

Chapter One: Being Feeble-minded: Eastern Oregon 1919

The warm sun is good. Another day with no clouds. Father and I walk for a long while. We are looking for the wild ponies. We woke when the sun woke and began walking toward it. We must be quiet. Cannot wake others. I like walking with Father. Outside our cabin he begins to talk to me. *"Today we will look for the wild ponies."* Father spoke seriously. He knew how much I liked looking for the ponies. *"We will walk towards the rising sun until it is over our heads, then we will turn toward the snowy mountains until we reach the hot spring water."* Father, was taking us to the edge of the grasses where the wild ponies eat and sleep. *"Now, Jimmy when we get to the edge of the grasses you must be quiet."* *"Yes, Father!"*, I promised him. I won't scare the ponies this time. Last time we walked into the grasses I'm so happy I let out a happy Yaaahhhoo! That was the only time we saw the ponies that day and they were running away from us toward the river that runs fast. *"No, this time I'll not scare the ponies Father. I promise."* He smiled at me. I feel so happy. I am with Father and we are walking to see the wild ponies. Maybe this time we will be quiet and they won't run! I am so happy. I am with Father and we are walking to see the ponies. Sun is shiny and warm, I can smell the sage and feel the cool winds blowing down from the snowy mountains. We stop under the big juniper tree where Father tells me my story. How this is the place he found Mother on a warm sunny....

No! I hear the Lady with Many Keys jingling. I don't want to leave Father. Soon we will see the wild ponies. No! Not now Lady with Many Keys! Please don't come. Don't bring your keys here. Father and I are walking to see the wild ponies! When the Lady with Many Keys is close I can hear moaning and crying. Mean Man is yelling at the boys. He is still far away, but, I can hear him. *"Git out of bed now! Don't make me take off my belt today! Git your stupid ass out of bed!"* Mean Man is hurting someone. I hear his belt slapping some one. Then I hear someone scream every time Mean Man hits them with his belt. *"Git out of bed now, goddam it! Don't make me hurt you more!"* Someone is crying and sobbing. They hurt. It is still dark and the Lady with Many Keys and Mean Man are coming. They will be here soon. *"Oh please, Lady with Many Keys, don't come in! Let me walk with Father and smell the desert air. Please don't come here."*

I can't see them coming. We have no windows. 'Cept a tiny window on the iron door. We don't look out that window. They look in. I don't know when they are coming. But they are. Maybe there is time today. Time for Father and I to see the wild ponies. Maybe time to crawl quietly through the sage and sweet grass and lie down. The ponies maybe come to us. I can hear them. They're coming. I can hear them breathing and snorting. I can feel their heat and sweat. Yes! Today is the day. I reach out with a handful of sweet grass and touch the....

No! Her keys are in our door. No! God no! Don't let this happen again! Not now. The grass, the wild ponies, the sage, sweet desert air, the warm sun...Father...they are disappearing.... Please come back Father! Please come back wild ponies! I have sweet grass....

Mean Man and the Lady with Many Keys are in our room now. Mean Man is laughing and telling the Lady with Many Keys, *"I beat that son of a bitch so hard my*

arms hurt!" "Where's my bucket? Git my bucket little puke!" "You shouldn't talk to the residents that way Dave", the Lady with Many Keys is telling Mean Man. I like her. She is new here and sometimes when she is alone with us she sings. Sings like a Spring Robin. Mean Man is talking now. "Residents?! Your kidding me! You newbies are all the same. You come here on your high horse. Bullshit! They aren't residents. They aint even human. WHERE'S MY GODDAM BUCKET!" The boy in the first bed comes running with the big bucket. It used to be shiny, but now has food, poop and little white worms crawling on the outside.

We sleep in a big cold room. I am in the last bed. My name is Jimmy but the Mean Man calls me boy. *"These sons of bitches are half asleep. I'm gittin some hot water. I'll be right back."* Mean Man is leaving the room. When he is gone the Lady with Many Keys is talking in her loud voice, *"Come on boys."* She calls us boys but we are full grown. *"Boys you know what to do. Wake up and get out of bed. You have to be standing quietly in front of your bed, or Dave is going to hurt you."* Our room is big and we are many. It will take some time before Mean Man and the Lady with Many Keys come to my bed. So I lay there and wait.

Now I am remembering how I got here. Talk spread fast one day in the village by our tiny ranch. They say she was a nice lady. I never saw her. She had candy for the children and flowers for the mothers. They say the candy came all the way from Portland and was sweeter than honey from the honey bee. I don't know. I never ate some. The nice lady visited many homes in the village and everyone was happy when she came to their house. She never came to our cabin. And she listened good. They say she was a real good listener. Real polite like. Anyway, she ends up at Uncle Jacks, Father's uncle. Mother and brother Quinn died a year ago. It gets cold here and that year it snowed and snowed. Brother Quinn went out to gather some chickens that got out of the hen house. It snowed harder and harder. So hard you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Mother went out looking for brother Quinn. She told me to stay put. After a long time, Father came back from hunting. *"Where's your mother Jimmy?" "She's looking for Quinn." "How long ago did she leave Jimmy." "I cant remember. I'm sorry Father." "Oh, my God."*

Dang nab it Jimmy. Now there you go again, movin from one story to the other before you finish the first one! No wonder others in the village used to laugh at you. But tell you what, I could put away more hay then three men my size! Now finish your story Jimmy. The first one. Before Mean Man comes.

So anyway, this nice lady ends up at Uncle Jacks. Now I don't like to be around Uncle Jack too much. Especially late in the day when he's been drinkin. Jimmy! Ok, ok I know stick to the first story. So I guess this nice lady sits down with Uncle Jack and listens to him drinkin and tellin stories. All the time she's writin in her book. Then the nice lady up and goes away and we aint seen her since.

Later on Doc is visiting Father and he has this dressed up man with him. They're talkin to Father real serious like. I was hopin Father aint sick. I wouldn't know what to do now that Mother and Quinn are gone. So there they are when the Fancy Man pulls out

this fine piece of paper and rolls it out across the table. *"This is your family pedigree chart"*, Doc is tellin Father. *"Explain it to him Superintendent Lydon."* *"Yes sir. Well you see Lucas, here's you and your Ma and Pa. And here's your Pa's brother, Uncle Jack. Now down here is you and Mrs Morse, God rest her weary soul. Now below you and the Missus, in these boxes is Quinn and Jimmy."*

"I aint following", says Father. *"Well its science Mr Morse"*, Doc is almost whisperin now. For awhile I cant hear them at all. So I crawl over to the edge of my bed and peek over the loft to down below. Father is holding his head in his hands. *"Are you sure Doc?"* *"Like I said Lucas its science."* Now Fancy Man is talkin. *"He'll be fine Mr Morse. He'll have food and warm shelter and lots of other men just like him."* *"And the women folk?"* says Father. *"Well no. We keep the men separated from the women. I think you can understand."* *"Yes, I spose that's best. Can I come to see him? I get up to Pendleton to sell my potatoes in the Fall."* *"We don't think that would good for Jimmy. It would only make him pine for you more. You see..."* Father is interrupting Fancy Man. *"Doc?"* *"You know Lucas, since June and Quinn passed in that storm, things aint been the same. The scientists say that you and Jimmy will be better off. In fact, they say the whole nation will be better off in the long run. Kinda like goin off to war. Its right for the country."*

Father packs me a bag of clothes and puts in some jerky and apples. I love apples! *"Jimmy, this nice man is goin to take you for a ride in his fine carriage. He's a nice man Jimmy. Now you do what he says."* *"It sure is a pretty carriage Father."* So I get in and wave goodbye to Father. He looks kinda sad. Like he did when we buried Mother and Quinn. Fancy Man and me drive and drive and drive. We leave the big river and drive over the hills to the city. Pendleton, I think they call it, and there along the railroad tracks is the biggest building I ever seen and the street goin up to it has a bunch of pretty trees. We drive right up to it and....

"Oww, oww, owwie! No! No!" Mean Man has just dumped a bucket of red hot water on one of the boys. *"Aiyeeee."* *"Now git your ass out of bed you lice infested heathen!"* *"For God's sake, behave yourself Dave"*, the Lady with Many Keys doesn't like Mean Man givin us the water treatment, *"You're just upset because they took you off the women's ward. What happened there anyway?"* *"Nothin. Its none of your damn business!"* *"I heard something about you washing the women down?"* *"Listen. Its like I told you. They aint human and that there is a scientific fact. I was just washin 'em down like cattle."* *"Science, what do you know about science?"* she was laughin. Mean Man's face was as red as the settin summer sun. *"Just you wait Mariam. One of these days one of these perverts are goin to corner you alone when I aint there to protect you. Then you'll see."*

I don't know if she meant to help us. The Lady with Many Keys got us enough time to all git out of bed. We were all standing straight and tall for inspection and to get our work orders. It's a long line. I never was much of a good talker. I guess that's why folks at home always said I was kinda different. But I aint too stupid. Whenever Father and I were out huntin, he would ask me to count quick how many antelope were runnin

together. *"Your good with your numbers Jimmy"*, he used to tell me. Father was always kind to me. Not like Uncle Jack.

So standing in line in front of our beds I suppose there is more than 40 boys (we're men but they call us boys). This place is big, dark and damp. We're in one of the big rooms and there's maybe 50 more sleeping rooms like ours. Then there is the turd room. Least that's what they call it. That's where the real bad off ones go. They call them the half-boys. They just sit there in their own poop, makin odd sounds and actin strange. Must be 30 or so turd rooms.

Its time for Mean Man to send us to work. He starts at the front of the line, far from me. He counts down 10 boys and says, *"You feebleminds will work in the garden today. And I don't want you eatin no green beans! So help me, if you do I'll beat you so bad you wont walk for a week. Now go with Missus Curtis and git some grub."* The boys leave with the Lady with Many Keys. Gosh, are they ever the lucky ones, bein outside in the sun and fresh air and all. Mean Man counts down another 15 or so boys. *"Now, you smell this room you dumb fuckin morons? Listen to me and listen good. This place smells worse than a skunk fart. I told you yesterday to clean all of the sleeping quarters on this ward. And this is what I get? Christ all mighty! Why I don't put more of you into the infirmary I'll never know."* The Lady with Many Keys is back now and Mean Man is talking, *"You clean this ward today and you clean it good. Remember I just as soon send your heathen souls to the ash room, as I would whistle Dixie. Now git your sorry asses some grub with Missus Curtis."* One of the boys is slow to move with the others. Another mean man broke his leg three moons ago and he limps a lot. He doesn't see Mean Man comin and I don't say nothing. Mean Man comes from behind him and kicks him real hard in his back. Limping Boy goes flyin against the wall and down to the ground tryin real hard to breath. *"You cripple bastard. I'm goin to polish my boots on your sorry ass!"* The Lady with Many Keys stops the boys on their way to grub and comes runnin back to Limping Boy. *"David! Stop it! Stop it right now!"* Her face is red and boy is she ever mad! *"I know that we got to move these boys on in a timely fashion, but your making matters worse. It'll take twice as long if we have to take this boy to the infirmary!"* *"You don't know a goddam thing Mariam."* At least Mean Man quits beaten Limping Boy.

Its our turn. I close my eyes and hope with all my might. Maybe we can clean horse stalls or feed the hogs. I'd like that. I'm a real good animal tender. I don't see his fist comin. At least when I see it comin I can brace myself and not get hurt so bad. Mean Man has put a leather strap over his knuckles and hits me real hard. My face hurts. Blood is pourin out and I spit out a tooth. But I'm not fallin down else he'll start kickin me. Mean Man is talkin to the rest of the boys but lookin straight into my eyes. He's so close I can smell the whisky on his breath. He's smilin that evil smile he smiles when he beats you. Just like Uncle Jack used to do when we were alone and he was drinkin. *"Now hear this boys!"* Mean man was screamin like a banshee. *"I was goin to be easy on ya all, til I caught this boy day dreamin? Anyone else want a knuckle sandwich? How the hell are you goin to get your work assignment when your day dreamin? When you stand in line you pay attention to me and nothin else!"* Lady with Many Keys is back and comin down the line to where me and Mean Man is. *"Mother Mary, what on earth is going on here?"*

She's lookin into my mouth wipin the blood on my face with the edge of my dirty shirt. "Aw, hell Mariam its nothin", Mean Man backs away from me. "This dumbass was sassin me, so I gave him a tunin up." "David, you're working my last nerve. I'm going to report you to the Superintendent!" "You know, Mariam, you're not much smarter then the rest of these feeblemindeds. You haven't learned a thing since you started here." That sick smile was comin back, "Noone says nothin about what happens in here." You know Mean Man is right. Worse things happen here than getting punched in the face. A lot worse and nobody says a thing.

Mean Man has assigned us to the turd rooms. It's the most horrible place I ever seen. Lady with Many Keys is walkin us to the grub room. There will be hundreds of boys there tryin to get a bite or two to eat. You see, even though there is hundreds of us, theres only food for about half of us. On the way there, the Lady with Many Keys hands me her kerchief. She soaked it in a bucket of cold water, "Here Jimmy hold this to your mouth. It will stop the bleeding." She did it! She said my name. My name, Jimmy! I haven't heard anyone call me Jimmy since Fancy Man brought me here. After we drove up the beautiful road to this big place a man called Judge read my name and said something about me being feebleminded. Judge said Oregon law said I was unfit and then said some long words that I didn't know. Next thing I know, I'm in a bed with wheels. There's a man in a white coat lashin me down with straps to the bed with wheels. Real tight like. Then he pulls down my pants and turns up with a big ol' knife. I screamed when he cut into my peepee. I was in the infirmary for awhile before I could walk.

She called me Jimmy! Just as we were goin into the grub room. I hand the Lady with Many Keys her kerchief back. "No Jimmy you keep it. Its full of blood anyway." I don't usually get this kinda of kindness here so I tuck the kerchief deep into my one pocket so nobody will know I have it. That was the last time I saw Lady with Many Keys. The kind ones don't last. There will be a new Lady with Many Keys. Like there always is. She aint goin to be kind.

Gettin grub is like a big 'ol wrestlin match. The winner gets a mouthful or two of rice. It's the wrigglin rice cuz some of the rice is kinda swimmin around. I don't feel like eatin grub this mornin. My mouth hurts too much anyway. But, I stick with my boys else I'll get the tar beat out of me. Pretty soon Evil Man shows up to collect us. They say he used to be a boy like us. They say he still lives here. Just not with us. He don't talk much. He don't smile much. Not even a smile like Mean Man. You gotta be real careful with Evil Man. You gotta think ahead of things cuz he don't talk. He points and we move. Now he's pounded his fist on the table and throwin the spoon the boys was usin to eat to the floor. He's snarlin like a bobcat. Like I says, you have move when Evil Man points.

We're walkin to the turd room. It's in another building. Oh, the sun feels so good on my face and the air sweet and cold. I can smell Evil Man when he is close. He smells like poop and vomit. The turd rooms are different than our room. They don't have beds here, just dirty cribs on the floor. Kinda like baby cribs. In the morning they pile grub into a big wooden bowl and everyone goes runnin and crawlin to it, gulpin down the grub and worms and whatever else is on the floor with their hands, These aint boys. I mean

they kinda look like boys but act wild. I aint too sure where their wildness comes from. I kinda think it comes from the way Evil Ones treat them. They don't talk. They moan a lot. They don't get clothes like we do. They have what they wore when they got here and a lot of them are wearin threads or nothing at all. Everyone calls them the half-boys.

Someone is screaming now. I'm lookin back toward the cribs. Evil Man has tied a chain to a half-boys peepee and is yankin this poor soul out of his crib by pullin on the chain. Evil Man is not mad like Mean Man, he's laughin and smilin like he likes it. He pulls this poor half-boy across the room to what's left of the pile of grub, or whatever is in the pile. Half-boy just lays in the pile squirming around in pain like a worm on a hot rock. "*Git! Git! Git!*" Evil Man is yellin at us boys. It's time to move these half-boys to the Box. Least that's what they call it. The Box. The Box aint nothin more than that. It's a big square, cold cement room. Aint nothin there but a hole in the middle. That's where all the pee, poop and pus get's washed down.

After we push 'em through the door into the Box we boys get to work. We don't wait for Evil Man. Sometimes he just up and disappears into the Box. I spose he likes it in there. I don't like thinkin about what he does in the Box. One time he came out laughin and got a couple of us boys. "*Lookit, lookit!*" When we went into the Box what we saw made me sick in my stomach. The half-boys was hittin, bitin, and kickin each other. One of 'em was bashin his head against the cement wall. Some of 'em were bitin their own flesh and pullin out their own hair. There was Evil Man laughin at what he taught them to do and makin us watch. He laughed harder when we watched. The Box is where the half-boys would stay until it was time for them to come out for grub, and go to sleep in their cribs.

Like I was sayin, we boys don't wait for the Evil Man. We go right to work or else we'll git it and git it good. I heard once that this place can turn a boy into a half-boy and I don't want to end up in the Box. With the half-boys in the Box, we start workin on the cribs. We lift up the straw mattress and shake out the bugs and shake off the poop. One of the boys beats the mattress with a big wooden spoon. The other boys sweep up the floor under the cribs, fill a bucket with hot water and mop the floor and wipe down the crib.

We work hard to clean. Many times durin the day Evil Man will call out, "*Box! Git!*" Then we take buckets of water and mops into the Box. We don't bring the half-boys out. There they are, mostly naked and we throw buckets of water all over the Box. It's hot, dark and smelly, but we scrub everythin down. Then we wash what's left down the drain hole in the middle of the Box. The half-boys scurry around, slipping on the wet floors, screamin and cryin. Some of 'em are so upset they bang their head on the walls and bitin themselves. I don't like it. But like I say, this place can make a boy a half-boy.

I heard it's the same with the half-girls, ceptin, its men like Mean Man that clean up their Box. I guess that's what the Lady with Many Keys was sayin about Mean Man. She heard that he was washin the half-girls down but that aint the half of it. I heard it said that he made more than one half-girl have a baby, but I aint sayin for sure.

Evil Man is screamin again “*Box! Git!*” What’s he want now? The boys just did a cleanin and he aint particular about clean like Mean Man is. I hope it aint to watch his evil antics. Me and another boy go in. Inside he has all the half-boys up against a wall. On the other side of the Box is a half-boy laying down. He aint movin and he aint sleepin either. Evil Man don't have to say a thing. We two boys know what to do. We done it before.

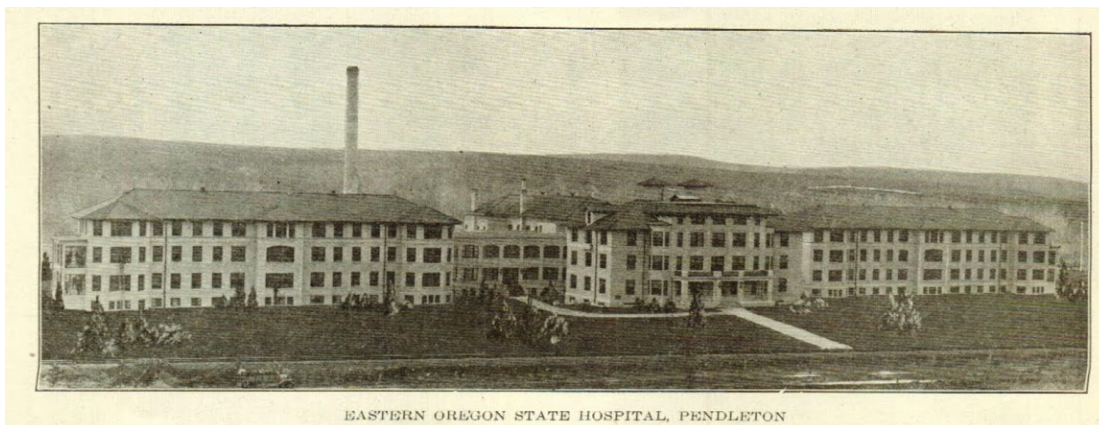
I grab the arms. The other boy grabs the legs. And just like the big bag of potatos we used to take to market back home, we pick him up. We’re taken him to the fire room. They’ll put his body in a ore cart and roll him into the fire. When there’s nothin left but ashes, then they’ll let er cool down. When its cool they’ll push the cart out of the fire room to the ashroom across the way. The dump one cart after another into the ashroom. It's a big room. I reckon it could hold five Boxes inside it. Now the ashes are in a big pile.

When they buried Mother and brother Quinn, preacher man said lots of things about them and about Jesus. Whenever I take someone to the fire room, I say somethin bout them. Somethin like, “*Sweet Jesus thank you for ending their pain. They didn't deserve this. Rest their weary souls.*” Cept one time. An evil man ran a hose up the rear end of a half-boy and turned the water on full blast til he was killed. That time I said, “*Sweet Jesus, pray for this evil man’s wicked soul. He’s goin to Hell.*”

I think about Hell a lot. Mother and Father used to say if I didn't mind my manners I would end up in Hell. Well, here I am, cept I don't know what I did to git here.

After grub that night, I cant wait to sleep. Sleep is where I escape this Hell. Even though my mouth is still hurtin, and there is cryin and moanin all around. I’m sleepin before my head lies down.

Even though its early, the warm sun is good. I’ll wake up Father cuz we got all our chores done yesterday. Today, I’m goin to touch a wild pony. I love wild ponies....



Authors note: Although this chapter is fictious, every incident has been documented either through investigations or my visits to Eastern Oregon Hospital in Pendleton, Fairview Training Center in Salem, or Lakeland Village in Eastern Washington.