



PHOTO BY ERIC GRANT

Passive-Aggressive Cowboy

COMMENTARY BY ERIC GRANT

Perhaps it was pride that kept Jerry from tapping his higher sensibilities. Maybe it was his bear-like strength, his tree-trunk arms, his massive hands that lulled him into believing he could wrestle his way out of any problem that confronted him.

One thing is certain. He had a penchant for disaster. It was a gift from the Almighty, a result of divine intervention, and watching Jerry at work was like watching a Biblical play.

Everything he did was on a large scale. His wounds were self-inflicted, the result of a sharply honed inability to communicate with others, a keen imprecision in his use of words, a sense of inner confidence that often sapped his best judgment.

Fatally flawed from the beginning, he was Job with more

than just locusts, and Achilles with two heels the size of Texas.

Needless to say, Jerry was born to be a cowman.

His reputation for trouble was well-known throughout the North Fork Gunnison Valley. He ran through hired men like an '80s cowboy through breeds, but he finally met his match when he hired Julio, a Basque sheepherder whose tongue spoke an ancient and difficult language and whose size, strength and stature made him ideal for working on the mighty ZY.

The two learned to communicate with each other through grunts, animated gestures and facial expressions. Somehow it worked. They got the cows on the mountain in spring, gathered them back into pastures by fall and put the hay up by the first of October.

But they always had trouble during calving season. Julio didn't like the long nights without sleep, and he spent much of his afternoon "checking cows" by napping in the cedars. He always missed the scouring calf, and Jerry's patience wore thin. More often than not, he lashed out at Julio like a bobcat.

So it was that evening when Julio came to the boss man's house.

"Jer?" Julio muttered. "You wake?"

"Huh? Yeah. Sure," Jerry responded, shaking himself from his afternoon slumber. Eyes bloodshot, he sat up from the couch. Fumbling for his glasses on the end table, he knocked the Regis Philbin autobiography from his lap and onto the floor.

"We got problem. We got a

heifer calfin' in pasture. She trouble," Julio said.

Jerry reached for his boots, pulled them over his elongated feet and clomped them on the floor. His eyes probed into the kitchen, where the last streaks of sunlight were giving way to dark.

"What horse you want me catch?" Julio asked.

"Oh, it don't matter. Just get a couple."

His instructions seemed easy enough, if not surprisingly succinct, direct and to the point. So Julio stepped outside, grabbed a couple of halters and headed for the pasture.

There was opportunity in the air.

Now, every hired man has subtle ways of getting even with his boss. And every boss is too arrogant to know when it happens. Call it passive-aggressive cowpoking, and Julio was its master. It's a subtle way to pay back the boss for all those holidays spent feeding the cows, all those weeks without a day off, all those humiliating days on the wrong end of the stick, all those years of making what worked out to 75¢/hour.

So Julio caught two horses. First was Ace, his beloved stout bay, a barbed steed of yore, a captivating presence that held the attention of even the most mundane cow. Then he caught Roanie, a roman-nosed, crooked-legged mustang, a present to the family from Jerry's daughter-in-law.

Never mind the nervous twitch. Julio thought, Roanie was easy to catch. The rank ones always are. So he slipped the halter over the animal's nose and led both horses back to the shed, knowing full well the trap was set.

"You got Roanie," Jerry said, his voice cracking slightly.

"No OK, boss?"

Jerry paused, shrugged it off, then mumbled something.

"It be OK, boss. Roanie need good ride."

"Yeah. It's OK. It's getting dark. We gotta go," he said.

Roanie seemed quiet as Jerry saddled up. He seemed sensible

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when Jerry stuck his foot into the stirrup and pulled himself into the saddle. He seemed OK when he dismounted to open a wire gate and even more OK when Jerry remounted.

“Maybe he’s OK,” Jerry quipped, breaking a confident smile for the first time since he got up from his nap.

Even if Roanie didn’t buck, it was a pleasure for Julio to watch the spectacle,

mainly because Jerry simply looked stupid riding that little gelding. In reality, Roanie was more donkey than horse, so Jerry’s long legs draped over the sides, and his toes dragged in the dirt. The horse took quick, itty-bitty steps, and Jerry’s Stetson-donned head bobbed and twitched and bobbed incessantly. He looked like some demented combination of Lyle Lovett, Don Quixote and Abraham Lincoln.

Their strategy was simple, pre-emptive and preventive. Julio, with the better horse, would take the downhill ride, the long loop around the pasture, and bring the heifer toward the calving corrals. Jerry would move aggressively up-country to take the edge off Roanie, then wait along the fenceline for Julio and the heifer to arrive. Together, they would bank her into the pen.

As they parted, they cranked up their flashlights and moved into the darkness. Every once in a while, Julio wheeled in his saddle to see if anything had happened yet. A half-mile away, he could see the dim beam of Jerry’s flashlight probing its way through the cedars.

No wreck yet, Julio thought, but there was still time. The heifer had moved from her afternoon location, and it would take a good 30 or 40 minutes to cover the entire pasture. So Julio rode to the top of a hill, turned off his flashlight to cloak himself in darkness and waited. The view from up there was simply too good to forego.

As if on cue, the colossal struggle began. The beam of Jerry’s flashlight twitched and pivoted and wheeled in the dust. Julio pictured Jerry, his jaw clinched tightly, his long legs stretched into the stirrups and the angry, slobbering, heaving, green-eyed horse plummeting through the oak brush. It was a feast for the senses: a canopy of stars, a cool mountain breeze, the sounds of branches popping and snapping, the grunts of man and beast, the dull thud of flesh and bone striking the ground like a cosmic bag of potatoes.

Then darkness as Jerry’s flashlight beam failed and silence fell on the valley.

Julio had gotten his revenge, and now he set out more intently to find the heifer. He found her in a clump of cedar, bedded down, but still in trouble. He got her up and trailed her in the direction of the corrals.

As planned, Jerry and Roanie both were there to meet him, and they followed the heifer into the corral. Julio praised God for the darkness, for it concealed the smile that stretched across his face. Jerry thanked the stars, too, for it hid the sweat and lather on him and on his horse.

Riding side by side, the moment begged the question.

“Boss, you broke flashlight?”

“Yeah. It hit a tree.”

