became the first Horncrackle to attend the university in Laramie. He graduated with a degree in biology, entered the Game & Fish Department a week later, and stayed there the rest of his working life.

He was almost sixty and Creel Zmundzinski fourteen when they met. Orion was climbing the courthouse steps, and Creel, in company with two youth service officers, was lagging down, his face in a sour knot. As they drew abreast Creel kicked the warden in the ankle and smirked. The two men with him gave him a jerk that lifted him off his feet and hustled him to an old bread truck that had the words ST. FRANCIS BOYS' HOME painted on the side.

"Who's the pissed-off kid?" Orion asked the sheriff's deputy who was taking the fresh air at the top of the steps.

"One a the St. Francis bunch. They got some mean little bastards out there."

Half an hour later, his poacher a "failure to obey citation," Orion drove out into the country looking for the St. Francis Boys' Home. It was a dismal stone building standing solitary on the prairie. He could see a rough baseball diamond and a drooping basketball hoop without a net near an outbuilding with the crooked sign LAUNDRY over the door. There were no corrals, no stockyard, no barn, no garden, no mountains in view.

"What in God's name do the boys do here? Must be bored to

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devilment,” he told himself. He walked unchallenged around the building, got back in his truck, and left.

Back in his office he telephoned the director of the home and had a long conversation. Two Saturdays later, Orion Horncrackle, in red-shirted uniform, sat in a folding chair in a cold room in company with eleven fidgety boys, ages fourteen to seventeen, one of them Creel Zmundzinski.

“I know, boys,” he said in the voice he used when talking to obstreperous horses, “that most a you think life give you a raw deal, cheated you out a parents and a home place. But you know what? That has happened to many thousands and thousands a kids and they raised theirselves up pretty good. They turned out decent. They made a mark in the world. I’m here because I want a tell you that you’re not as much orphans as you think. You was born in a wonderful, wild place and I think that if you let Wyomin, your home state, and its wildlife stand in for your human parents you will do pretty good. I’m goin a help introduce you to your new folks. We will be goin up in the mountains on little trips and everbody will have to pull his weight or he won’t come another trip.”

“You mean like a bunch a deer will be like our mother and father?” The kid had a face like a pumpkin with incipient peach fuzz.

“Well, in a kind a way. You can learn a lot from deer.”

“What about birds? I want a eagle for my dad,” said Crossman, catching the idea.

“More like a skunk for *you*,” said Creel, but suddenly they all began naming animals they wanted for relatives.

A very thin kid who looked half-Indian said, “Do we get to ride horses?”

“Aha! What’s your name? Ramon? Right to the point. You know, it used a be you could rub a magic lamp and a genie would stick his head out a the spout and you’d say, ‘Bring me couple good

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horses,' but them genie lamps are pretty much gone now. I'm goin a have to scratch for horses and they probably won't be the best horses in the world but I agree with you, horses are necessary, even if they are mules. And I'll get them."

He gave each of them a map of the state and talked about the Big Horns, the Sunlight Basin, the Buffalo Plateau of his own youth, the Wind River range, Towogotee Pass, Sheep Mountain, Elk Mountain, the Medicine Bow. He talked about pronghorn, mountain lion, the great elk, badgers and prairie dogs, about eagles and hawks, meadowlarks. Yellowstone Park, he said, was mostly in Wyoming and they would surely go there. He gave each of them a field guide, *Mammals of Wyoming*.

Late in the afternoon the director came tapping at the door and blurted at the boys, "Now, say thank you and goodbye to Warden Horncrackle. Time for you boys to do your compulsory exercise. Mr. Swampster is waiting in the gym. Now get cracking!"

Creel jabbed his elbow into Crossman's ribs and whispered, "He don't know he's talkin a the son a the Moose King."

"Yeah, and the son a the Gold Eagle."

"Shut up back there and get goin." To Orion Horncrackle the director said, "I doubt you can do much with this bunch. They're hardheaded."

"Troublemakers, too, I bet," said Horncrackle in his mild voice.

Creel Zmundzinski was not the only one who slept that night with his map and *Mammals of Wyoming* under his pillow, nor was he the only St. Francis kid who went on to a career in wildlife service.

"What! Hunting license! For your information, as a man of the cloth I've often received the kindly nod of local game wardens," the Reverend Jefford J. Pecker roared in his clogged-nose voice.

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“That must a been in California. Sir, you are in Wyomin now and it’s different. Just start down the trail in front of me. I am goin a write you a ticket for poachin.” Creel Zmundzinski found it difficult to be civil to the man.

Ten minutes of outraged protest followed by a sniveling plea to be allowed to ride his ATV to the bottom as he had a medical condition did not move Creel Zmundzinski.

“What medical condition is that? You look pretty healthy to me.”

“What! You’re not a doctor now, are you?” screamed the man. “I have a heart condition! And a bad leg! I have nephritis!”

Creel Zmundzinski waited, and at last Reverend Pecker began walking, turning around every five minutes or so to give Creel a pithy and short sermon illustrated with many vivid phrases. Creel noticed his bad leg kept changing from left to right. It was no doubt tiring to maintain a fake limp. Every now and then Creel urged Dull Knife, his dun gelding, forward a little so that he nudged the reverend.

As they left the meadow the calf’s bawling sounded loud and pathetic. Zmundzinski muttered, “Hope you make it, kid,” knowing the calf didn’t have a chance. When they were halfway down Creel called a sudden halt.

“Back up the trail,” he said.

“What!” But the fellow walked fairly briskly up the trail, no doubt thinking they were going back for his ATV. It came to him as depressing news that the warden now insisted he carry one of the moose quarters down the trail, but still leave the ATV behind.

“What? I can’t do that! That’s a hundred fifty pounds of fuck-ing meat!”

“I’ll help you load up, Reverend Pottymouth,” said the warden kindly.

“Pecker!” shrieked the furious preacher. “My name is *Pecker!*”

“You bet,” said Creel.

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It took a long time to get to the bottom of the trail as the hunter kept sagging against trees and claiming he had to rest.

“All right, now back up for the other one.”

“*What!* You’re going to pay for this, you rotten red shirt asshole. I know some *people*. I’ll see your head on a platter. I’ll have you *fired* and I’ll have your *boss* fired and I’ll make sure he knows *why* he was canned. Because of *you*.”

In the gravel pullout Creel allowed the man to drop the second load of meat in the back of the state truck. Dirty and blood-stained, the preacher stood on a slightly depressed patch of gravel near the far end of the pullout. As soon as he caught his breath he began listing the reasons Creel should not write him a citation. Those reasons included the painful pangs of conscience that would certainly cause Creel grief later, the lawsuit the reverend intended to file against Wyoming Game & Fish, and the reverend’s powerful friends who would make life a constant misery for a certain redheaded warden whose ancestors were undoubtedly related to Torquemada, Bill Clinton, and the Pope. Creel continued to write.

“You fucking hear me? You shithead warden, you’re going to burn in *Hell!*” shouted the excited man, and he stamped his feet and jumped in frustration and rage. Tendrils of smoke rose in a circle around him.

“What?” he said as the gravel sagged beneath his feet. There was a sound like someone tearing a head of lettuce apart. The gravel heaved and abruptly gaped open. The hunter dropped down into a fiery red tube about three feet across that resembled an enormous blowtorch-heated pipe. With a shriek the preacher disappeared. The whole thing had happened in less than five seconds.

Immediately the entrance to the hot conduit closed up and the gravel of the turnaround looked undisturbed and solid except for

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a slightly soot-darkened circular depression marking the fatal entrance. There was a faint sulfurous odor, not unlike that of the tap water in Zmundzinski's trailer kitchen back in Elk Tooth. The horse shivered but stood his ground.

"My God," said Creel to Dull Knife. "Did that happen? Did we see that?" He walked gingerly toward the circular depression. He thought he could hear a distant and faint sizzling sound. He bent over and held his hand just above the gravel where the Reverend Pecker had stood only minutes before. It was definitely warm. He found a twenty-pound rock and dropped it on the spot. The gravel seemed to stir a little, but no fiery hole opened up. After half an hour of puzzled examination and deep thought he gave up and drove home in the dark. He didn't know what had happened, but it had saved a lot of paperwork.

A week later Creel Zmundzinski had a rancorous run-in with two Texas lawyers and their friend, a California IRS agent, who swore Creel would be audited every year of his future life, and that his children and his children's children would also be audited.

"Another good reason not to git married," said Creel.

The lawyers said he would do hard time in a maximum-security cell.

"I sure hope it won't be in the cell next a yours," he said, smiling.

None of them had Wyoming hunting licenses, although two produced Texas licenses and claimed there was a reciprocal agreement between Texas and Wyoming to honor each other's licenses. Creel laughed and said he didn't think so. The men had cut off the heads of the five bull elk they had shot, abandoning the carcasses in an irrigation ditch, clogging it and causing it to overflow. He made them clean out the ditch, dig a pit, and bury the fly-blown carcasses, then drive ahead of him to the Pinchbutt pullout.

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He was careful to park near the road. It was a pullout to be approached with caution. He prodded them toward the far end.

“Just stand over there,” he directed, pointing to where the gravel had a darker color.

They slouched carelessly in the direction he was pointing. The faint circular depression was almost invisible, but he recognized it by the rock he had dropped after the Reverend Pecker’s quick exit and the darker gravel that marked the perimeter of the opening. He supposed it was soot that discolored the edges. He took up his citation book wondering how to get them to jump up and down or stamp. He didn’t even know if that would work. Maybe Preacher Pecker had been an isolated case. Maybe it only worked with backsliding ministers. Maybe some kind of cosmic forces had been in alignment. He pretended to ponder, putting his pen to his lips and tilting his head to one side.

“Gentlemen, tell you what. I’ll let you go this time if you’ll take part in a silly little thing. For my own personal satisfaction, if I’m goin a let you go I want a see you look ridiculous first. I’d like you to give a little jump—like this”—and he demonstrated—“and then I’ll laugh, but I won’t write you up.”

The three friends looked at one another and made faces indicating they were dealing with a lunatic.

“Let’s humor the man,” said the IRS agent, and he gave a tiny jump, barely an inch. Nothing happened, but Creel saw a single faint tendril of smoke in the right place.

“Come on, make it a good jump,” he said, leaping high himself to encourage them.

One of the lawyers sprang into the air with a grace that Creel admired, and as the man landed, the ground opened beneath the trio and they dropped into the glowing borehole. The IRS man had been standing with one foot outside the circle, and for a moment it seemed he might escape, but the tunnel exerted a powerful suction. Creel could feel it from twenty feet away as he

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watched the IRS man whisk in like a fly into a vacuum cleaner nozzle.

So, he thought, the trick was in getting them to jump. It was a wonderful discovery, and he wasted no time in telling his fellow wardens the secret of the Pinchbutt pullout. The Hellhole, as he called it, saved a great deal of tedious paperwork and became so popular that sometimes several Game & Fish trucks were lined up along the road waiting a turn at the facilities. Wardens drove many miles to get outlaws to the wonderful hole. One wrongdoer, after a three-hour drive, threatened to sue for cruel and inhuman detention as the interior of the warden's truck reeked of wet dog, manure, offal, and sardine sandwiches. There is no record that such a suit was ever filed.

They were all sworn to secrecy. Creel did not even tell his closest friend, Plato Bucklew.

The next season Creel Zmundzinski clumped into his favorite bar, Pee Wee's in Elk Tooth. He sat at a back table where Plato Bucklew sat drinking boilermakers and reading the lonely hearts columns in the paper. Creel sighed, ostentatiously. Plato looked up.

"Matter with you? Didn't get any bad guys today?"

"Got plenty. My hand's about wore out from writin tickets. Gimme the same thing," he said to Amanda Gribb, waving his hand at Plato's beverages.

"So your hand is wore out—nothin unusual in that, is there?" He put a salacious twist on the question.

"It's goin a be like that the rest a the season, thanks to the goddamn Forest Circus."

"What's that supposed a mean?"

"It means the goddamn Forest Circus screwed up the best deal I ever had." And he told him the complete story about the

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Hellhole, about the line of wardens waiting to use it, about the unearthly shrieks of malefactors as they slid down into the brimstone.

“And? What’s Forest got a do with it?” Plato Bucklew worked for the Forest Service, and as much as he complained about his hardheaded, shortsighted bosses he did not like to hear a red-shirt, even Creel, put the organization down.

“Tell you what, I got me a bad nasty one today, cocky little rat works in a bakery in Iron Mule, killed a doe. Then he drops his pants and gets down on the ground and proceeds to have sexual relations with the dead doe. And I’m standin about twenty feet away.”

“Jesus!” Plato inhaled his whiskey the wrong way. “That’s”—he drew on his course in criminal psychology—“that’s like deviant bestial necrophilia! What’d you write him up for?”

“Nothin, except he was in a buck-only area. Game laws don’t say a word about deviant hunter necrofoliage or whatever.”

“Well, look at the bright side. It could a been a lot more writin. At least it wasn’t a buck—then it would a been homosexual deviant bestial necrophilia. So what did you do?”

“So I tell him to get his pants up and I take him to that certain pulloff and things sure look different. Looks like the Forest Service had a convention a road scrapers and backhoes in there. It’s all opened up, room for fifty cars, fancy trailhead signs, posts, two a the new shitters, garbage can, trail maps, the works. But I can’t figure out where the sweet spot was. I walked all over that place, smackin the ground with a fence post Forest left layin on the bank, and nothin. Nothin! I got the guy standin there watchin me. He must a thought I was nuts. In the end I had a write him a regular ticket. I told the other wardens, and at lunch we was all there, jumpin around, pokin at the gravel, tryin a find that sweet, sweet spot. Total *nada*. It’s gone.”

“Kind a hard a believe it was ever there. You didn’t say nothin

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about it last year. Sounds like hyperactive imagination. Or mass hypnosis.”

“I wish you’d never took that damn criminal psychology course. It was a *secret*. Couldn’t tell anybody.”

“Suppose so? There was a memo come in late last fall to Jumbo Nottage about a lot a traffic out there at that pulloff. Parkin problem. I guess he thought maybe it was a good place for multiple use enlargement. He probly thought the traffic was tourists and day-trippers. Didn’t occur to him that Game & Fish was roastin citizens in there like ears a corn.” He signaled Amanda Gribb.

“Amanda? Ain’t there a mix drink called the Devil’s Somethin-or-Other?”

“I’ll look in the book.” Amanda had been trying to hear the low-voiced conversation but missed everything except “bestial necrophilia,” which Plato had pronounced in a rather loud voice.

“Yep, there’s somethin called a Devil’s Tail. It’s made with vodka, rum, and apricot brandy.”

“That’s it. Give us two a those. Doubles. In honor a my friend, Warden Creel, who pulled the devil’s tail all last year and wants a do it again.”