



*She turns to the passenger seat. "It doesn't  
look that high to me at all."*

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## PUMPJACK

Andrew and Laura are thirty feet up. They are cousins and in love, or at least Laura is. She insists on Thursday afternoon sex, and so every week they climb a rusted ladder to the maintenance deck of the family's pumpjack, the only one still bobbing over a live oil well and the only place she thinks they are safe. From the ground, the pumpjack looks like a giant cartoon grasshopper with a painted face and twin rotors thick as jumper's thighs. The swaying body blocks the entangled couple from the road, though Andrew claims that they don't need to hide. He thinks that most people know, but he still parks his pickup at the base of the collection tanks so no one will see his truck.

Other pumpjacks are rusted in arthritic poses across the four-acre section, and sometimes they shudder in the wind. There are twenty of them — all dead, but Laura can still remember when the air around the entire field wavered with natural gas fumes. She can remember seeing the first derrick light from the home place right after her daddy and Andrew's father plowed under their cotton right after her mother died. She remembers spending all the time with her father, Andrew, and Andrew's father Silas when the oil companies came in. But Andrew can't.

"Well?" He clears his throat and makes an act of fumbling with the blanket. He keeps it in his pick-up cab and always brings it to lay over the deck. Laura ignores it. She also ignores him because he laughed at her when one of the ladder rungs broke and she fell back to the ground. The seat of her Levis is coated in mud and crude oil, and the smell makes her eyes water. When they were ten, she

would've punched Andrew so hard he would've vomited, and then she would have told her father and they would have had a good laugh. Now, she sees very little of her father Lyndon, though she still lives in his house. He is more secretive than she is, and he glares at her if she is home on Wednesday afternoons. Laura is certain that he doesn't know about her and Andrew, but she knows without any doubt that Andrew's father has found them out. Silas is in the High Plains nursing home after a stroke. But even then his face is still supple enough to register disgust when he sees his niece. For Andrew he attempts smiles, jerking his head in the direction of a pretty nurse named Mandy, who flirts with Andrew. He flirts back.

"You know," Andrew says after clearing his throat again, "if I lit a match, those would be some real hot pants."

"You don't say." Laura kicks the platform with the toe of her work boot. When she turns, the wind nudges her dark hair from its ponytail. Her hair is thick, and she knows that it's Andrew's favorite thing about her. When they were thirteen, he was fascinated to discover that she washed it with Mane and Tail, a shampoo used for horses, though the family never owned livestock. He was watching her shower when he told her that he liked her hair best. This knowledge causes Laura to wear it long even though she is well over thirty.

Andrew reaches out and takes a handful of her hair in his fist and pulls her head back. At first Laura resists, tightening her grip on the rail, but then she allows herself to be pulled. She stomps her feet on the platform and the sound echoes. "I wish your hands were clean," she says. She keeps her face turned straight ahead.

"They are," Andrew says. "I have hand sanitizer in the truck. I scrubbed before I climbed."

"Yeah, but then you climbed."

Andrew smirks, and pulls on the waist of her jeans. An oil splatter has run down the inseam of her right leg. "Your pants are ruined."

"I can use them as rags."

“I wonder about your underwear.” He slips his hand into the back of her pants into her panties. He grabs one cheek and squeezes.

“I can smell the rust on your hands,” Laura says as she tries to wiggle away from him. “Now, you’re getting rust all over my ass.”

“And such a pure-as-driven-snow ass it is.” Though his movement is restrained by her waist band, he attempts to spank her. Laura drives an elbow in his rib cage and frees herself from his grip.

Once when they were sixteen and goofing on Boone’s Strawberry Hill on another maintenance deck of another pumpjack, Andrew bet an entire bottle that she couldn’t hurt him. He was in training for football then, and sometimes Silas made him roughneck on the weekends. He had rolled up one sleeve and showed it to Laura, flexing and kissing his bicep.

“Go ahead,” he said, “show me what you got.”

Laura hit him so hard Andrew grabbed his arm.

“Is that all?” he said, and without warning, she socked him again, only harder. His entire body shifted on the platform and his cap fell off. He laughed and Laura punched him so that his nose ran.

“You’re gonna hurt yourself,” he said. He wasn’t smiling any more, and he asked to see her fist.

“No,” she said. She had had it poised and ready to strike again, but she saw Andrew’s cheeks begin to flush. She had watched the blush grow to claim his entire face, and she discovered the thing she loved most about him: those red cheeks. They were like Cupid’s on a Valentine’s Day card he had once given her in elementary school, a pristine candy-apple red that only appeared on Valentine’s Day. Everyone else gave her cards with Looney Tunes characters, but Andrew had given her an actual card with embossed letters and a real envelope. The other kids had seen the flashing red foil of the envelope’s liner, and they tried to make up songs where most of the words rhymed with cousin. Then one of the girls told one of the boys that Andrew and Laura took baths together and another sort of kidding began that the teacher had to break up. Both Laura and An-

drew had blushed, and Laura had to own up to the fact that she had told Beth Grier she had painted Andrew's penis green with a Marks-a-Lot a few years before.

As an adult, Andrew's still looked cherubic when hurt or embarrassed. Laura knew it was the real reason he had never lasted on any rig crews. He claimed that the family's position had made him into somewhat of a target and that he really didn't like roughnecking as a life's choice anyway. Silas and her father had bought a few of their own rigs after so many of the early wells came in, and had started their own small business. Though it would never compete with the larger outfits, it was something, and Laura could imagine how a boss's son might find himself the butt of jokes. Her father had sympathized, putting Andrew to work in the business trailer with Laura instead, even when Silas protested. He wanted Andrew to work his way up, learn the ropes, and think up different ways of drilling. He wanted the family's name attached to something more than second-hand equipment. He wanted Andrew to use his degree. Andrew spent his time in the office, leaning back in one of the swivel chairs and looking out field side of the trailer, away from the rig. He wore clean pressed shirts and threw paper clips at Laura as she looked over the books or wrote out checks.

Laura knew Andrew simply couldn't bluff, even though he could fight well enough to win more than he lost. He fought all the time, a habit he picked up first in elementary school and then later when their classmates made kissing sounds and obscene gestures with their fingers. Laura had been the better fighter, even in high school when only a few of the boys reached her 6'3" height, but she let Andrew take the black eyes for both of them. The fights didn't change anything for Laura. She never had any friends in school: the stories about her and Andrew were shocking enough to keep potential friends away. She spent most of her time with her father and with Andrew when he was home. He always seemed to find someone to pal with—even if it was the twenty-one-year-old redneck still in high school.

He even dated a couple of girls before Laura found out and beat him up herself. Andrew was just too sensitive.

Lately, the punches and jabs she means to be playful are fierce. Not only has Andrew been flirting with Nurse Mandy, but Laura suspects that he has stepped out with Jody Maines, a candidate for the High Plains Oil Queen title, and ex-rodeo queen who used to ride around an arena, the American flag in one hand, the Texas in another, the horse's reins in her mouth. As the Vice President of the High Plains Oilfield Association, Andrew is in a strategic position to help Jody win the crown. She has seen Jody—a hundred-and-forty pounds of boobs and stomach—caress her cousin's belt buckle as she flashes sparkling blue eyelids at him. Laura cannot be sure, though. Jody has cooed at Lyndon, the Association's president, pushing her upper arms against her boobs so they pop at her throat. Laura has shaken her finger at her father—in a mock warning manner, but to Andrew she has balled up a fist. "Don't you even think about it," she says and hits him as hard as she can on the shoulder.

It is Laura who finally spreads the blanket onto the deck. She has watched the red face, and she feels guilty. They undress side by side, and Andrew does not blink as she removes her breasts from each cup. He grasps one, squeezing until she slaps his hand away, and leaves a rust red hand print. He licks a thumb in an attempt to remove it, but he has not clipped the nail in a while and the edge leaves a broken circle as he traces over the puckered gooseflesh of her nipple. Laura shivers.

"Does that feel good?" Andrew says, applying more pressure.

"Not really."

"Then why'd you get all shivery?"

"Because it's my nipple. It's sort of sensitive."

"I should think you would enjoy it, then." Andrew folds his thumb back into his palm and traces Laura's breast with his index finger. When more goose bumps appear, he blows on her skin.

"I enjoy that." Laura closes her eyes, but just as suddenly Andrew stops and starts unfastening his jeans. His eyes are focused on Laura's breast where a pink welt has risen, and he doesn't look at what he's doing. He grabs his jeans and the elastic of his boxer shorts in both fists and jerks them down. His gesture is so forced that he rocks the platform, and Laura grabs a rail, avoiding his feet as he tugs the denim over his knees. With her other hand, she keeps the pile of clothes she has folded from falling.

"Easy," she says. "I'm not going anywhere."

Andrew has not removed his boots, and they get caught in his jeans. Laura notices the problem first and laughs. She tickles the flesh of his exposed thigh and then runs a fingernail beneath his boxers. "Payback's a bitch, isn't it," she says.

"Just help me."

"Maybe I will, and maybe I won't." Laura twirls a lock of pubic hair around a finger and pulls.

"Okay, okay," Andrew says. "I'm sorry."

"Sure you are." She works the pants far back enough so that she grips the sole of one shoe, but the denim curls in a tight ring at his ankles. Andrew does nothing to help. As she tries another angle, she thinks of Mandy who had to strip Silas when he got tangled in his wind suit. She cut him out with a pair of shears. Andrew and her father left the room, but Laura had held her uncle so he wouldn't tip forward onto the floor. She had been embarrassed of his old man's underwear that gapped over his thin legs, his balls visible from all sides. Silas grew agitated when he caught Laura staring. He struggled against her, and Mandy had asked Andrew into the room to take Laura's place. Andrew's hand had found its way onto Mandy's ass. Laura's father had snickered and said, "That's Andrew for you," and Laura had snapped at him, telling him to not be so crude, and her father got mad and had followed her down the hallway and out into the parking lot. But when he caught up with her—she had been

stretching her stride, almost running—he didn't say anything. He told her to let Andrew be.

It occurs to Laura that Andrew has fucked Mandy by now, just as she figured he fucked Jody. Laura's threats haven't worked, and the thought makes her sick to her stomach, a sensation she has rarely felt. She was only slightly nauseated the first time with Andrew in the family's deserted migrant barracks. They were fifteen, and though Andrew hadn't followed her into the old building for that purpose, Laura had suggested it for the very reason. She had laid out old feed sacks beforehand in a corner, and grabbed his crotch, the way she had seen a woman do it on a satellite channel. Andrew hadn't wanted to, even though he enjoyed watching her shower and play with herself. He even enjoyed kissing her, but he had initially been shy about his own nudity. When she pulled his pants down that first time, he locked his hands over his penis and turned his legs inward so that he stood before her pigeon-toed. She laughed and punched him in the stomach so he would grab his stomach instead.

The first time hadn't lasted long, of course. He had barely pushed into her before he was done and vomiting into a corner. She hadn't had time to think *This is my cousin* while it was going on. It had hurt too bad, and when she dabbed at the blood on her thigh, she was sick to her stomach more because she heard Andrew throwing up, not because she thought of him as a close relative. She couldn't get her mind around it when she tried to hug him, and he turned to her crying and shouting that she was his cousin. He had this look on his face like when he had seen a dog carcass left by a wildcat. The dog had been ripped open, throat to groin, and its organs were bloated and pink on the dirt. The wildcat had not eaten very much before it had been scared off. The coyotes hadn't eaten either, though their tracks said they had circled a couple of times. Not even the buzzards dipped down to the body, and Andrew had been terrified that the dog was still a dog and not skin and scattered bones. He had wanted to bury it, but he couldn't look at it long enough to grab its legs and



lower it into a hole. Laura burned the dog when Andrew went to the truck and laid his head into his arms.

When she can't get Andrew out of his pants, Laura pushes him back. He says nothing, but he grabs her hips. Her hair comes out of the ponytail and hangs in his face. He doesn't brush her hair away, and he inhales so that a little of it is sucked into his nostrils and then out again. Laura's hair coils over his head so that he is covered completely. She tips forward – rotating her hip – and bites him hard on the shoulder until he complains. She tries for blood, but he pinches her hip with equal pressure to make her stop. And she does, lifting her head to see sunlight glinting off the pump. She is so close that she can't focus, but she watches the blurred rivets anyway, her eyes crossing involuntarily.

She stays like that for awhile, looking and not looking at the pump, moving enough to chaff her knees where the blanket has slipped when Andrew tries to lift her.

"Hey," he says and slaps her ass when she doesn't respond.

"What?" She grabs her hair with both hands.

"There's someone coming," Andrew says. He smiles.

"Uh, yeah," Laura says. She giggles, but Andrew shakes his head.

"See for yourself." He gestures out to the pumpjack field, and Laura sees a red pick-up turn off the coleche road onto their land.

"Shit," Laura whispers. She covers her chest with one arm and pulls at Andrew's pants with the other.

Andrew doesn't move. He smiles up at her. "What's the rush?"

"It might be Dad," she says. She struggles with the denim until it rips.

"So, I guess I've ruined a pair of jeans today, too," Andrew says. He laughs, tries to catch Laura's eye, but she reaches for her clothes.

"Get dressed," she says, struggling with her bra. She turns it so that the hook is in front, fastens it, and then twists it around. It's looped, though, and she can't get her arms in the shoulder straps. She twists the elastic until her bra makes two complete circles around

her ribcage as she looks for the problem. Andrew unfastens it, straightens it for her, and holds the shoulder straps so she can fit one arm in at a time.

"Why don't you ever put your underwear on first?" he says. He pulls his pants up to his waist very slowly and examines the tear.

Laura exhales as an answer, shakes her head.

"Seriously. Why not?"

"Do you really want to talk about this now?" Laura says. She is about to put her t-shirt on over her head, but she stops and grabs her panties. She stands, thinks better of it, afraid the pickup's driver will see her, and she sits on a corner of the blanket.

"I just noticed. It seems like you would be more concerned about that," he says and gestures in the direction of her crotch with a smile.

"Should I be concerned?"

"No."

"Then what?" Laura lies down to pull her jeans on. "Why does it matter?"

"Well, the whole getting caught with your pants down thing." Andrew buttons his jeans without looking and then zips the fly. "It just seems you'd be more embarrassed to be that kind of naked."

"And what about boobs? Boobs don't matter."

"They matter, but you can see them on TV, you know." Andrew speaks as he pulls his t-shirt is over his head, so his voice is muffled. "In magazines."

Laura, dressed except for her shoes, helps Andrew straighten his t-shirt so that it covers the rip. She looks back over her shoulder for the pickup. It fishtails down the turnrow in a large figure eight around two old pumpjacks. There hasn't been a rain in several months, so the dust cloud is solid and opaque red when the brake lights flash.

"Don't worry," Andrew says. He glances at the vehicle and back at Laura. "They can't see us."

"Yeah, but what are they doing here?" She starts to whisper. "Who is it?"

Andrew shrugs and speaks more loudly than normal. "Probably people wanting to get laid." He kicks her in the side until she turns to look at him. "You know."

"Yes, I know," Laura says, still whispering. The truck slows as it approaches their pumpjack. The headlights are on, so it's difficult to make out the driver, but Laura can hear the faint sound of music. "Just be quiet," she says.

"What?" Andrew cups a hand around his mouth and yells.

"Stop," Laura says. She forces a hand over his mouth.

Beneath her hand, Andrew mumbles. "It's not a big deal. Everyone knows."

"Shut up."

The truck's engine shuts off, and the driver opens the door slowly so there is a long, drawn out whine. Jody Maines steps out. Her blonde hair is rolled in large barrel curls, and she is wearing a rodeo queen outfit: black Wranglers and a snap-front Western shirt with red sequined roses curling across her chest. Her torso is ample, but she has tucked her stomach into her jeans, fastened with a silver conch belt. Jody puts her hands in her back pocket and rocks back and forth. She glares up at the pumpjack.

"It doesn't look that high to me," she says. She turns to the passenger seat. "It doesn't look that high to me at all."

Laura's father opens the passenger door and steps down from his seat. He is wearing a shirt similar to Jody's except that the red sequins form flames instead of roses. The thin flap of hair over his scalp is hardened with Brylcream, and he wears a large turquoise-studded belt buckle. He slams the door behind him, placing his free hand on his stomach.

Laura can tell he is holding his gut in. She turns to Andrew, who refuses to look at her, and then back to her father. His boots are polished, his pants freshly pressed so that the crease is straight and white all the way down to the hem.

"You'll change your mind once you get up there," Lyndon says.

"I doubt it."

"Get with it then," Lyndon says.

Jody makes a show of prancing to the pumpjack ladder, wiggling her hips, and when Lyndon whistles, she runs to him and kisses him on his bare forehead.

"What are you looking at, old man," she says, tracing a finger along his belt buckle.

Lyndon looks at the ground and clears his throat. "I don't know," he says finally, and then reaches back into the pickup bed to lift out a blanket. The gesture is clumsy. He bumps Jody so that she stumbles and brushes up against the truck's side. Laura is certain that he is blushing, though she is not close enough to tell. She taps Andrew on the shoulder, but his eyes are closed.

"Did you know about this?" she whispers. Andrew doesn't act like he hears, and the skin at the corner of his eyes crinkles as he clamps his eyelids tighter together.

Lyndon drops the blanket into the dirt, and when he and Jody both bend to retrieve it, they bump heads.

"I'm sorry," Lyndon says. He opens the truck door, blanket now unfolded, and climbs back in.

"You do this every time," Jody says. She puts her hand on the door so that if he closes it, he will crush her hand. "It's ok."

Lyndon says something that Laura can't understand, and then she sees him shake his head in silhouette from inside the cab.

"Oh, no you don't." Jody plants her feet in the dirt and tugs on his arm. She is successful in dragging him partially out of the truck. Lyndon is laughing now, allowing himself to be pulled, and when Jody jerks her head at the blanket, he grabs it in one hand.

"There you go," Jody says, speaking calmly as if to a horse. "Easy now." She pretends to pull him toward the pumpjack. "Easy."

"Andrew," Laura says. She smacks his forehead with an open palm, not loud enough to make a sound, but hard enough to make him open his eyes.

Andrew looks at her and cringes. "Yes," he says. "I knew about it."

Laura opens her mouth, then closes it. Andrew shrugs.

Lyndon is following Jody, towing the blanket in the dirt. When she gets to the ladder, Jody turns, and Lyndon moves his hand to her hip. "Now you keep it right there," she says.

"Yes, ma'am."

Laura stands as Jody puts a foot onto the first rung. "What are you doing?" she yells.

Jody freezes with one foot poised on the ladder and her hands gripping the rail. Lyndon's hand stays where it is, but he doesn't look up.

"What are you doing?" Laura says again. She hovers over the ladder so that her hair droops into masses on either side of her neck.

"Hey, Jody," Andrew says. He stands beside and a little behind Laura.

"Hey, Andy." Jody lowers her foot back to the ground and drops her hands. She looks at Laura. "How are you?"

"Good. And you?"

"Never better." Jody smiles without showing teeth or blinking. "Laura."

"Jody," Laura says.

Lyndon removes his hand from Jody's ass and starts to fold the blanket. Laura can tell now that he's blushing.

"What are y'all doing out here?" Jody says, moving her hands to her hips. Lyndon clears his throat again.

Laura doesn't answer. She looks back at Andrew who speaks for her, "Pumpjack riding."

Jody laughs too loud. Laura notices that her eye teeth are very white as compared to the rest of her smile. "Oh. Pumpjack riding." She looks to Lyndon, but the scowl on his face forces her to stop laughing so she turns back to Andrew and Laura. "Pumpjack riding."

"Yeah," Laura says. She flips her hair behind her shoulders, but it falls back.

"Why didn't you ever take me pumpjack riding, Andy?" Jody says. She raises an eyebrow, purses her lips.

Lyndon grips her upper arm. "We're leaving," he says.

Jody shakes Lyndon off. "Why not, Andy?"

Andrew laughs and pretends to scratch his head. "Well . . ."

Lyndon finally looks up and meets Laura's eyes. He isn't frowning anymore, and the corner of his lips jerk in a brief smile as he glances at Andrew and then to her. She feels sick to her stomach.

"Laura, why does Andy only take you pumpjack riding?" Jody says. She is almost purring now.

"Jesus, Jody," Laura says. She moves so suddenly that one of her shoes falls from the platform and onto the ground by Jody. "It's just pumpjack riding." She climbs easily onto the pump from the platform. Her long arms and legs wrap around the neck of the machine and she slides from side to side trying to maintain her balance. The gears stall, then work to support the extra weight, moving faster than before. Laura crosses her ankles and wrists, and lays the side of her face against the metal top. Her cheeks are smudged with grease, her mouth is slack.

"Laura," Andrew yells. He reaches out to touch her, but he is too hesitant and only brushes a boot. Laura doesn't answer. She doesn't even blink. The metal is cold on her face and the world bounces in her vision. She knows she should close her eyes so she won't be sick but she can't. She can make out Jody's spangles and her father's flames. She can see one of Andrew's red cheeks.

She remembers when Silas and her father plowed over the last cotton crop and disked the field flat so that a series of semis could transport the derrick in in pieces. The tower was up within twenty-four hours, splitting the horizon. She and Andrew came every day after school to stare up at it and the men climbing the ladders. She held his hand when a roughneck wiggled thick eyebrows at her and

climbed onto a platform with a lit cigarette hanging from his mouth. He turned to her every minute or so to wave and tip the ashes as he climbed higher and higher. When the well finally came in, there were only a few spurts of liquid and Uncle Silas said, "Is that all?" A pumpjack replaced the derrick and lasted ten years.

Laura is not immediately aware that Andrew straddles the pumps and clasps her jeans. He is trying to pull her back onto the platform, but he can't get a good grip. He reaches for her waist and belt, but her legs are too long even as they are folded around the machine. Lyndon shouts up at them, pacing on the ground.

Andrew finally grabs a belt loop, but Laura gags and slips. She dangles on the pump by her thick arms, her eyes closed and her mouth held in a thin slash across her face. Andrew calls to her, but she falls to the ground just out of the way of the pump's trajectory. She is disoriented, shaking and kicking, not sure where to move, and Andrew is airborne.

He will break his ankle when he lands, but he will not know it because as soon as he hits the ground he is pulling Laura away. Jody and Lyndon rush to help, each lifting a corner of her body and transferring her to Jody's truck. Andrew rubs at a speck of oil on her face, but smears it instead. When he tries to kiss her, she pushes him away, looking at her father.

"Are you sick?" she says. She balls up a fist and hits him as hard as she can in the gut. He bends over, almost to his knees. "I'm your cousin," she yells. "Your cousin." When Andrew looks at her again, his face is white. Jody puts an arm around his shoulders, and he rests his weight on her as he turns and limps away.

"It's okay, Laura," Lyndon whispers. He covers her in the blankets, tucking it up around her chin. "I knew," he says. "We've all known." He pats her shoulder, feeling for broken bones, and then follows Laura's gaze as she watches Andrew and Jody vanish around the pumpjack and the collection tanks to his truck. ■