

GONE ASTRAY

Written by

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A young man struggles to find his horse that has gone missing  
hours before his team roping event.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

A boot slips in the sloppy mud. JACK, a fiery 15 year old, falls down on his face, now covered in the muck. His flashlight falls from his grasp. It's beam shows the vast dark forest.

WYATT, an ornery 60 year old hired hand, looks down on Jack in the mud.

WYATT

Get up, boy.

Rain pours down on Jack as he picks himself up. Streaks roll down his cheeks. Tears or rain, we won't ever know.

JACK

We need his help.

WYATT

You think he's just gonna come save you after what you did?

Jack shivers as he picks up the flashlight. He continues further into the forest, desperately looking for something.

EXT. RODEO PAVILION - EARLIER THIS AFTERNOON

A pickup with a horse trailer/RV combo circles the corral toward the main gate.

Jack jumps from the pickup to guide it in.

AUSTIN, Jack's stern 55 year old father, rolls down the window and leans his head out to find Jack.

AUSTIN

Jack?

Jack stands on the side railing of the fence directly behind the passenger side of the pickup.

JACK

Over here.

Jack snaps his fingers at his dad to get his attention.

JACK (CONT'D)

This side's higher.

AUSTIN

Jack!

This command, as strong and quick as the snap of his fingers that follows, gets Jack's attention. He points to the drivers side of the pickup.

Jack lets out a deep sigh as he falters to the other side.

JACK

Fine.

Jack guides him back and waves him off once the trailer taps the gate. He shoves the gate wide with excessive force. This blows off a little bit of his steam.

Wyatt chuckles at Jack while he opens the trailer door.

WYATT

You're never gonna get out of his shadow.

JACK

Story of my life.

Jack's subdued demeanor is lifted as YUKE, his beautiful black quarter horse steps out of the trailer and trots around the large corral, saying hello to a few other horses.

Jack stands on the fence railing watching Yuke stretch his hip out from the long ride. CHRIS, his 15 year old buddy who is generally reserved, but has known Jack long enough to express himself, steps onto the fence as well.

CHRIS

He's looking good.

JACK

Eh, that right hip looks a bit tight.

Wyatt pulls out a bridle and lead rope from inside the trailer. Austin meets the boys at the fence.

AUSTIN

Chris, how you been?

CHRIS

Oh pretty good. Kinda nervous for tomorrow. I heard there's gonna be a few recruits from UT here tomorrow.

JACK

No way? Really?

CHRIS

Yeah that's what I heard. How was the drive?

AUSTIN

Long and hot.

JACK

Could've saved two hours staying on I-10.

Jack throws a defiant glance at his dad.

AUSTIN

The slower drive has always been better for his nerves.

A few bystanders who are drinking beer come by to pet the corralled horses. Yuke gets jumpy when his face is touched and this causes him to buck.

WYATT

He's *still* a cagey bugger.

Austin checks his watch. It's past 5:00 PM.

AUSTIN

Better stable him. Then wash up for supper.

JACK

Nah. I'll probably just let him limber up out here tonight. I never throw the rope right if he's too tight on his runs.

Wyatt tosses the bridle and lead rope on the ground next to Jack's feet. He then looks to Austin.

WYATT

He'll be too feisty in the stable if you ask me. And I ain't shoeing him again tonight.

Wyatt winks at Austin and pantomimes himself drinking a beer with a smile.

JACK

He'll settle better out here.

Jack picks up the items at his feet.

JACK (CONT'D)

I know what I'm doing, Dad.

AUSTIN  
New pen, new place, young horse.  
Not a good combo.

Jack can't hold back his reservations anymore.

JACK  
He ain't going to ride right if his  
hips are tight! Geeze dad!

This amuses Wyatt as he latches the trailer gate.

WYATT  
Can't win no rodeo that way.

Austin gives Wyatt a look that says, "*keep it to yourself.*"

AUSTIN  
You done?

Wyatt chuckles to himself as he walks off toward the barn.  
Austin walks toward the pickup, talking over his shoulder.

AUSTIN (CONT'D)  
This isn't up for negotiation.

Defeated yet again, Jack throws the lead rope over Yuke's  
neck. He wipes the sweat from his forehead.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Jack wipes away the cold snot and rain from his face. He  
frantically sweeps the flashlight beam through the forest.  
Wyatt does the same.

Jack pulls out his cell phone to call his dad, but Wyatt  
slaps it from his hands.

WYATT  
Doing that just proves you made a  
bad call.

JACK  
I did make a bad call!

WYATT  
And now you want him to know about  
it?

JACK  
What's the alternative?

WYATT

Man up and find him yourself,  
that's what!

JACK

Don't you ever just shut up?

Jack turns toward the dark forest and sighs heavily. He rubs his forehead in concern, and finally decides to secretly text his dad for help. The text reads, "**Need your help about a mile south in the forest. Bring the trailer.**"

They both hear the whinny of a horse and bolt in that direction. Mud and water splash everywhere.

INT. STABLE - EARLIER THIS AFTERNOON

Chris carries a bucket of water that sloshes on the ground. Jack slides open the stable door and leads Yuke inside.

JACK

Man. He just never lets up on me.

CHRIS

He does know his horses.

JACK

Yeah but every frickin' rule has to be by his book.

Chris pats Yuke on the face and talks to him.

CHRIS

You'll be fine in here, right boy?

JACK

Remember Divisionals? His hip locked up on me his first two runs.

CHRIS

You still placed.

JACK

But I want to win.

Jack stops leading Yuke and just stands there thinking about his choices. He turns to look at the corral, then back to the stable. Chris shrugs and offers some reluctant support.

CHRIS

I don't think you'll screw it up.

JACK  
I know what I'm doing.

He leads Yuke back out toward the corral.

INT. RV/HORSE TRAILER - EVENING

Jack comes into the RV to find his dad reading the paper at the table set up with beans, mashed potatoes, and steak.

AUSTIN  
Where you been?

Jack can't make eye contact with his dad. He tries to make himself look busy.

JACK  
Cleaning up. Where's Wyatt?

AUSTIN  
Beer gardens.

Jack stands at the kitchen counter and can see the corral out the window above the sink. He can see Yuke congregating with a few others horses as he fills up a glass of water.

They both sit down to eat.

AUSTIN (CONT'D)  
Grace?

Jack seems distant.

JACK  
Nah, I'm too tired.

They both bow their heads.

AUSTIN  
Lord, thanks for this day and safe travels. I know we've been through a bit of a struggle, but you got us through it and we're stronger for it. Bless us so we can bless those here this weekend. And bless this food, Amen.

JACK  
Amen.

Jack eats in silence and Austin notices this standoffish demeanor in his son.

AUSTIN  
He'll be fine.

JACK  
You embarrassed me out there, you know?

AUSTIN  
Wasn't the intention.

JACK  
Why you gotta be riding me so hard, especially in front of a crowd?

AUSTIN  
You gotta trust me son, I'm just looking out for you.

Austin takes another bite of his steak.

JACK  
You keep, I don't know. It's like you don't believe I got what it takes.

Austin transitions into a more softer tone in order to reach his son.

AUSTIN  
I know you got it, Jack. You just need a bit more experience. I got a few more years on you, you know?

Jack picks up his plate of food.

JACK  
See, it's like you can't let go and just let me do my thing.

He takes his plate of food into his bunk room in the RV.

JACK (CONT'D)  
I got this.

He slams the door. Austin sighs heavily while he continues to eat his steak.

EXT. CORRAL - CONTINUOUS

The moon glistens over Yuke's beautiful black coat while he stands sleeping in the corral.

A COWBOY and COWGIRL stumble in tipsy and flirt with each other against the steel fence.

COWBOY

I'm a good shot. I'll show you.

The cowboy snatches an old soda can from the ground and sets it on the fence post. He then pulls out his revolver and fires twice. BANG BANG! He misses.

Yuke wakes up spooked. He bucks around in the corral.

BANG! The soda can whizzes up in the air and falls onto the ground. Yuke bucks a few more times in fright. This breaks the chains of the gate and he bolts for the distant treeline.

COWBOY (CONT'D)

Quick grab that gate.

The cowgirl rushes for the gate and pulls it shut before the other horses can get out.

INT. RV/HORSE TRAILER - CONTINUOUS

Jack looks out the window due to the sound of the distance gunshots. He can't find Yuke in the corral!

He bursts out of his room, past his dad to grab his boots and jacket.

AUSTIN

What's the deal?

JACK

Forgot to water Yuke.

Austin chuckles to himself as Jack flies out the door.

EXT. RV/HORSE TRAILER - CONTINUOUS

Wyatt, clearly tipsy, is finishing his cigarette as Jack rushes past him. Wyatt sticks out his arm to stop him.

WYATT

Whoa not so fast hot shot! Past curfew isn't it?

Jack pushes Wyatt's arm aside.

JACK

Get off me. I gotta checking on my horse.

WYATT  
Stable's locked up.

Jack runs to the corral and looks around for Yuke, but he is gone. Wyatt shakes his head and laughs from behind him.

Jack turns from the fence to rush back for the RV, but Wyatt grabs him by the collar and stops him dead in his tracks.

WYATT (CONT'D)  
You ain't got the sense to listen  
to your dad and now want to go  
crawling back to him? Not how it  
works in the real world.

JACK  
You said it was alright!

WYATT  
What do I know? I'm just the hired  
help.

Wyatt laughs at his joke, but Jack is in no mood for it.

WYATT (CONT'D)  
Fix this yourself. Put your money  
where your mouth is.

Jack runs off toward the woods with Wyatt following.

EXT. WOODS - LATER

Jack stumbles through the brush with his flashlight. He hears Yuke whinny and rushes for him. Wyatt is close behind.

Yuke has his back leg wrapped around a barbed wire fence. Every attempt he tries to get his leg out only wraps it tighter, causing it to bleed.

Yuke's eyes are filled with fear and Jack's quickly do the same.

Jack tries to unwrap the wires but they are tight.

JACK  
What do I do? What do I do?

WYATT  
I ain't your daddy.

Jack pulls at the wires but this attempt spooks Yuke to buck, and causes Jack to cut his hand on the rusty barbed wire.

Defeat and shame sets in on Jack's face.

His phone chimes with a text response from his dad that says,  
**"On my way."**

Wyatt is infuriated, knowing that the boss will be coming.

WYATT (CONT'D)

You idiot! Now you *and* I got it  
 comin'!

Yuke's leg gets pulled tighter and tighter with every jerk.

EXT. FOREST - LATER

Headlights shine in through the trees. It's his dad's truck  
 and horse trailer slowly making his way toward Jack.

The headlights act as a spotlight shining directly on Jack's  
 bad decision. Wyatt stands there sheepishly.

Austin gets out and looks at Jack who can only stare back at  
 him while standing in the beams of the headlights.

Austin's weathered face holds back his temper.

AUSTIN

Still think it was a good idea?

Tears start to well up in Jack's eyes.

JACK

No.

They just stare at each other. Austin knows that this is  
 more powerful than any words. Finally Jack breaks the  
 silence.

JACK (CONT'D)

I need your help.

AUSTIN

Been waiting to hear that. Get the  
 pliers.

Wyatt goes to the side tackle box on the bed of the truck and  
 pulls out a pair of gloves and fencing pliers. He walks back  
 passed the boss, but is stopped once again by Austin's  
 powerful arm.

Austin looks to Wyatt with indignation.

AUSTIN (CONT'D)  
I wasn't talking to you Wyatt.

Wyatt understands and coyly hands the pliers to Austin. Austin walks them over to Jack with Yuke still wincing in pain.

Austin stands over Jack, blocking the rain from hitting him in the face.

AUSTIN (CONT'D)  
Cut that middle wire there.

Jack tries, but it's very tight.

JACK  
Can you try?

Austin puts his hand on Jack's shoulder.

AUSTIN  
No, you got this.

Jack snips the wire and it bursts free. The others unwind themselves. He snips a few more.

JACK  
Now what?

Jack's hand bleeds from a cut. Austin hands him his gloves. Jack puts the gloves on.

AUSTIN  
Now, slowly unwrap it.

He does so and finally frees Yuke's leg allowing the horse to jump out of there. Jack takes the lead rope and walks him past his dad and Wyatt, toward the trailer. Yuke limps in pain.

JACK  
You think he'll be okay?

AUSTIN  
Hard to tell. We'll have to see about it in the morning.

All three get back into the pickup truck and Austin drives toward the pavilion.

INT. STABLE - LATER THAT NIGHT

Yuke limps up to take a bite of hay that Jack throws into the feed trough. Jack knows his horse is injured and will not be able to compete tomorrow.

He begins grooming Yuke's side with a curry comb.

JACK (UNDER HIS BREATH)

I'm sorry.

Austin quietly walks up to the stable and watches his son from behind the gate. After a moment of silence he gets Jack's attention.

AUSTIN

You did good out there, son.

Jack stops what he is doing to look his father in the eye.

JACK

I nearly got him killed.

AUSTIN

If you hadn't gone when you did he probably would have.

Throwing all pride aside, Jack leans in for a hug. He is tired, but thankful.

AUSTIN (CONT'D)

Not gonna get around all the problems of life, but you got through it.

He squeezes Jack's shoulder and then guides him out of the stable.

AUSTIN (CONT'D)

And you're better for it.

They walk side by side down the long dark passageway, silhouetted by the moonlight shining inside.

**THE END**