

Chewing the Cud  
(about 4, 028 words)

Gabe stared at the tumor on old man Stewart's neck, a grapefruit sized node a few inches below his jaw. The growth bobbed and danced under his wrinkled skin whenever the neighbor talked or moved. Gabe searched the archaic kitchen for something else to focus on, but locating a distraction from the ominous feature proved impossible. As the old man continued chitchatting, Gabe became more hypnotized by the grotesque lump.

He would try to avert his gaze whenever the old man looked at him, but Mr. Stewart's baggy eyes were quick. Each time Gabe was caught gawking at the tumor his hands became clammy, mouth drier. The same thing happened when Miranda, a girl in his English class, always caught him ogling her tits.

Christ, he'd been there for less than ten minutes and the idea of future visits made the cold sensation between his shoulder blades icier. His latest punishment had begun and it was already shaping into the worse one yet. The edge of a counter pressing into his lower back started to make his legs numb. He shifted his weight and tried to find a way to end the visit as soon as possible.

"You been helping your father out?" Mr. Stewart's words drifted to him as if they came from an old phonograph on slow speed spinning a warped record under a bent needle.

Gabe's synaptic pause lasted too long and then he sputtered, "Yes sir. Well, as much as I can anyways."

"I helped my paw out—on this farm. Damn hard to work for, but I reckon we all are."

Old man Stewart picked up a small knife and half-formed sculpture off a cluttered counter; he began whittling. Little bits of wood fell away from the chunky figure. The pieces became lost in an astounding mess of shavings, chips and whittling debris that covered every inch of the floor throughout the house.

Gabe used the fragments to keep his attention off the tumor. "Dad's all right. Some of my friends say their fathers are way worse. I wish he'd give me more time to get to the river."

"Sounds like me at your age. I loved swimming in the Platte, almost as much as I loved

chaw.”

“What’s chaw?” Gabe perked up eager for the answer.

“It’s what they used to call chewing tobacco and,” his voice faltered and he cleared his throat to finish, “the wife hated it. Made me like the damn stuff even more.”

“I’m a snuff man.”

“What’s that?” A wisp of smile crept into place on his wizened face.

“The fine ground up stuff they put in the small, round cans. Skoal and Copenhagen.”

“Oh yeah. I never cared for that shit. It gets all floaty in my mouth—like dirt. So, you’re a fellow enthusiast of chewing t’backy, eh?” His smirk widened and the snubbed, yellowy teeth he had left poked out past paper thin lips.

“Yes sir.”

“You ready to have a chaw now?”

“Heck yeah.” Gabe stood up straighter.

“Well, there ain’t no one here gonna stop ya, so long as you keep it between us men.”

“Should you...”

“Boy, does it look like t’backy can do me any more harm? ‘Sides them stupid fucking doctors have shit for brains. How in the hell would they know this is caused by chaw?” He tapped the whittling blade on the huge ball protruding from his neck and then went back to carving.

“I suppose you’re right. Does it hurt?”

“Nah. There’s a dull ache, but other than that I feel damn good most days.”

“How long has it been that big?” Gabe hiked up the pant leg of his button fly Levi’s and pulled a dark-green can of Skoal out of his knee high work sock.

“Hmm, ‘bout two years.”

Gabe’s head flinched, “Oh.” Two years to get that big? That’s it? “How old were you when you started on the chaw?”

“Shoot, quite a bit younger than you.” He stared off, but his knife kept clawing and digging into the light colored piece of wood. “I’d guess eight or so.”

“Damn, I was ‘bout eleven the first time I tried it. Made me sick as fu—shit.”

He made a low, gurgling chuckle. “How old are you now? Thirteen, maybe fourteen?”

“Good guess. I’m fourteen.”

“Let’s see, you put that fine, gritty shit in your lip this-a-way?” He set his knife and the shapeless wooden form back down on the counter to mimic Gabe’s motion.

“Yes sir.”

“How in the hell do you keep it all together? Chaw stays packed in your cheek all natural and such.”

“You gotta keep fiddling with it, using your tongue. Once ‘ya got enough saliva mixed in with the wad, it’ll pretty much stay by itself.”

“Mind if I give it another try?”

“If you want.” Gabe passed him the can and thrust his hands into the front pockets of his pants.

They spent the next couple of hours talking and chewing tobacco. Old man Stewart spoke of the years gone by and the shelled-in life of a Nebraskan dirt farmer. His hands whittled away at the figurine with few interruptions. A gold, tarnished spittoon passed back and forth between them. Similar to the co-owned combine Mr. Stewart and his dad used during harvest time until the old farmer “retired”, which was now rusting away in the east set-aside field.

Around four o’clock, old man Stewart handed him a large bottle of coke and a bag of store bought cookies. A six-pack of Coors, held together by the plastic ring thingamajig, sat next to the cokes in the refrigerator. Gabe almost asked for a beer instead of the Coke, but lost his nerve as the door swung close with a loud creaking noise. Within minutes, he’d devoured four of the pink frosted cookies and drained half the coke. The old man’s white, bushy eyebrows rose and remained suspended for longer than Gabe took note.

Then the old man started up again and talked about one story or remembrance after

another. He'd sprinkle in a farmer's almanac tidbit every so often, the way a preacher tossed in relevant passages during a sermon. The events and milestones seemed as if they were occurring all around the old man instead being mere memories in his head.

Gabe's punishment was turning out to be somewhat enjoyable and the continued exuberance from uninhibited use of snuff made it hard to act casual. Plus, laboring away his summer was put on hold and hanging out in a cool house beat the hot fields without question. The massive lump became something he could ignore, for the most part, but a foul odor remained oppressive.

Ever since he'd entered the old man's house a pungent, vile odor had taken root in his nose. For most of the day he had a hard time pinpointing the odor's true source. He ruled out old house smell because that familiar scent mingled with the terrible stench. The indigenous trees Mr. Stewart used for his tireless carving smelled good, an earthy wooden fragrance unrelated to the foulness. When they went and sat on his porch the source became apparent—the unsettling, bittersweet stench came from the damn tumor.

A few years back the neighbor had carried Gabe home, not too long after his seventh birthday. He'd sprained his ankle in a field where old man Stewart had been baling hay since first light. Running full speed and dreaming about being a star running back, Gabe stepped in a prairie dog hole causing his first of many sprained ankles. Back then the neighbor smelled of sweat, strange detergent and fresh cut alfalfa. Now he wreaked of cancer and little else. Even the light gusts of wind did little more than waft the unrelenting foulness about. Gabe hated the fucking stench and wished it would go away.

The creaking moan of matching rocking chairs sang out as they rocked back and forth on the dry-rotted porch. A late afternoon sun had dropped down into an obtuse angle from the horizon casting them in full shade. Every so often, tobacco juice would spurt from one of their mouths and splatter on the hard packed ground. It'd been a common practice for so long the area beyond the porch edge was a darker color than anywhere else.

Gabe had noticed the discoloration when they sat down. Jesus, how much spit had gone into making that big, brown spot? How much spit did it take to defy rain, snow, wind and sun? What about all the deposited in other places; the spittoon, the fields and the little bit a person

swallowed while participating in such a great pastime. The old man had been a chewing machine for most of his life and the stained ground was a huge banner of lifetime achievement.

The first lull in the old man's prattling created an awkward silence, but his voice had become so raspy Gabe was glad he quit talking. When the old man began snoring Gabe tried to slip away. A loud squeak from a loose board woke him up.

"I reckon you'll be back, 'bout the same time tomorrow?" The old man shifted in the rocker.

"Yes sir."

He cleared his throat with a loud phlegmy cough. "Your old man need less help this year or something?"

"I'm not sure."

"Humph."

"Goodbye."

"See ya later."

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After that, hanging out with old man Stewart became an everyday ritual instead of penance. Gabe would hustle along the dusty, graveled road between their houses to spend as much time with the old neighbor as possible. The three-mile hike took fifty minutes if he went all out and over an hour if he dallied.

Prior to that first visit, Gabe had asked his father if could drive the tractor to his mandated social calls. "Then I could get back earlier to help out with the evening chores."

His father scoffed. "It'll be damn good for you to have the extra time for reflection. Maybe you'll get it in your thick head that dipping snuff is dangerous. Cancer is a terrible way to die."

What in the hell did he know about dying from cancer? His father was healthier than anyone in the county. Being a tee-totaling, God fearing, hardworking dirt farmer kept him hearty, hale and—strict.

He'd find excuses to stay at old man Stewart's house for longer periods of time. His dad gave him concerned looks, but allowed his requests to stay later. By the end of the month Gabe would return home long after chores were done. He'd slip in the basement door and try to get to his room unnoticed.

His father would catch him and a short inquisition would ensue. The order to stop visiting their closest neighbor was always withheld, much to Gabe's surprise. Relief and disappointment would wash over him in a puzzling wave of emotion. He'd get ready for bed trying to sort everything out. He'd fall asleep more baffled than ever before about his punishment, old man Stewart and the maddening methods of his father.

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One day the old man came to the screen door, but he stopped and made no attempt to open it. He stood and stared through the rusted wire mesh with a vacant gaze on his wrinkled face. His odd behavior made Gabe edgy, similar to his first visit. He stirred some whittle shavings on the warped boards of the porch with his boot while he waited.

The day was dry and hot. His clothes and roper boots were covered in dust from the long walk. Sweat dripped off his bangs and chewing snuff had made the inside of his lower lip tender. All that discomfort paled in comparison to the haunting statue staring at him through the screen. Did the old man want Gabe to scam or stand there until the sun melted him into a puddle of molten flesh?

An iron taste, caused by smelling the rusting screen door became apparent and stopped Gabe's grumbling stomach, cold. Right as he moved in an attempt to minimize his exposure to the rust, a hand speckled with age spots pushed open the door. The hinges protested, giving voice to the old man's state of mind. Gabe tried to enjoy his time with Mr. Stewart, but jumped at the first chance to leave.

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Gabe contemplated the strange greeting for many days yet never came up with a sound reason for his bizarre action. Even if the unusual reception hadn't occurred, the shine of hanging out and chewing the cud had waned. The odd behavior helped the fading flavor become

distasteful even faster.

The following day, about half way to old man Stewart's house, Gabe became more irritated than he'd ever been. He kicked the base of a young sunflower growing in the soft dirt of the road's shoulder. The plant flew up in the air with the root clump leading its way; a chunky, deformed arrowhead. It hung for a moment at mid arc and then sailed into the irrigation ditch causing a large splash. At mid-summer, the full flow of water sucked the young shoot downstream. The brown head, circled by yellow pedals disappeared into the murky water as it sank. The drowning victim image stuck with him as he plodded along.

For over a year he'd been careful and hid his cans of snuff in hard to find locations. One morning, before heading off to school as summer recess approached, he got distracted. On the bus, halfway to school, he became aware that something was wrong. The familiar sharp edges of the can pressing against his leg in the upper part of a sock wasn't there. Fuck. He'd left a half-used can of Skoal sitting on top of his dresser in plain sight. There was nothing to do, but pray that one of his parents didn't find it.

No such luck. What a foolish thing to do, leaving the evidence right out there in the open. He'd hoped to be living on his own when his parents found out about his favorite habit. His father had always been a maestro of punishment. This particular time became his ninth symphony in the art of penance.

The visits to old man Stewart's place went on and his precious summer of freedom dwindled until two weeks of break were all that remained. His dread of school starting up intruded on every thought and tainted everything he did. Going over and chewing the cud had grown staler than early spring sweetcorn. Once a week would be perfect, but every single day had become a big bucket of suck.

His hustle to get to the neighbor's house had receded. He threw rocks and tossed sticks into the irrigation canal as he shuffled along. Whenever a vehicle drove by he did something goofy. The first time he lay down on his back in the narrow shoulder of the country road. He thrust his arms and legs straight up in the air feigning to be a dead cockroach. Another time he sat cross-legged and pretended he was a meditating Indian. By the time he knocked on Mr. Stewart's door, an angry late July sun casted shade over the empty porch.

Several minutes passed, then he rapped harder and longer. His alarm morphed into deep concern and his drifting attention became focused. He walked to the back of the house and snuck a quick peak around the corner. The old man's beat-up farm truck sat on four bald tires in its normal spot.

More knocking went unanswered so he pulled open the screen door and slunk inside. He crept through the kitchen, past the bathroom and down the long hall. It was the first time he'd ventured into that part of the house and the strangeness abounded off of everything. Upon reaching the closed door at the end of the hall he stopped to listen.

His breathing had quickened and heart raced. Heavy panting and blood rushing in his head made it impossible to hear anything else. He gave up, drew in some courage and pushed open the door. Old man Stewart was lying in his bed; a rigid, motionless form. Shit, maybe he'd died in his sleep. The neighbor had been a little out of sorts the previous day, but as usual he told stories and whittled while they chewed tobacco all afternoon.

Gabe took a few steps closer, but the old man began moaning and thrashing around. He retreated to the door and stood in the opening ready to bolt. His neighbor's writhing and groaning intensified. When the old man lurched to one side the grungy, light blue top sheet slipped off and fell to the floor. The fitted bed sheet was stained with body fluids and tobacco spit. Holy hell, he's delirious, naked and has a hard-on. Gabe fought the urge to run out of the room and away from the house.

The old man began ranting and screaming. His eyes had gone wide open and he kept yelling that the drapes were on fire. "Why are you standing there like a fucking tree stump? Hurry up and put out the fire before it torches the whole goddamned house."

The old man's hand had latched onto his stiff cock. He stroked it with rapid fury and glared right at Gabe, expecting him to tend to the drapes. Before he could react and pretend to fight an invisible fire the old man stopped bellowing. He threw his head and shoulders from side to side like things were attacking him from all angles. After the attack ended he turned onto his side and began murmuring to the far corner of the room.

Gabe jumped at his chance, "Mr. Stewart, I've gotta go for help. I'm going to borrow your truck to go get my dad."

The old man flopped back over and stretched out his lanky arm trying to get ahold of Gabe. The futility of his desperate action caused a nervous chuckle to slip out of Gabe's mouth. His hand slapped across his mouth, much too late to stop the rogue snicker. Rage consumed him and if he'd been in better shape Gabe would've received the throttling of his life. Old man Stewart succumbed to his weakened state. His face and body relaxed, his outstretched arm went back to his side. The other hand continued its furious activity without missing a beat.

"No. Let me go—it's time." His raspy, unintelligible voice would be lost on almost everybody except Gabe who'd become accustomed to hearing it.

"But..."

"No buts, do as I say."

Gabe began to utter a response, but the old man's madness came back before any words could form. His outlandish actions went on for many hours until exhaustion forced him to lie on his back. Prone and frozen he held onto his erection while staring straight up at the ceiling. Gabe kept his sentinel position at the door. He remained stunned, unable to move any closer and too confused to do anything else.

Gabe fell into his own trance and it took him a few seconds to register the strange noise.

Old man Stewart had started signing, "The Camptown ladies sing this song."

Then, as if they had practiced for weeks on end Gabe sang out, "do-daa, do-daa".

That's all it took. They belted out the rest of the song taking turns. After that they sang four more songs in the same manner. The tunes were old yesteryear songs his parents listened to any chance they could. The final melody became a solo act. Gabe was unable to recall the lyrics because his mom disliked the song as regular listening fodder. She insisted the hymnal remain reserved for the house of God and select tragic moments.

The old man's graveled, garbled voice illuminated the sorrowful beauty of the famous song. About midway through his lone performance he became stuck, a tape deck set to loop.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me... Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved wretch like me..." He sang the line a dozen more times taking a long eerie pause and gasp for air between each one. Then as if he could sense Gabe's growing

angst he quit. He leaned up on an elbow and glared at Gabe with his familiar, all-knowing smirk.

“Boy, get me a chaw.”

“I doubt you’re...”

“Do it now, boy.”

“Yes sir.”

Gabe picked up the foil-pouch of tobacco that had fallen onto the floor with the sheet. Most of the contents had spilled out. He scraped the brown, twiggy strings of tobacco back into the bag. Time seemed to be critical and he left the wood chips mixed in with chaw. He stood up and handed the pouch to an outstretched hand.

Mr. Stewart pulled out a big wad of chaw chockfull of wood shavings. He looked at the mixture and then at Gabe.

“I’m sorry, the pouch...”

The old man shushed Gabe with a huge grin and packed the concoction into his cheek. After a few minutes he spat a slurry of brown liquid full of wood fibers onto the bed. Their eyes locked onto each other and the connection made gooseflesh spring up on Gabe’s arms. The look lasted for a long time until old man Stewart pointed over to the closet door. His bony finger and distorted nail were stained dark brown. Years upon years of pulling the damp leaves out of the tobacco pouch and packing them into his cheeks.

Gabe hesitated and then went over to the door painted dark yellow. He twisted and pulled the brass door knob as his mind raced. What in the hell was he going to find? The door swung open in silence like it’d been oiled that morning. Gabe cocked his head to the side as the door made a dull thud against the wall.

A large hand carved golden eagle stood in the little alleyway between the mounds of clothes, shoes and junk. His mouth gaped open from the amazing craftsmanship and detailed paint work. He careened his head to the old man. Did he carve the eagle for him? The question went unanswered because the old man had rolled onto his back. His ancient, sagging eyes stared upwards, but he gazed at something a few feet below the ceiling. Within a moment or two a slight tremor shook his old, broken-down body. Gabe began to weep.

After his tear fest subsided Gabe went to the kitchen. He hauled one of the rickety dining chairs into the bedroom and sat next to old man Stewart. His mind was lifeless and tepid like the body next to him. About an hour later he walked out of the farm house that had homesteaded generations of Stewarts. The orange sun, a disc cut in half by the sand hills, struggled to stay above them. He set the eagle on the ground and pulled a can of Skoal out of his back pocket.

Gabe stared through the ragged, hoary bushes lining the front porch; his hands fiddled with the can. The tarnished patch of ground was darker and more sinister in the fading sunlight. Soon, he popped off the top of the can and pulled out a large pinch of black grit. He packed the wad into his bottom lip. The familiar sting from snuff on raw tissue went unnoticed as he worked the grinds into place.

When he reached the dilapidated mailbox he glanced back down the lane and spat a stream of brown juice onto some loose, chalky dirt. His spit skittered along the surface until it caught hold and became a globular ball of muddy spittle. The rolling mass came to rest at the base of a gypsum weed twisting out of the gravel road. A small white flower in full bloom at the top needed rain and soon. He squinted through the oncoming darkness and wiped the dribbles of spit from his chin. Then he turned and continued walking home.

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