

Grandpa's Ranch

Kelcie Zarle

When I was growing up, my grandparents lived on a ranch in middle-of-nowhere Colorado. My mom used to talk about how rich her parents had become since buying the ranch, but I never fully understood. Their house was outdated and they never seemed to have enough cows or chickens to make substantial money off of. Maybe I was wrong to assume that all rich ranch people made money solely off of their cows and chickens. Either way, I was young at the time and apparently ignorant to the other ways a ranch person, like my Grandpa, could make bank in middle-of-nowhere Colorado.

Every summer my parents would drive me a whole 19 hours and 56 minutes, nonstop, from our modest apartment in San Francisco to my grandparent's ranch. The car ride was always a blur. We would leave at 12:00am on a Friday and I would sleep most of the way. During our brief bathroom breaks at various rest stops, my parents would make me do a series of parking lot sprints and jumping jacks to get some energy out, while they went inside to buy more Marlboros and Red Bull.

When I was awake, I would lose myself to the landscape outside my murky backseat window. The distant mountains never seemed to get any closer as we drove straight towards them, but they never seemed to get any further either—they were just there. The vast plains of grass and nothingness were comforting since San Francisco had nothing of the sort—unless, of course, you count that public park a few blocks from our apartment where the homeless people liked to sleep with needles shoved in their arms.

Nothing about the constantly changing landscape outside my window ever looked familiar until we took this one left turn down this bumpy, dirt road. This six-mile path—that most people would drive two miles down before deciding there was nothing to see and turning around—was the path that led us to their property. I would crank down the window and let the fresh Colorado summer breeze and the dust that our car kicked up, bombard my face, while I inhaled deep, suffocating breaths of cow manure, hay and freshly cut grass.

When we finally turned into their matted down, dirt driveway, my parents would make me hop out of the car so I could take a picture next to the sign I had painted with Grandma when I first visited the ranch. The 30-by-10-inch, chipping-white-painted sign, pierced the ground and stood slanted at the same angle year after year. In faded, rainbow-colored letters, the sign read: GRANDPA'S RANCH.

My parents would drop me off for a week or so while they enjoyed a little getaway to themselves at some mountain resort a few hours away. As an only child, I always looked

forward to this little getaway myself. It was a change of scenery that I needed from my boring, sibling-less, summer existence at home that I would return to after my week in paradise was up.

Maybe paradise is an exaggeration. Even though the ranch was a beautiful 10-acres of open, never ending land, that had one outdated home, one ugly, old garage, one redwood barn, one large, ancient elm tree and one abandoned log-cabin-looking barn on it, almost everything was off limits to me. I was only allowed to climb the tree, roam the one-floor house and explore the long-cabin-looking barn. Because I quickly lost interest in that activity after realizing there was nothing to see but broken log beams, rust and cobwebs, I was pretty much confined to the house and the tree.

Grandma told me not to climb past the fifth branch because if I went any higher, I'd fall and break my neck, so even parts of the tree were off limits to me. Grandma also told me that I was too young to go into the redwood—which doubled as Grandpa's workshop—but what did age have to do with being able to go into a stupid barn? I guess I didn't care enough to question anything they told me. Having grown up without siblings, I knew how to keep myself busy, so I was content with climbing the tree and getting lost in a different book every day, all while taking in the beautiful scenery around me. That was my version of paradise and every summer vacation at the ranch was like that—that is, every summer but one.

One summer, my parents and grandparents decided to give me a full 2 weeks on the ranch. At the time, my mom had recently been promoted so she wanted to treat herself and my dad to an extra week at the resort. My grandparents were happy to take me for longer than my normal stay, especially since they had bought a new horse—a black Mustang, or better yet something new to keep me busy. They told me that if I promised to help take care of him while I was there, he wouldn't be off limits to me. I had never touched a horse before, so my 12-year-old self was beyond excited for my vacation.

We left at 12:00am on a Friday, drove 19 hours and 56 minutes east, took four bathroom-sprint-jumping jack-Marlboro and Red Bull restocking breaks, turned left down the dirt path, drove six more miles, inhaled dirt and smells of manure, took a picture next to the slanted, rainbow-lettered sign and finally arrived in paradise. Grandpa greeted me on the porch steps with a warm hug that smelled oddly—but characteristically—of eggs and nail polish remover, while Grandma handed me a sizzling bowl of Annie's white cheddar mac n cheese shells. My parents stretched, waited for me to finish my meal, smoked a cigarette apiece, then said their goodbyes and headed to the resort. How they went from driving all day to driving another four hours made no sense to me, but that's what they did, and I did what I did best—I didn't question it. I'll also never understand how I was always able to fall

asleep so quickly after sleeping for the majority of the car ride, but I shut my eyes and eagerly dreamt of the horse I was going to meet in the morning.

When I woke up, I wolfed down a stack of blueberry pancakes and a few bacon strips that Grandma had ready for me. After shoving my dirty dishes into the sink, I sprinted out of the house to greet Grandpa at the log-cabin-looking barn. Not much had changed—broken beams and cobwebs still crowded the interior. There was, however, a new makeshift stall in the back corner where Grandpa and the mustang stood. When I say I've never seen any living thing so big, I mean, to this day, I have never seen anything so big. I always viewed Grandpa himself as a larger-than-life creature mainly because of his big old beer belly and tangled white beard that made him look like Santa Claus—but even this creature towered over him. It was love at first sight and I was in awe. Grandpa let me name him Steve—because who doesn't want a horse named Steve—and he showed me how to take care of him.

“Now Ella, I'm gonna be gone on several day trips in the next couple of weeks while you're here so I need you to pay close attention so you can be in charge of Mr. Steve here,” Grandpa said. I nodded, turned on my listening ears and spent all day with Grandpa learning how to feed, clean and safely transport Steve from inside the barn to the gated roaming area outside without him running off. Before I knew it, the sun went down and I was told to go inside even though I didn't want to. Grandpa assured me Steve would be there the next day and the day after and the day after that, so I finally went in, ate dinner and passed out again.

Every day from there on out, I took care of Steve. Grandpa would leave after breakfast in his rusty red pickup truck to go wherever he went and sometimes wouldn't return until after dinner—but, honestly, I was too preoccupied to even notice. I became so obsessed with taking care of him that I had totally abandoned my normal routine of reading on my spot on the fifth branch of the elm tree in front of the house. Instead of interacting with book characters, I was able to interact with a real life being, so I thought it was for the best. I told Steve everything from secrets I never told anyone to stories from my imagination, but he never got annoyed like I imagined a sibling would. He just stood there munching on hay, swaying his tail and swatting away flies with slight movements of his ears—he was a great listener.

One night, I was sitting on Steve's back, staring up at the stars when I heard Grandpa's truck roll into the driveway. He didn't like it when Steve was outside when the stars were out, so I quickly brought him back to his stall, gave him a kiss and said goodnight. I ran through the darkness to the house and walked in to see Grandma holding a wet kitchen rag to Grandpa's head.

“What happened Grandpa?” I asked, confused as to why the rag was turning red with every passing second.

“Oh, nothing Ella! I... uh... just hit my head! Nothing to worry about! Your Grandma has it under control! Why don’t you... uh... head off to bed?” Grandma pressed the bloody rag to his head, looked up, forced a grin and nodded in the direction of my room.

As I put my pajamas on and brushed my teeth, my imagination began to overflow with things I had once read about: a tree branch falling on his head, falling on pavement, a bird flying into him, someone throwing a rock at him... I stopped myself before I fell down a rabbit hole and began to think up more gruesome things. After all, they said he just hit his head—I didn’t question it and let my mind fill with ideas of what to do with Steve the next day.

I drifted off into a pleasant sleep but woke up to the faint sound of one of those screaming whisper matches—the one that parents like to have when they want to fight, but don’t want their kids to hear in the other room. I was only half awake, but I could make out some of the conversation.

“I thought it’d be my last... they said they’d shoot if I didn’t give it... they hit me unconscious... when I woke up, the whole lot of it was gone from my truck... not enough money to give him... do you want him to come here... if I don’t get the money, he will come here and shoot us both!” Grandpa whisper-yelled. I imagined his face at that moment—an angry Santa—and grinned with sleepy squinted eyes. I was too tired to fully understand. Plus, my parents always told me that it was rude to eavesdrop on people.

“You’re going to break her heart,” I heard Grandma say. The front door slammed, and it was over just like that—why did I have to wake up for that? I heard footsteps outside my door before Grandma slowly cracked it open and peeked in to see if I was awake. I was awake, but my eyes were closed and soon enough I drifted into a deep sleep.

The next morning, Grandpa was gone before breakfast. Grandma said he had important business to attend to and that he had to take Steve with him. I was bummed that I didn’t have someone to play with, but it was nice to have some alone time in the tree. Grandma sat in her rocking chair on the front porch and I sat in the tree and we talked and read and sang—and did a little bit of everything that required little movement—all day until Grandpa returned. Steve wasn’t with him.

“Where is he?” I demanded.

“Ella don’t be mad now. I know you loved him, but I needed to sell him so he could go do what he was meant to do... race! He’s a racehorse now!” Grandpa said with a smile and open arms, hoping I’d run into them and give him a hug. I slowly walked past him with tears

in my eyes. I didn't believe him for a minute. I wasn't stupid. I knew he had to sell Steve to get money for whoever he was talking about the previous night.

"I didn't even get to say goodbye," I managed to say through my deep sobs.

"Shh. I know. I'm so sorry, sweetie," Grandma said as she held me and stroked my hair. "Sometimes bad things happen to good people."

She tucked me in, but I couldn't fall asleep. How could Grandpa do something like that? This time I really wanted to question it. I really wanted to understand. But, I just couldn't. I cried and cried and cried some more until I finally drifted into sleep.

I stared at the ceiling for a while when I finally woke up the next morning. I had nothing to look forward to. Steve was gone and after realizing how much fun I could have on the ground, reading a book up in a tree suddenly seemed unappealing. I had no appetite, so I slipped out the back door and walked to Steve's stall. All day, I sat in the hay and talked to myself as if he was still there.

I must have fallen asleep because the sound of distant sirens shook me awake—I only ever heard that sound in San Francisco. I walked over to the tree and climbed to the fifth branch to see if I could see anything from up there. I couldn't, but I could hear the sirens getting louder. I heard a crash in the kitchen and out came Grandpa. I had never seen him run so it was entertaining to see him attempt proper running form as he made his way from the house straight to the forbidden redwood barn. More crashes of breaking glass came from his workshop as the sirens grew louder, until I could see the flashing lights of seven police cars coming up the driveway one by one. None of my books had ever prepared me for anything like this. I hugged the tree like I once hugged Steve's neck and my heart beat harder than ever before. I was in shock.

Like those 19 hour and 56 minute car rides, it was all a blur. Officers with gas masks and angry, barking dogs kicked in the door of the redwood barn. The police shoved Grandpa against the hood of the car and handcuffed him. He cursed and spat and grunted until he was forced into the car and I couldn't hear or see him anymore. Grandma screamed and sobbed in the arms of two officers at the front door of their outdated home. The sirens rang and the lights flashed and I stood there in shock, unable to move. A female officer finally noticed me and told me to come down. I did—my parents told me to always do what a police officer said—and I stood paralyzed at the base of the tree as she draped a blanket around my shoulders.

"I'm sorry, kid. Your Grandpa was just involved in some illegal business with some bad people. I don't want to be the one to tell you, but you'll understand one day," she said.

The police cars finally drove off once Grandma quieted her sobs. We fell asleep on the couch in the living room after sitting there in confused silence. She must have called my parents because they were there the next morning. I was told to play outside while the adults talked inside. I didn't have the energy to do anything. The perimeter surrounding Grandpa's redwood was covered in caution tape. My parents told me to pack up my stuff and say goodbye to Grandma, so I did, and just like that my 2-week vacation on the ranch was cut short.

"Ella, don't ever do drugs, don't ever sell drugs, don't ever get involved with people that do or sell drugs! For heaven's sake especially not meth! Jesus Christ, what the hell was my dad thinking! No wonder they had so much fucking money! And to think I was going to let them pay for her college tuition with that fucking drug money!" My mom ranted every couple of hours.

At the time I didn't know what "meth" was, but I imagined it was something similar to what the homeless people shot up into their arms at the park back home. All I could think about was how I had lost two loved ones that vacation, and I didn't get to say goodbye to either. Maybe Grandpa deserved it for taking Steve away from me.

When we got home, my boring, sibling-less, summer existence resumed as expected and no one really talked about what had happened. Mom told me that Grandpa was going to be in jail for a long time and that Grandma had decided to sell the ranch to move closer to us—that is, the FBI basically kicked her out after finding dangerous chemicals used for cooking meth in Grandpa's workshop and that ugly old garage of theirs. I saw a lot more of her, which was nice, but she seemed so lonely without Grandpa and out of place in her retirement community.

Life went on, however, and soon the ranch became a distant memory. I never got the chance to go back, though I sometimes go back in my dreams. I hear Steve's soft grunts as he stands in that makeshift stall of his. I smell the manure and the freshly cut grass. I feel the wind in my hair as I sit in my spot on the fifth branch. I see the beautiful distant mountains that surround me. But, when my alarm rings to wake me, I hear those terrible sirens and my body freezes as I peel my eyes open and remember that bad things happen to good people and that I never got to say goodbye.

WILBUR SMITH ADVENTURE WRITING PRIZE: AUTHOR OF TOMORROW

COMMENDED ENTRIES



Age 16-21 | 1500-5000 words:

- **A May Murder** by Anna Young (18)
- **Black** by Savannah Hall (17)
- **Counting Cars** by Glenn Davis Howard (21)
- **For You, I Weep** by Grace Tran (18)
- **Frostbite** by Atharva Beesen (16)
- **Grandpa's Ranch** by Kelcie Zarle (20)
- **Howling Behind The Wind** by Emerich Hamilton (21)
- **In the Shadow of the Colliseum** by Alex Atkinson (18)
- **Le Pont Transbordeur** by Emma Crone (18)
- **Once More into the Mist** by Abi Wall (21)
- **Portrait** by Joseph Seed (17)
- **Scars** by Athena Christine (20)
- **Song of the Sun** by Katherine Rose Birditt (20)
- **Speaking for the Dead** by Lisa Ireland (21)
- **The Adventure Line** by Frankie Browne (16)
- **The Head of Miroslav Jovanović** by Sara Thompson (17)
- **The Hobbled Crusader** by Uduakobong Etukudo (19)
- **The Limpet Rock** by Clara Haxell (19)
- **The Little Hedgehog** by Harriet Sophia Drury (16)
- **The Mines of Mirndaruhn** by Hannah Sips (16)
- **The Native** by Kacey Martin (19)
- **The Tale of Princes** by Merlin Ohta (16)
- **The Waterfall** by Devin Advani (16)
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