This story was inspired by a line from Lou Reed's last solo album: "Give me your tired, your poor, I'll piss on them—that's what the Statue of Liberty says." It's an American tradition. Sort of a trial by fire, I guess. Paying your dues in the land of opportunity. Always been that way, right?

As spawning ground for so much of the violence that we are capable of, prejudice and bigotry come from an essential survival trait that saw us through our own evolutionary trial by fire: we automatically fear that which is different. The Statue stops pissing on you once you've melted into the pot. And that's a real problem for those who wear their differences on their skin.

One of the key lessons in a liberal arts education is simply: "Different is not deficient." Easy to say, hard to apply to your life on a daily basis. The built-in distrust, fear and loathing for those who are noticeably different from us happens automatically. It's only in the mental monitoring process that we have hope.

As I write this in the closing days of 2001, the smoke of September 11 still hangs the air, in our nostrils, in our blood aching for justice. No apologies here. I want Osama's head on a plate. Tonight. For dinner. But it's not that simple. Whether we want to or not, we Americans are waging another battle at home. With prejudice. This battle is taking place in our hearts, our communities, our government. Here's what can happen if that battle is lost.
It was about dusk when Gus Whitsett pulled into the parking lot of the Piggly Wiggly in his old Army deuce'n'half that whined like a coyote in heat when it got revved up, which wasn't too often if you knew the kind of fella Gus was.

He'd been elected committee chairman again and carried out his responsibility the way a South Texas farmer does just about everything—slow and deliberate, dependable as the sunrise, or that old Army truck. I suppose living by God's time instead of a watch had something to do with it.

He'd brought his two boys with him, it being their first lesson. My deputy was home sick so I had the duty. I didn't mind all that much. Old Gus even reminded me a little of my daddy, rest his soul.

I waved Gus over to the vehicle staging area.

"Evenin'," I said when he got alongside and then just about had to laugh. Those two boys were hopping out of that cab and making a bee-line for the soft drink and candy machines. Coming into town is still a pretty big treat for farm boys around here.

"Sheriff," Gus said and nodded. Hill people could be pretty tight-lipped, especially around town folk.

"How things out at your place, Gus?"

"Mighty dry, Sheriff."

It was always either too dry or too wet for farmers. I said, "Where d'you suppose all that rain is they been forecastin'?"

"Hell, we ain't gonna get no rain. It'll move on past liken it always does." It wasn't a complaint, mind you. Just a way farmers had of helping it to rain—saying it won't so maybe it would.

Pretty soon the others started arriving by twos and threes: Jerry and Mary Douglas in their Ford Bronco, Otis Lipscomb in a Willys Jeep he got at an Army surplus auction same as Gus, Doc Fredericks in one of those little Subaru jeeps with his wife up front and their little girl in back, Nig Sanders still drove his old International Harvester pick-up and probably would for the rest of his life, the Sweetwine boys had a Toyota 4X4 with those...
balloon tires and a roll bar.

But nobody paid much attention to what the other drove. It wasn't an auto show. So long as it had four-wheel drive and a CB radio, that's all the law required.

After a few minutes, Nig's boy, Toby, came scootin' in, late as usual, that dune buggy of his looking more like it belonged in an amusement park than at a committee meeting. But Toby could really make that thing do magic out on the desert. Sure, I knew it didn't have a CB, but Toby was smart enough to stay tight by his dad so he'd know what formation to ride. I also knew that dune buggies were illegal on these hunts, but I'll tell you the same thing I tell the folks in Austin: Sometimes out there you need a dune buggy for those critters and nothing else will do.

They all stood around in little groups, engines idling as the ladies chatted and the men nodded seriously about this and that, drinking their coffee — nothing stronger allowed. Talk was a little strained, I guess, which was natural for people who aren't really friends but only get together for a special purpose like this.

Just as it got full dark I nodded to Gus, and he said: "Well, folks..."

Everybody mounted up and followed Gus' deuce'n'half out of the parking lot, staying in single file. I brought up the rear as we drove through town, past the cotton gin and then onto the Interstate, keeping in the right-hand lane at a steady forty-five. I had the flash bar going just as a precaution, you never knew about some of them truckers on pills and such. They'd just as soon run you over as wave at you.

At the canyon road Gus turned off and headed down toward the river. It wasn't long before the pavement gave way to gravel, then the road played out and we were in the desert. We began pulling up alongside Gus, forming a tight side-by-side fan pattern just like we'd practiced. We drove in formation until the first dune, then everyone slowed together and cut their engines.

It takes a mite for your ears to get used to the quiet out there, but then you start picking up all the little night sounds, like the hoot owls and that sort of raspy sound the wind makes when it blows
through a grasswood shrub or tumbleweed. Moon wasn't up yet; just the Milky Way stretching over the top of the desert, so many stars you could hardly see any dark up there. Once your eyes adjusted you could make out the shadows of the cactus and the tire tracks criss-crossing the desert floor. We'd been at this for over a year now.

There was a burst of static from the radio and then Gus came on in that low, gravelly drawl. “Voice check, everybody. Let's start with Otis.”

“Yessir, loud and clear.”

“Jerry, whatcha got?”

“Ten-four, and wall-to-wall, good buddy!” It was Mary, giggly as usual and too loud.

“Now folks, this ain't no party. Doc Fredericks?”

“Ten-four.”

“Nig?”

“H yup.”

“Toby next to you?”

“H yup.”

“Sweetwines, come in.”

“We got ears, boss.”

“Sheriff?”

I keyed a ten-four.

“All right now, listen up. We're gonna start this thing with an open fan pattern, hundred foot intervals. Let's keep it straight and let's keep it even. Everybody ready?”

There were clicks and bursts of static as everyone said yes. No giggles this time. Then Gus came back on. “Okay, I'm holding the center. Let's move out!”

We pulled out in formation, engines rumbling together, then went
into an open phalanx six hundred feet across, and held it steady at twenty-five, the legal limit for hunts. No showboats in this crowd; our line was straight and even as we rolled past all the trash that's out here — rusted out car bodies, those styrofoam containers that never seem to go anywhere, piles of bottles, even an old bathtub.

It wasn't long before one of the Sweetwines radioed from the right flank, “Got eyes here, boss!”

Jerry Douglas came right back. “Don't get excited, folks— just some wild ponies. M omma and her babies.”

“A w, took at 'em.” It was Mary's voice off to the side of the mike.

All the vehicles dethrottled together. There were three ponies standing stock still beside a cactus, frozen by Jerry's spotlight.

It was funny, but they reminded me of a saying my daddy had for times like these when you had to fight a little dirty to protect what was yours. “Boys,” he used to tell my little brother and me, “sometimes you got to aim low, 'specially if they're ridin' ponies.” Then he'd smile just like there was no tomorrow. I'll tell you, I had a lot of respect for that old man.

“I'll run 'em back,” Jerry said from his end and pulled the Bronco out in a wide circle so he could get behind them. When he edged up from behind, they lit out between two vehicles and were gone.

“Okay, let's move,” Gus said. Then, just before he uncued his mike I heard him say, “T hey're safe now.” He was talking to his boys, who were a lad scared, I suppose.

The vehicles reformed and headed out again, moving up and down together over the dunes. Soon we crossed another abandoned road. Gus knew a coyote would probably head for one of those old highways when he came up from the river. They were dry, flat and wouldn't leave many tracks. These new coyotes were cagey bastards.

But Gus was no fool neither. He had the vehicles line up seven abreast so they stretched about a quarter mile on either side of the road, and then we moved out at a steady fifteen. After a bit, I saw Toby pull up close to his dad and shout something. Then Nig came on the radio and said just as calm as you please, “We got a
pack of ‘em down here.”

Gus gave the signal for full lights. High beams and twin spots snapped on and lit up the desert floor. Then the line of vehicles angled together toward Nig and Toby, sped up to the legal limit of twenty-five and closed in.

I could make out at least a dozen pair of eyes that flickered for just an instant, then faded. They had turned and were hightailing it out of there.

“They’re breakin’ for the dry wash,” Gus said. “Right flank, slow it down. I’ll cut ‘em off.” The other vehicles started falling away as Gus floored his deuce’n’half and pulled ahead.

First he swung out to the left and then made a wide arc back in to make sure he wouldn’t miss any. “Okay, right flank, bring it up,” Gus radioed. “Corral pattern.”

Jerry Douglas floored his Bronco and came up quick, kicking up sand and blasting on the horn. When Jerry opened his mike to confirm, you could hear Mary yelling “Yippee!”

The pack was running all out now, caught inside a pincer, with Gus on one side, Douglas on the other, and the rest coming up the middle and closing fast. Must’ve been at least twenty of them. Mostly male, probably seven or eight female. I remember one in particular at the rear: a young girl, about twelve or thirteen, her black hair covered her cheek when she turned her head to look back. Even from where I was I could see the look in her eyes and knew she’d be the first to go down.

“They’re in the cup now,” Gus said. “Close up those intervals, folks. We don’t want any slippin’ through.”

If I had to fault Gus any that night it’d be for waiting too long to close the gaps between the vehicles. Before anybody had a chance to respond to his command, one of the males popped out from behind a cactus, darted between the vehicles and was loose. Had to be the group’s coyote; he knew that was his only chance.

Toby peeled off without being told and took off after him in the dune buggy. The rest of the vehicles settled in behind the pack, which was starting to slow and stumble. They kept looking for...
ways to turn right or left, but the spotlights and horns would turn 'ern back. They were trapped, but good.

Finally it happened about like it always does. First one of the females went down, the girl I'd figured, and laid there. Another stopped to help. Then, as if somebody had given a signal, they all stopped and just stood there, bent over, their chests heaving.

They thought they'd just be rounded up and shipped back over the border. Only the coyotes knew what was really going on these days. So they just sat or stood there like they were hypnotized, staring into the lights of the vehicles coming straight at them.

During the last few seconds, you could see the confusion in their eyes just before the bumpers knocked them down and the heavy-duty tires rolled over them. The sand muffled a lot of the sound. Mostly you just heard the bodies hitting underneath the floorboard. And you could feel the thumping a little, too.

The vehicles made a perfect fleur-de-lis pattern, with the ones on the left breaking left into a U-turn, the ones on the right doing the same. Then they came back around at the bodies. A few were trying to drag themselves away. But before they could get very far the vehicles had lined up single file and started through one at a time, singling out a live one, hitting it dead on, then circling back for another pass. Took longer this way, but that was how Gus did things, slow and deliberate — and thorough. By the time his deuce'n'half came up for a fourth pass, there wasn't nothing left but heaps of cheap clothes, steaming guts and bones edges shining in the moonlight.

Everybody had stopped to watch for any more movement when Mary came on the radio all excited. “There's Toby behind us! There he is!”

About a half-mile back Toby's dune buggy was still dodging cactus as he stayed on the coyote's tail. Gus gave the signal and everybody started across the desert toward Toby's lights. Toby had let the coyote run himself out and was creeping along about three feet behind him, barely moving really, waiting for him to give up. Finally the coyote collapsed face down in the sand and just laid there heaving up and down. He knew it'd be worse for him. All the coyotes knew.
The vehicles formed a circle around him, headlights and spots on bright, then everybody got out. Gus' boys and Doc's little girl hung back behind the others, wide-eyed for sure. Nig held his foot on the back of the coyote's neck, just in case there was any fight left in him, and Gus took out his knife.

"Let's see how many you bring back with you next time, Mr. Coyote," Gus drawled. Then he bent over and began to saw through the hamstrings on both legs—quick, deep strokes, first behind the knee and then below the buttock. The coyote made a high-pitched mewing sound, like a rabbit will do sometimes if you skin it alive. The Sweetwines strung him up against a cactus, his arms over the stems, for a lesson.

Heading back home, everyone was chatting back and forth on the radios, excited and relieved now that it was over. Maybe a bit proud, too. We were just about to the gravel road when Mary spotted the wild ponies again. "There's our babies," she said. 'Ain't they darlin'?'

You could hear the emotion in old Gus' voice when he came on. "Graze in peace," he said to the ponies, but you could tell he was talking to his boys and everyone else, too. "This is your land."

I knew Gus hated what happened out there as much as the next fella. Nobody felt completely good about it, not even Mary Douglas. But you had to admit, Gus had his point. This was our land, damn it — America. And like my daddy used to say, if that meant shooting a little low sometimes to protect what was yours, then that was the way it had to be. Always has been. Always will be, I suppose.