

## Shootout at the Brokaw Corral

by Adam Wilks

You make your first million dollars during the 1980s. This is the time when people don't think anything about being paid in stock. You get paid in stock. The market crashes, and suddenly you don't have a million dollars anymore.

"That's okay," you say to yourself. "Live the dream. You'll be fine." You're in your thirties; you've got a lot of good years ahead of you.

There's a bit of downtime with your next job, working in a cubicle alongside all the other people who used to have their own million dollars. You set yourself apart by reading manuals about computer programming during lunch, with Sun Tzu and synergy during the evening hours.

This is the time of Reaganomics. You're white and you have little credit card debt. Pretty soon you're doing well for yourself again. Well enough, even, to raise four or five kids, and you're not around enough to notices that they're getting fatter and sicker every day. You work for a company that sells computers or microwaves or long-distance phone service depending upon the day of the week. You make another million dollars in 1994.

It's the late nineties, and your company absorbs nine other companies, and in the process is absorbed by another two. The brand names never change, and you incorporate websites that are part of the paradigm shift that's going to radically transform the business landscape.

You fly to business conventions in Aspen and Maui, giving speeches about blasting apart the tyranny of brick and mortar corporate models. Your wife is back home

in a suburb just south of Chicago. She's a million miles away and no one in the world is going to notice how you spend a measly five hundred dollars in some Presidential Suite that was comped anyway.

You buy low and sell high this time around. You keep your money away from the stock market and cash out from mergers when you get the chance. The quarterly profits continue to beat earnings expectations time and time again. You get to ring the bell on Wall Street. You're featured in a spread in *Fortune*.

The market crashes.

People start blaming the CEOs they celebrated—they want blood, and they start looking at you. Pretty soon your kids are answering the phone, yelling down the hallways of your mansion that it's either a reporter or someone from the Justice Department. You hear them in the other room—your youngest is either eight or nine—and she asks if she can take a message.

People are taking pictures of the house your house with the nine bedrooms and the four Sub-Zero refrigerators. No one mentions the fact that you bought a motorcycle from Jay Leno with all the celebrity signatures and all proceeds going to the Red Cross. You helped a shit-ton of minorities. Not even American ones, either. The employees who loved you are leaving threatening notes about what your daughters are wearing to school each day. You start carrying a gun.

You dream about a life somewhere else, far away from what's happening now. You dream of a place where the sky is the same sky blue of the geek-chic shirts that everyone wore with the tanned-grass khaki pants back in 1999. You dream of place where life is simple and Wi-Fi access is spotty at best.

On eBay, you find a listing for a working cattle ranch in South Dakota.

It seems like the whole family has gone crazy: the wife moved out six months ago because she says you have a problem with Xanax, but she calls every so often to say that she's worried, but also that she's keeping the townhouse you bought her. She sounds drunk, and you tell her so. Your kids cry about not wanting to change schools, and not wanting to live in the middle of nowhere. That's because they're weak and blind like newborn calves. They don't know shit about shit.

You print up new business cards on the nice scented paper with the watermark, and it's just your name with the word "Rancher" underneath. You give these out to everyone you can, and quickly discover that they're pussy magnets. In conversation, you try to flawlessly integrate the new lingo of the old west: your Range Rover becomes your "rig" and your old neighborhood, "Cheshire Creek," becomes "Cheshire Crick." The Armani suits are gathering dust in the back of your closet, and you've taken to wearing Justin boots and the nicest jacket you could find in the Cabella's catalog. DVDs arrive in the mail: *Treating Lesions on Grass-Fed Angus*, *Intermediate Saddled Roping Techniques*, and *Barely Legal Sluts 8*.

Your wife has hired a lawyer, but a narrow majority of the children have assured you that it's "just in case."

There's a new message on your cell phone and an unknown number on the "Missed Calls" list. It's Tom Brokaw. You're ready to skip to the end of the message, because you've been a featured part of the *Fleecing of America* enough to know not to talk to the press.

Out of sheer boredom, you listen to the message over speakerphone while practicing your lasso techniques in a mirror you bought for improving your golf swing. “We need to talk about the water rights along our property boundary,” he begins. Tom Brokaw’s ranch backs up to your own. Your new fencing is supposedly keeping his cattle from water.

You loop your wrist twice and release the lasso with one hand and pause the DVD with the other.

“If you’d like, you and I can take my rig. We can check out the area I need to access.”

Brokaw tells you he’s thinking about this Wednesday to survey the area.

Today is Monday.

He wants to hear back from you, if you’d please call him when you get the chance.

You unpause the DVD.

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Tom Brokaw wears a bollo tie and a pair of ostrich boots that are worn smooth on the toe. He stands beside a Ford F-150 that might just be three years old. The paint is faded, and there appears to be a visible dent in the fender. Through the noonday glare on the windshield, it appears that the interior might be plush rather than leather. You feel your face go red and inch yourself closer to the grill of your Range Rover, hoping that he won’t notice the iPod dock above the dash.

“I like your *car*,” he says.

Out of habit, you want to say something about how your rig has great suspension, or how it's good for herding in cow-calf operations. But you hear yourself begin with the words, "Oh, this?"

And somewhere deep inside you, you want to say that the luxurious cargo space is useful for the transport of downed calves, you can feel the words creep out with claws: "This is my wife's car. My rig is in the shop."

Brokaw smirks and he's so proud of himself as you climb in the passenger seat, with McDonald's wrappers on the floor of the cab. You ask him how handy he is with a lasso.

He says he's never used one.

"*Oh,*" you say. You're sorry to hear that.

Along the border between properties, there's a gleaming stretch of brand new barbed wire.

"There used to be a gate right over *there*," Brokaw says. He points to a portion of the fence where a gate once stood from when the owners from fifty years ago divided up their assets and went their separate ways.

The portion in question is some seventy yards away, and he offers you a pair of binoculars to get a better look at the trail that's been cut off. You've recently had laser eye surgery and so you decline his offer. You don't need them, you say.

"Better than twenty-twenty," you say.

He says that he's interested in digging a trench for a cattle guard with a dual gate structure in-between.

"*Not that you'd know anything about that.* 'Being better than Twenty-Twenty.'"

Brokaw pauses a moment and then says that he'd be glad to incur half the cost of the gate.

"Twenty-Twenty. Like the show." You tell him that you always liked that show.

By this point, Brokaw is halfway back to his rig, and he acknowledges you with a little grunt.

That night you take your Range Rover to a field that was used by the herd earlier in the year. Everything is gopher holes and patchy grass, and it's scarred and gnarly like what your doctor says your liver looks like.

You start off doing donuts and revving the engine in neutral before dropping it into gear. You imagine telling your old circle of friends that the Range Rover just can't keep up with real "ranch work." The Range Rover ought to fall apart at the seams; you're living too tough for soccer-mom transportation out here.

The engine purrs from behind the block, and through the optional soundproofing you can just barely hear the responsive engineering that you can only get for ninety thousand dollars.

You exit the car and leave the door open. A bullet from a .44 Magnum can shatter the rear frame of a car. You count out one, two, three paces in your head. The bullet can then travel through both rear and front passengers. Twelve paces should make something close to ten yards. The bullet can then enter the dash and wedge itself within the engine block. You are far enough from the impact to avoid any resulting shrapnel. The man who sold you the gun told you that story.

You align the front and rear sights and blast apart chunks of your life like so many headlights, listening to ricochet and shatter and the desperate final cries of something that might as well have been alive.

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Back in Chicago, you buy a 1998 F-350 with Bondo on the passenger door. The truck is a uniform Twilight Blue, and you're not so proud that you can't travel to Home Depot, purchasing a latex compound paint; deep red. Brokaw with his rich-ass plush truck with the doors all the same color.

Brokaw is what you'd call a "gentleman rancher." He has no stake in the land.

The next day you head to McDonald's and buy seventeen value meals. You park in the driveway of your old athletic club and eat four quarter-pounders, stuffing the wrappers into the inescapable caverns between the console and the driver and passenger seats.

A voice you can't quite place calls your name from behind. It's your wife. For the first time in longer than you can remember, she sounds and looks concerned.

"How," she says, and wrenches her face up, her eyes wooden, her whole body beaded with the pretty, twinkling sweat that comes from martinis and tennis. "How," she says, like a dime store Indian.

"How are you doi—oh...are you okay?"

You're fine, and you tell her so. You've never been better. You wipe the corners of your mouth. "I've never been better."

She says that she's doing "great" too. She starts to talk about one of the kids, who apparently was suspended from school, and another who was diagnosed with type-two diabetes. You interrupt her: "*I've got a new rig.*"

She says nothing.

"That *Range Rover* just fell apart. *Fell-the-fuck-apart.* Couldn't handle the ranch life like I thought it could." She's impressed, and says "oh." She wants your cock so bad. You can tell.

"The doctor says that Janie will be okay, if we keep up with the shots."

"It got shot, too. The Range Rover: it got shot up."

Your wife repeats the "shot up" part like she's learning a foreign language. You explain that it got shot 42 times with a .44 Magnum. "That's seven full cylinders."

"Oh."

You ask if she wants a bite of cheeseburger. She hesitates a minute, then closes her eyes and nibbles on a portion you haven't yet touched.

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You've decided to divert a stream so that it runs farther from your ranch house than it does now. Brokaw has a ranch manager with a law degree, and you find your inbox stuffed with water rights technicalities.

The man who's redesigning your stream also designed the waterfall on your old subdivision entrance. He bandies around words like "breathtaking" and "robust" in describing the breaks he has planned in the river. You debate telling him to keep his voice down. He asks if you'd like to stock the river with fish. You explain that the river already *has* fish, and he sucks the air through his teeth and says, "Not for long."



Maybe you find yourself driving on a long afternoon along the property line that separate you from Brokaw, and you spot him struggling with a gate about a hundred yards ahead. You might hop out from the cab, and in a strained voice he says, “Nice rig.”

Maybe you thank him as you grab hold of the stainless-steel gate, one-handed, and lift from the legs. It weights nearly nothing. “Not *too* bad,” you say. The gate opens with the gentle ease of a good woman. You set it at rest.

Maybe Brokaw wipes the sweat from his brow, and says that he’s not cut out for the ranching game. “Not everyone is,” you explain.

A horn blares and you jerk to attention. You’re still behind the wheel of your Ford. Brokaw and his ranch manager are in a 2005 Toyota Tacoma with leather seats. The ranch manager asks you what you’re doing, and if you’re daydreaming. You say that you’re not, and the seconds pass in pounding heartbeat ticks while you think of something snappy as a follow-up. Nothing comes, and Brokaw asks you about the progress on the river.

You say that in terms of making it easy for him, you’ve begun work diverting the stream to the property line. Brokaw’s manager chimes up: “Aren’t you worried about silt concentrations?”

You say that it’s crossed your mind, but you say something about installing bio-netting to keep the silt levels low.

Brokaw asks about the rainbow trout population in the stream, and you tell him not to worry about that.

You look away, pulling up cheeseburger wrappers and casually tossing them into the back of the crew cab. You can tell from the silence that one of them wants to say something about the river.

“Don’t either of you worry about this,” you say. You explain that you know what you’re doing. That man you’ve put on the project worked on Cheshire Crick.

You pull away, but not before one of them asks where Chesire Crick is.

Shouting out the window over the roar of a diesel engine, you say that it’s down south. You drive away without another word.

The Black Cat is a bar about twenty minutes away from your property line. It’s the only place in ten miles to get a decent meal, but you make it a point to tell everyone you know that it’s “kind of a local hangout.”

Jennifer used to be married, but apparently either her or her husband has a problem with OxyContin, but that depends upon the loyalties of the person doing the gossiping. Jennifer has the nice ass that comes with mild chemical dependencies, without the sunken eyes or sallow skin.

The first time she met you, she asked for your e-mail address, as it turns out she does for everyone she meets. After that, you wound up on her mass e-mail list that’s 212 names long. She sends out little musings: “You Know Your Husband Plays Golf When...”, “How Women and Men Age Differently...”, “How to Tell Men and Women Apart By What They Drink...” She quizzes you every time she sees you, and though you and everyone else knows that she didn’t write any of these, she accepts the praise as though she had.

After buying her a drink, you inch your hand closer to hers. “What was that line? ‘Women want a man whose privates stay firm,’” you try not to wince at the way she always substitutes in words like “privates” and “poo” when she sends out her mailing. “‘But *men* want a woman whose *whole body* stays firm.’ That was *hilarious*.”

Your hands touch at the knuckle. She thanks you, and smiles in such a way that makes you confident that you’ll be able to bed her.

You are, and you do.

Later that afternoon, you feel the brisk and unexpected confidence that comes from sexual intercourse without the exchange of money. After leaving Jennifer alone so she can chop up some unseen substance and snort it over her kitchen sink, you return to the Black Cat for four more drinks.

Five more drinks.

You’re still feeling confident, and when you can’t remember whether you know how to ride a motorcycle, you decide not to let the details bog you down.

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Brokaw asks you whether that’s Julia Roberts’ signature on the bike.

You don’t look away from the Komatsu bulldozer that’s clearing away another section of land for the new path of the stream.

“Yeah, I think she’s on there.”

“You *do* know that this is worth a lot of money, don’t you? This bike will lose value if you drive it around like this.”

Four migrant workers were brought up from Arizona, because this far north it’s rare that you can find experienced labor willing to work for less than fifteen dollars an

hour. They are visible just behind the dozer, laying down netting to keep the silt from flowing with the river.

There's a bit of scorn in Brokaw's voice: "I think there are a few bugs on here—a couple of them are even on the *signatures*."

You exhale a little bit like it's no big deal. Brokaw is way too into possessions—he's doesn't really fit in out here. "Just wipe the bugs off, Tom." You wonder if it makes him mad to hear you call him "Tom."

He's a real starched shirt.

The Komatsu engine revs again, cranking louder as more fertile soil is piled up to plug the old area of river. He yells a little louder: "The signatures are wiping off *with the bugs*. That *shouldn't be happening*."

You tell Brokaw that it's no big deal, and you make a show of it by suggesting that he sign his own name in place of Julia's. "But then," you say, "I wouldn't want the signature of someone who drives a Toyota." The other morning you purchased a decal of Calvin pissing on the Toyota logo. You explain it to him and tell him that you'll show it to him later.

Your phone vibrates in your pocket, and it's a text message from Jessica, or Jennifer. Which is it? You read the message:

"HOW MANY LAWYERS DOES IT TAKE 2 SCREW IN A LTBULB?"

You put your phone back in your pocket before it can vibrate again with the answer.

Surveying the land as you saddle up on your Harley, you remember the tagline of the eBay offer that brought you here: A plus, plus plus. Three-thousand virgin acres in

Ess Dakota. Exclamation point. Exclamation point. The land might sell for twice what you bought it at now.

The bulldozer roars again. The land is better than virgin.

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Back in Chicago, your old friends ask you for advice about getting their own ranches. Twelve missed calls. Ten new messages. The CPA of your old company, the lawyer who helped sort out matters with the SEC, and two members of the board of directors all want to know if you really know how to use a lasso.

“That is so *cool*,” they say.

They ask if you’ve ever shot a gun in real life. Where exactly *is* your ranch?

People start asking if there’s any available property in the area. “Real estate,” one says, “*Killer* investment M.O.”

There’s talk of people buying their share of a few hundred acres in the next valley. They want to break up a few of the old, larger properties. One of your marketing VPs tells you about putting in *ranchettes*.

Your wife left a message too. She says something about how you haven’t talked to your doctor in something like five weeks. Your liver, it’s been said, has the consistency of an old banana. She says “please” like she really does want you to call her.

The only reason she’s calling is because she likes the idea of being fucked by a real-life rancher. She says that she’s coming to find you. You drive past your old neighborhood in hopes that she might be there. A crew of workers is changing the bronze lettering on the stucco edifice of the subdivision:

*Cheshire Crick*

You erase the message.

Tom Brokaw calls and says that there's a problem with the water flow at the ranch. You're all too happy to come back up: at the athletic club where your wife works out, all the men over 45 have taken to using the polo fields as a shooting range for .357s and .44s, and spend the late afternoons practicing their lassoing while moving on golf carts. Each one wears a cowboy hat with linen shorts.

A Casull .454 can stop a charging bear with a single shot. You're making record time back to South Dakota. You have half a bottle of Xanax on you and make good use of it, chasing the dosage with a generous swallow from an engraved sterling flask. A Casull .454 isn't a gun: it's a hand-cannon. Your phone vibrates again, and you read the message: "3 LAWYERS. 1 2 SCREW IN THE LTBULB, THE OTHER 2 2 SCREW THE CLIENT!!!!" A hand-cannon. Blow a hole through any motherfucker trying to rustle your property, regardless of whether he happens to be in a tank at the time. You drive out through the unincorporated land twenty minutes out from town, right along the interstate. New neighborhoods are popping up everywhere. "Dakota Crick." "Rancho Escapo." Billboards show men in blue linen shirts with cell phone holsters who are mounted on horseback, with rosy, thin children looking up from prone positions—glittering eyes that shine in the triangles between fear and worship and unending amusement. In the center console, the grip of the Casull .454 is moist like homemade bread.

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You take your Ford out to meet up with Brokaw along the property line, where the new path of the river is already winding. About halfway across a field on the way to

meet him, you find a woman with a tennis bracelet standing alongside a Lexus sport utility. A blanket is spread out next to her, with a carload of young children splayed out across it. You drive by, and before you can turn the radio up to block her out, you hear her shout your name.

She looks upset. She tells you to stop. A few of the children have gotten up to greet you, but you accelerate slightly, leaving the lot of them in a cloud of cinnamon hayfever. As you watch them shrink in the rearview, the youngest of the lot appears to snap her head in a sneezing fit.

At the property line, you mosey out of your rig to see Brokaw holding a mason jar against the light.

“Silt,” he says. “The silt barriers you have up—the bio-netting: it wasn’t *sound*.”

You explain that the bio-netting is quite *sound*, and it won’t be a problem.

Brokaw motions to a riverbank full of dead trout, and says that the silt levels already *are* a problem, and he says “are” so as to make you feel about two inches tall.

Brokaw motions to the mason jar full of brown water and says the waters are damned near black.

The words are out of your mouth, and you clamp your teeth down on them they come, trying to catch one by the tail: “It’s not *black*,” you protest. “It’s more of a mocha.”

The ranch manager sniggers a little behind you, and Brokaw says something about how you’re missing the point. By then, it’s too late anyway. He starts in about how you’ve still got a lot to learn about real-life sustenance ranching, and you tell him to suck your dick. It goes back and forth for a few minutes, and he tells you that you’re not

concerned about the land. He tells you that you're not supporting the community with your land management decisions.

You tell him to go fuck himself, and he goes quiet for a second before his ranch manager chimes in: "You know, the paint is chipping off the passenger door. The whole thing is blue underneath."

He mutters "jackass" under his breath, and you're fairly certain that you're sober enough to stand your ground in this argument, and you feel yourself telling him to suck a dick, again. Did you already say that? You call Tom Brokaw a fucking queer.

It feels like your face may be too hot to think properly, and the sweat on your brow seems to form in little roofing nails that make you feel just uncomfortable enough to swagger or stagger back to the cab of your rig.

There seems to be a child standing in your way, and you feel your arm swing just enough to push them aside. The child is weak and comes apart at the hinges like an old screen door that collapses into elbows and skinned knees.

It sounds like the kid might be wailing, and you fumble to get the door open, and four or five different voices won't shut the fuck up for a minute and everyone keeps asking you what you're doing. Your neck feels hot.

You should stop whatever it is you're doing.

And maybe your cell phone buzzes in your pocket the way your heart buzzes in your chest, the way your lips buzz on your face like your left arm buzzes and buzzes and maybe you're tougher than anyone might have expected you to be.