

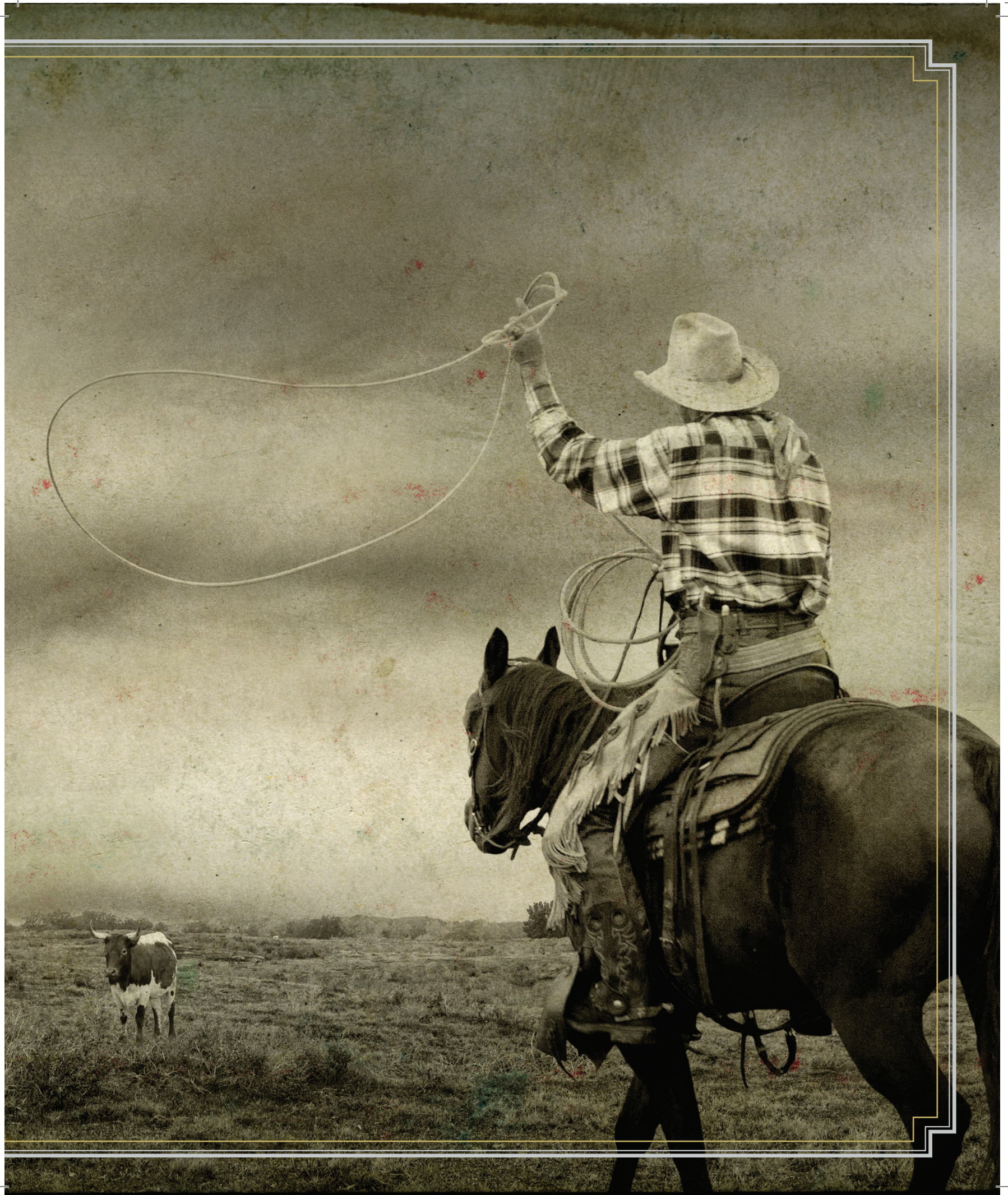
— SHOULD' A BEEN A — COWBOY

written by EZRA SALKIN | photography by JOHN FULTON PHOTOGRAPHY

IN THE DARK OF THE COWBOY CABIN, LARRY BUTLER—FACED WITH MY CITY-BOY INEPTNESS—STRIKES A LONG MATCH. THE OWNER OF SEVENTY-FOUR RANCH, A WORKING CATTLE RANCH OPERATED BY REAL COWBOYS IN JASPER, GEORGIA, IGNITES THE COLEMAN LAMP HANGING FROM THE RAFTERS. HIS LANKY BODY IS SUFFUSED BY THE SOFT GLOW, AND THE CEDAR QUARTERS, HIDE RUG, WOOD-BURNING FURNACE, AND BED ARE ILLUMINATED IN RUSTIC CHARM.

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As it happens, the Cowboy Cabin, part of the ranch's bed and breakfast, is the only room without electricity. Unlike the other accommodations, which are Western-themed but still possess modern amenities, the Cowboy Cabin is a realistic replica of an 1880s Wyoming cowboy's line shack. I chose to stay there because it seemed the most conducive to understanding the cowboy point of view, the purpose for my visit.

Set against the fence cordoning the bucolic pastures from the rest of the grounds, the shack has one shuttered window that peers directly out onto some 30 head of grazing cattle. "Pasture art," Butler says, gesturing with one hand toward a Texas longhorn emblazoned against the sinking sun among the other nondescript steer.

THE REASON FOR THE RANCH

After getting settled, the two of us sit in the den of the main house watching a football game. Except for the large flat screen, it's a room characterized by its Western paraphernalia—mostly art. But there are other items worth noting, such as the antique firearms on mounted deer hooves and a pillow with an embroidered image of Sitting Bull. Butler sits in a chair made from the hide and horns of a steer, a sleeping puppy in his lap and a bowl of chili in hand.

"People think—well, at least children think—that beef is just a little pink thing that comes wrapped in Styrofoam. They have no concept of the process by which that package finds itself on the supermarket shelf. They have no idea of the daily risks that cowboys take to get it there. So the purpose of doing everything as if it's the 1870s is educational." He goes on to explain some of the technicalities of typical

cowboy duties such as branding, vaccinating, worming and castrating cattle (I had the early morning shock of stumbling upon the latter, from which I learned the meaning of Rocky Mountain oysters).

The conversation soon segues into how Butler, a wrongful death and high-end divorce lawyer, ended up juggling such disparate lifestyles, swapping suit and tie for a 10 gallon hat and buckskin and then back again.

"Men were supposed to know stock (horses and cattle)," Butler says, referring to the values his mother instilled in him. "She believed in stock as well as higher education because she knew I wouldn't be able to make a living on horseback. That's how I ended up becoming a lawyer—a lawyer who loves horses."

When he was younger, Butler's mother loaned his services, pro bono, to farming families. It was there he picked up the ranching know-how. "They taught me as if I was one of their own."

A man characterized by all the different worlds into which he's thrown his hat, Butler almost seems like just a guy who likes playing dress-up. Before becoming a lawyer or cowboy, Butler had entered the seminary to become a Catholic priest. After that he was a battery commander during the Vietnam War.

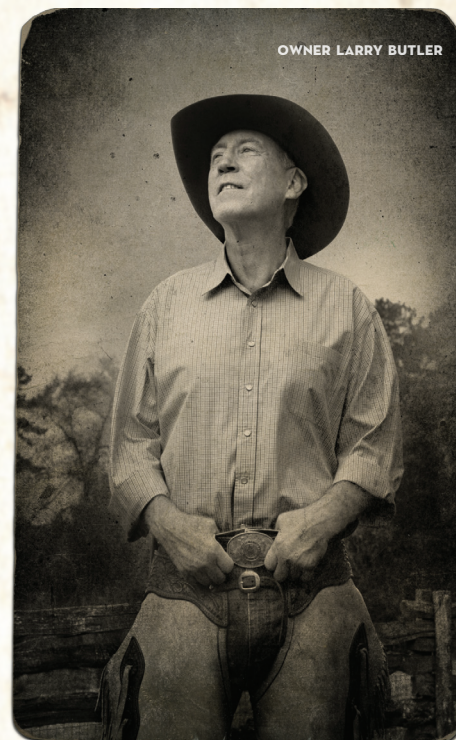
SECOND IN THE SADDLE

That said, his life's charter is no stranger than that of his wife Pam Martin, a former Atlanta news anchor of nine years and local celebrity in her own right. The morning of my second day, while she hovers in the kitchen over a breakfast casserole, we talk about how she ended up marrying into the ranch life.

The two met when Butler's barber and Martin's stylist had a baby and opened a shop together. Martin saw Butler in his hat and boots and asked her stylist, "What in the world is a cowboy doing in Buckhead?" She told her that this particular cowboy was a prominent Buckhead attorney. Intrigued, she continued, "Does he go to church? Does he like animals? Is he single?" She was satisfied with the answers.

"This will never work," Butler remembers saying at the time. "She'd never stepped off concrete, let alone in manure. I never thought she'd take to it." But she did.

What's most rewarding about her new life? Martin ponders a moment. "It's much closer to real life. Before, when I was full-time in the city, like most people, I saw rain as an inconvenience. But now," she says, "I'm aware of how catastrophic a drought can be. Rain can be life and death. With knowing that comes a greater appreciation." Martin currently has two books in the works, the first about her lifestyle swap. The second is a children's book starring an orphan calf named Annabelle. Martin nursed the calf by bottle on the ranch. Annabelle hit the jackpot in more ways than one: "She won't have to worry about being eaten," Butler says, shaking his head. The book is meant to help kids who feel displaced.



COWBOY TALES: FOREMAN MENNY LOZOYA

AFTER A TERRIBLE CAR ACCIDENT, MENNY LOZOYA'S FATHER, LALO, WANDERED INTO BUTLER'S LAW OFFICE. THEY TALKED FOR A WHILE, BUT LALO WAS PREOCCUPIED BY ALL THE PICTURES OF HORSES HANGING ON THE WALL. BUTLER BROUGHT HIM BACK TO THE RANCH AND LALO REVEALED HIS MEXICAN RANCH EXPERIENCE WHEN HE REINED IN A HORSE ONCE CONSIDERED UNTRAINABLE. BUTLER HIRED HIM AS THE FOREMAN. SOON, HOWEVER, LALO BECAME HOMESICK AND WANTED TO RETURN TO MEXICO. BUTLER ASKED, "WHO WILL TEND THE HORSES?" LALO ASSURED HIM THAT HE HAD A SON NAMED MENNY, BACK IN CHIHUAHUA, WHO KNEW EVEN MORE THAN HE. BUTLER DIDN'T BELIEVE HIM. IT ENDED UP BEING TRUE.



DON'T WORRY, NO HORSES WERE HARMED DURING THIS PHOTO SHOOT. THIS PARTICULAR HORSE IS TRAINED TO PLAY DEAD.

The biggest obstacle of Martin's metamorphosis was literally getting back on the horse after an early spill from a particularly tall horse named Deacon. "No one had ever taught me how to fall properly, and I fell like a sack of potatoes." She ruptured her spleen, splitting it in half. After that, when she finally managed to force herself to ride again, just seeing a stick in her path was traumatic enough to bring her to tears.

A MODERN OPERATION

The ranch faced its own challenges. With the cost of restoration, fences and animal bills, the ranch would've gone under if not for being supported by a lawyer's and an anchor's salary. The turning point, Martin says, came when they finally got themselves well situated on the Web and word of mouth caught up to the plethora of different experiences offered: riding and roping lessons, trail riding, weddings, honeymoon stays, and even pet vacations. As a

result, the majority of the profit comes not from beef, which is predominantly sold to local restaurants, but from the guest operation. And the guests keep the ranch plenty busy.

We step onto the porch to find a handful of eager guests watching the foreman (or head wrangler), Menny Lozoya, setting up a mock steer in the middle of the lawn for a roping lesson. Gripping the rope at his ear while flicking his wrist, he demonstrates the classic cowboy maneuver of

FAMILY HISTORY

ONCE NIGHT FALLS, LARRY ENTERTAINS GUESTS BY FIRELIGHT, TELLING THE GRISLY HISTORY OF THE CAPE FAMILY, THE ORIGINAL OWNERS OF THE MAIN HOUSE DURING THE 1920S. BACK THEN, IN CAIN AND ABEL FASHION, LEVI CAPE FATALLY SHOT BROTHER HOBERT, FOR WHOM ONE OF THE ROOMS IS NAMED, AFTER HOBERT POURED OUT LEVI'S BOOTLEG LIQUOR. THE BULLET, WHICH PASSED STRAIGHT THROUGH HOBERT, IS STILL LODGED IN THE FRONT PORCH.



WIFE, PAMELA MARTIN, FORMER ATLANTA NEWS ANCHOR, ENJOYS HER NEW LIFE ON THE RANCH.



JUNIOR STRACK

ALWAYS GARBED IN THE PROPER COWBOY DUDS WITH HIS LOYAL BLUE HEELER STOCK DOG SMOKEY NEVER FAR BEHIND, THIS 23-YEAR-OLD, EASY-GOING RANCH-HAND LOOKS LIKE HE WALKED STRAIGHT OUT OF A STEINBECK OR TWAIN NOVEL. JUNIOR LOVES "COWBOYING." THERE'S NOTHING HE'D RATHER BE DOING. HE ENJOYS TAKING GUESTS HORSEBACK RIDING ON THE TRAIL OR, WHEN THERE'S FOLKS NOT TOO KEEN ON HORSES, DRIVING THEM AROUND THE PASTURES IN THE BUTLERS' FORD PICKUP OLD BLUE. AFTER ALL THE COWBOY TRICKS HE'S LEARNED FROM LARRY, JUNIOR HOPES SOMEDAY TO PULL OFF THE MOST IMPORTANT ONE—BUYING HIS OWN RANCH.



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RODEO COWBOY KEITH ROBERTS

A HORSE TRAINER AND ODDLY ENOUGH—FOR A COWBOY—A VEGETARIAN, KEITH ROBERTS RAN THE RODEO CIRCUIT WITH BUTLER BACK IN THE DAY AND IS KNOWN FOR HIS METTLE ON BUCKING ANIMALS. WITH A 1985 BAREBACK BRONC CHAMPIONSHIP UNDER HIS BELT, KEITH FOUNDED THE ATLANTA BLACK RODEO IN 1991. BEFORE THAT, HE RAN THE ATLANTA YMCA RIDING PROGRAM. HIS NEWEST ENDEAVOR IS THE INTERNATIONAL WORLD OF RODEO. WHAT WOULD HE BE DOING TODAY IF HE WEREN'T A COWBOY? "WELL, I WOULD SAY 'PRESIDENT,' BUT HE'S CATCHING HELL RIGHT NOW."

spinning the lasso above his head before snapping it taut around the unsuspecting wire animal. The metal clangs and the thing lurches backward before settling back to its original position. Then it's my turn.

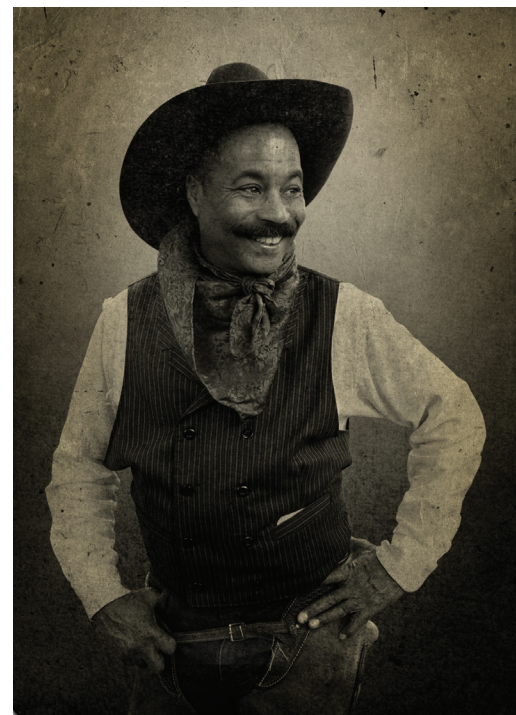
Mercifully after a few bumbling attempts, it's obvious roping is not my forte, and I'm pulled away by a young ranch hand known only as Junior. He walks me to the stables where there's a nice brown horse waiting for me. It's time to learn to ride. Junior attempts to show me the proper way to swing into the saddle. On my second attempt, I succeed but almost send myself hurtling over the horse's flank in my determination to perform better than I did during my roping exhibition. After all, I've been living in the Cowboy Cabin. We go over some basic neck reining, as it's called. "Squeeze your legs to make

him go," Junior says. I squeeze my legs, but the horse only drops his head to graze.

After I get the horse to respect me at least enough to take me around the beginner's corral, under Junior's careful eye of course, I look up and find Butler and Martin on horseback, dressed the part, watching from the other side of the fence. Butler sits atop a large Bay horse named Blue, while Martin rides Bengal, a small gray Sorrell named for the faint striping around his hooves and mane. They're called primitive markings—remnants from when, however many millennia ago, horses and zebras were the same species.

"Having fun?" Butler asks, looking at me from beneath his brim.

Lozoya opens the gate and Butler and Martin trot off on their respective horses into the



pastures, their dogs in tow, lowing cows stand idly in the distance.

"Having fun?" I call back.

"Of course," Butler says. "I've got the perfect horse and the perfect wife. What else could I want?"



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