

Father and Sons (by BettyHT)

SUMMARY: Ben has a frank discussion with his sons about their relationship and the future after some changes have taken place. It seems an appropriate story to post in the week before Father's Day. This is an expanded version of a pinecone.

Rating = PG Word count = 1167

Father and Sons

Breakfast was served by Hop SIng. Plates of ham and hot cakes were set out. Plenty of coffee was there with a basket of biscuits and a bowl of preserves. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary at first. Ben Cartwright had greeted Hoss and Joe like he did every morning. As usual, all three tried to avoid looking at the empty chair at the end of the table. With the shape of the table there was no way to camouflage that empty spot. Frequently Joe wished they had a round dining table. If they had that, he and Hoss would have shifted over and removed that extra chair sparing their father the pain of looking at that space at every meal. However, it seemed his mood had improved over the past few weeks which had surprised them because they could discern no reason for the upturn although they welcomed it. Their father had dropped into a deep melancholy when they got the letter from Adam announcing his intention to travel to Australia. It meant there was a fair chance they might never see him again. Then after a few weeks, Ben had perked up and now seemed better than he had since Adam had left. He left Joe nearly speechless with his first effort at opening conversation for the day.

“Joe, I think that idea you had about improving our breeding stock is a good one. We should diversify. In fact, I'd like to go with you up to Oregon to look at those stallions you're interested in buying.”

With eyes suddenly wide, Joe looked at Hoss first and then at his father before stuttering his answer to that. "You would? You do? I mean, really?" Then with a chuckle meant to be disarming, Joe tried to see if his father was serious. "Ah, Pa, don't you trust me to buy good horse stock?"

"Of course, I trust you. I thought we could have a nice trip together though. I mean, if you don't want me to come along, I would understand."

"No, it would be great to have you with me. I was surprised is all."

That conversation and the trip to Oregon was the first of several unusual developments on the Ponderosa. Within a month, a number of changes took place that the two brothers had suggested in the past and been rebuffed. In fact, a few changes Adam had suggested were implemented too. There was a new hay barn, a foreman was hired and given separate quarters, and equipment was ordered to build windmills in some of the drier pastures to provide more reliable water supplies. When their father had a conversation with Hoss and suggested they take time off just before roundup to go on a hunting trip, Hoss and Joe decided perhaps they needed to talk about it.

Joe especially was getting worried. "What do you think is going on with Pa, Hoss? You don't think he's sick, do you. I mean, he's not getting things ready to turn over to us when he's gone, is he?"

"Nah, he's not sick. We woulda seen some sign of that ifn he was. I dunno exactly what's going on though, but it seems he's trying to do everything we want. It's like he don't want to make us mad or something or like he's trying to make sure we're happy or something."

"Somehow this is all tied in with Adam leaving. Do you think he thinks Adam went away because Adam was mad at him or something?"

"Maybe. It kinda seems that way sometimes."

"But he wasn't. Adam told each of us why he was leaving. Now he's doing just what he told us he was going to do too. I never expected him to go to Australia, but it fits with what he said he was going to do."

"Yeah, it does. Shur wish he wasn't going so far away. We may never see him again."

"I know, but we got another issue right here. I'm worried about what's going on with Pa."

"Maybe we gotta have a talk with Pa."

"That isn't going to be easy."

"Maybe easier than you think." Ben stepped from the shadows. "I'm sorry but I was out for a walk and heard you."

Hoss and Joe looked a bit uneasy about being overheard and wondered how much their father had gotten from their conversation. Ben smiled at them to let them know he wasn't upset and to do his best to reassure them even before he talked.

"I know I taught you boys that eavesdropping was wrong, but I didn't know how to tell you I could hear, and then when I heard what you said, I decided the best course of action was that I ought to step up and explain. You see, it's not that I thought that Adam was angry. Oh, I might have worried about that at one point, but you were both correct. He talked to me and convinced me that he had things he wanted to do. No, he could leave because it was the opposite of that. He never said it, but in time, I have come to understand it. It's the same reason that I was able to leave my home. He didn't care enough to stay, and that was my fault. I sent him on trips and put him in charge of things, and I stayed at my desk. I was happy to hand off all sorts of responsibilities to him. I left him

alone in a number of situations that I never would have left either of you. I may have had good reasons for it, but I put distance between us. More than either of you, because of his childhood, he needed me to reach out to him and hold him close. I didn't, and he drifted away from me, from us. I am determined that won't happen with you two. I'm going to be more involved in this ranch and what happens here. I don't want the rest of my family to drift away from me. I'm not going to send you off to do things and sit behind that desk and let my sons move on without me."

"Aw, Pa, that won't never happen." Hoss put a hand on his father's shoulder and didn't let go.

"No." Joe was too choked up to say more. He reached out to his father and did his best with a hug to reassure him that their bond was as close as ever.

Father and sons turned and walked to the house together with Ben's hands on his sons' shoulders and his mind on the one who had gone.