

AUDLER

by J.S. ran

Sardus, Oklahoma has three paved roads, one postal box, and a lake that turns thick as boot black during the summer solstice. All the kids here grow up with nightmares of drowning. I've lived my whole life on the shores of Lake Sardus, but I never considered leaving until the day my brother sewed me up inside a dead steer.

Audler takes his hit and twiddles the syringe between his fingers. A smile pulls at his harelip, but I know not to reach for the needle before my brother is ready to part with it. You don't fuck with what belongs to Audler. I once traded his Walkman to a boy down the road for some weed. Audler beat the kid so badly the lake came and took him. You'd think someone here would have done something, but no one disputes the will of the lake. If the lake wanted Audler, it would have taken him instead of the other boy.

Finally, Audler passes me the needle. I huddle over the blackened spoon and draw back the plunger.

"Be careful," he says. "The rest don't belong to us."

"But I only got half a shot."

His smile vanishes and I know not to press my luck. I'm as bony as they come, but there's a little pudge around my love handles. I aim shallow, so the heroin will seep into the fatty

tissue. Skin popping is risky business, but it gives you more bang for your buck than hitting the vein.

Audler gestures to the lake festering in the valley below our farm. “Go on now. Give it what we owe.”

Normally he’d do the honors himself, but he’s spent all day repairing split-rails, so it’s my job to carry our offering down the hill. The lake air is potent with the musk of curdled milk and honeysuckle, and the water’s gone the color of a spit cup. Mr. Hibber, owner of Sardus Mercantile, nods to me and upends a bucket of nails into the lake. They glisten as they sink. Galvanized steel. Expensive. Folks like Mr. Hibber don’t take chances with the lake. He waddles back to his store, leaving me to make my offering in peace. I’m sick of owing everything I have to this greasy pit.

“Not today,” I say and shoot the lake’s share.

I toss the empty syringe. It bobs in the black ripples.

The next day Mom finds a greasy wet streak outside my bedroom window.

“What’ve you done?” Her voice rises. “Ain’t it enough we had to give your daddy to the lake?”

Audler comes up from the barn to check on the commotion. He knows what I’ve done, but he doesn’t yell. He talks with the back of his hand. Stars explode across my field of vision, and Mom steps between us before I can hurt myself trying to return the favor.

“You had it coming,” she says.

I nurse my throbbing jaw. Audler knew where to strike. My two back molars are in desperate need of pulling.

Mom clutches at my brother. “You gotta do something. The lake likes you special.”

“Horseshit,” says Audler, “the lake hates us all the same.”

“I can run,” I tell him. “I just need your keys.”

Audler gazes at the road out of Sardus—the one that loops around the lake. “Lotta cars rustin’ beneath them waters.”

“Or I can go on foot. If I head east, I ought to hit Arkansas by morning.”

“The lake’s got a long reach.” Audler points at the storm clouds gathering. “Better you hide ‘til I find some skag to replace what you took.”

“Hide where?” Mom’s voice is cracking again. “That rain’s gonna know every nook and cranny of the valley.”

Audler chews his thumbnail for a spell. “Lake can’t take you if it don’t recognize you.”

With that, he returns to the barn. A muffled shotgun blast reverberates across the stillness of our darkening farm. By the time Mom and I reach the barn, a breeze has picked up, and the tang of old milk and honeysuckle wafts in from the lake. Audler is inside gutting the steer he put down. He digs out the organs then punches a hole between two ribs and threads a length of garden hose through the beast’s flank.

“For breathing,” he says. “Get in.”

I shake my head. He grabs me by the wrist.

“You go in there or you go in the lake. Your choice.”

I crawl into the steer and clamp the hose in my mouth. Audler pulls the baling twine until the carcass closes around me. Warm viscera presses against my face. It takes everything I have not to scream. If I start, I'll hyperventilate and lose track of the garden hose. Mom is sobbing on the other side of the dead animal, but when Audler speaks, he's all business.

"I can make Tulsa and be back by nightfall."

Mom's cries turn to whimpers then fade completely. I call out to her and she warns me to stay quiet. The rain has come looking for me. Even through six hundred pounds of beef, I hear the familiar rattle of an aluminum roof under attack. Those damn molars are aching again, but I keep my jaw clenched. I'm too afraid of losing the hose.

The only measure of time in here is how bad my coffin smells. Hours must pass because the meat starts to turn and flies gather. They echo through the hose. Every so often one follows the carrion scent all the way down. At first, I spit them out, but that leaves them trapped in the carcass with me. The sensation of a dozen flies worming their way through the carnage to lay their eggs on me is too much to handle. So, I start crushing them against my teeth before spitting them out.

The ache in my jaw spreads to my bones until even my toes hurt. This is my body's way of telling me it's time for another hit. The hunger comes in waves. My shoulder muscles knot, making it hard to breathe. I call out to Mom again, but she doesn't answer. Why is she ignoring me? Did she leave? When I twist enough to shout for help, a tangle of fat slithers down into my mouth. Choking and spitting, I stab my fingers at the seam in the steer's belly. Audler's stitches

are as tight as a drum. Fuck the lake. I'm going to be the first human being ever to die in a bull's stomach.

Something along the seam gives way. A beam of pale blue light lances through the darkness. I tear at the hole.

"That's a fine way to lose a finger." It's Audler.

I sob in relief.

"Just be still," he says, "and for shit's sake, stay quiet. The roof's been leaking. There's water everywhere."

He cuts three more stitches and halts.

"What are you waiting for?" I whisper.

"Tulsa went bad."

I peer through the hole in the bull's stomach. Audler's jacket shoulder is weeping.

"You get shot?"

"Just a pea shooter. Didn't even make it through the bone. But you're gonna have to stay put while I try my luck in Little Rock."

"I can't do it."

"You wanna go the way Dad did?"

Neither Audler nor Mom has ever told me exactly what happened that night, and I don't want to know. I just want out of this carcass. Out of this town. Audler shoves something through the ragged hole. It's his beloved Walkman.

"Bruce Springsteen and full batteries."

Tears—more cow blood than saltwater—run down my cheeks.

Audler leans in close. “You’re my little brother and you’re gonna play this smart. You’re gonna stay put, and the lake ain’t gonna get you.”

He sews the hole shut, while I lie back in the carrion darkness and listen to The Boss croon about life and death on the prairie. The music somehow makes it easier to breathe. My brother is right. The lake won’t get me. You don’t fuck with what belongs to Audler.