

DEAD FOX RUN: A COLLECTION OF STORIES

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This collection consists of a critical preface and five linked short stories. The preface analyzes the usage of violence in literate and other forms of media, and specifically the ways in which literature can address violence without aggrandizing or stylizing it. The stories explore this idea through the lens of the lives of two young men, following them from boyhood marked by violence to adulthood crushed by the trauma of the American Civil War. Collection includes the stories “Dead Foxes,” “Cow Pen,” “Fatherless,” “Woodsmoke,” and “Brotherhood.”

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PART I
DE-MYTHOLOGIZING VIOLENCE

Violence and death are mainstays of literature, and indeed of all kinds of storytelling. They are built into our culture and society in ways that are only sometimes explored in depth. By in depth, of course, I don't mean the pop-psychological studies on the effects of television and video-game violence on the youth of the country, but rather the reasons why violent imagery and themes remain prevalent if not ubiquitous in modern forms of leisure entertainment.

Simply acknowledging the prevalence of violent imagery and death in literature is not enough, however. The shades of morality involved make what could and perhaps *should* be as simple as the Christian commandment 'thou shalt not kill' something much more multi-layered and subtle. Many forms of violence portrayed in literature and the theatre and film have become their own sub-genres complete with their own tropes and conceits and clichés. The war novel, or the war film, as the case may be, in many cases devolves into patriotic or nationalistic propaganda, glossing over the human cost of war in ways that can only be harmful to the mental health of servicemen and women who see actual combat after being exposed to stylized and aggrandized portrayals of violence in most mainstream commercial literature and film.

In war literature, death is ever present and meting out violence on the “other” is not only socially acceptable, but also somehow morally right. No matter that the physical

act of killing another human being has not changed, the context gives a soldier, under color of national authority and identity, the moral right to kill. Collective violence of this nature seeks to erase individual responsibility for a supremely individual act, the killing of one human being by another, but to what cost? Uncounted millions over the course of human history have fallen in wars, and in almost all cases, their deaths are rationalized away. The dehumanization of the enemy is at work in most war novels, and this is a troubling trend especially given the vaster scope of the term “enemy” in current sociopolitical thought.

The Red Badge of Courage, by Stephen Crane details the emotional struggle within a Civil War soldier, Henry Fleming to embrace the potentially life-ending danger and violence that he faces in battle. The novel deals with this in an interesting fashion, though one that runs contrary to my own ideas. After spending most of the novel struggling with fear of his own death, more so than the potential killing he is tasked with doing, he finds the shame of cowardice more frightening than the danger to himself and the thought of killing other human beings. The deaths of the enemy are far away and less real than those of the men dying around the novel's protagonist. When Henry Fleming finally comes to terms with the morality of combat and rejoins his compatriots, he becomes fully a part of the war machine. The final sections of the novel are interesting to this discussion due to the manner in which individual identity is to a large extent subsumed by larger national identity, and in this case not even that, but rather a specific military unit becomes not unlike a singular entity, as Crane uses the collective “the

regiment” predominantly, only falling back to the use of a third person singular 'he' when the regiment wavers in the face of enemy fire.

Still, in dealing with Fleming's guilt for breaking and running, the discussion runs up against a very important issue. One of the few instincts that are universally accepted among human beings is that of self preservation. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane's protagonist's instincts to keep himself alive and safely out of the fight, are at war with the external dictate of the nation and its conflicts during the American Civil War. At one level, this seems to dictate that the natural world exists in harmony with this desire of all creatures to remain living. However, human beings are set up morphologically, to be hunters. Binocular vision is of must use in catching prey, and so hunting and violence follow through much of history. Culturally, the skills used in hunting are easily adaptable to making war, and thus the two are inextricably linked. In the Revolutionary War, sharpshooters took a heavy toll on British regiments. In the Civil War, hunting skills again allowed minimally trained soldiers to be quite nearly as effective as troops trained specifically for the organized killing of army units.

The act is given a different name, but in actuality, the distinction is less readily apparent.

Are we as human beings hardwired to seek out and enjoy violent literature due to its “thrilling” content, or do we owe this drive to the selfsame ubiquity of violence? As authors, a life-and-death scenario is in many respects simpler to engage the reader. What could be more engaging than characters that we have become attached to through the

course of many pages face death, and potentially, the ending of the tale? At the same time, any overly violent work runs the risk of slipping into melodrama, with the guts of the tale spread out before the reader and the character's importance to the tale running secondary to titillation. At what point does the reader become numb to the violence if the protagonist always comes out unscathed? And still more troubling, in the case of video-games that allow active participation in violence, when does death lose any threat? To appeal to more consumers, there is seldom any active *loss* involved in getting a video-game avatar killed.

The origins of violence and death as morality play harken back potentially thousands of years, but for clarity, let us confine ourselves to Western literature. In Wister's *The Virginian*, one of the first works that helped define the genre of the Western, the titular Virginian is drawn into conflict with cattle rustlers, eventually killing their leader in a prototypically Western pistol duel.

The moral stakes in the novel are clear nearly from the outset, but much of this is due to the clichés and stereotypes involved, which were not, per se cliché at the time of its writing. In hindsight, of course, the staunch morality and stylization of violence largely typical of Westerns have their roots in *The Virginian*. The Virginian himself actually wears a white hat, and the villainous counterpart a black hat. This sort of cut-and-dry moralism is useful only as a starting point. It allows a reader to stop thinking about the consequences of violence in a real way. To an extent, much of popular entertainment today falls into this trap.

Police procedurals dominate the airwaves, giving cookie cutter morality and allowing the good guys to shoot the bad guys more often than not without a ripple of guilt. Looking at such situations in more exacting detail is a necessity if the intention is to do more than merely entertain. To make a value judgment, a 'good' work of fiction, no matter the medium, leaves the reader something to work out, beyond the mechanics of a mystery story.

Violence also has an attachment to manliness, from Schwarzenegger to John Wayne to Hemingway, with wide-reaching effects on cultural mores in regard to violence. In Ernest Hemingway's short story "Indian Camp," Nick Adams accompanies his father, a doctor, to the birth of a local native American child. The screams of the woman's labor become too much for the child's father, and believing both mother and child will die in childbirth, the native American father cuts his own throat. Nick Adams learns an important lesson from the experience, but it isn't necessarily the lesson we would wish him to take away. When Nick's father takes him along to the delivery and then makes the discovery of the father's suicide, Nick takes something away from the events, that we should not be endorsing, but are. This is not an attempt to justify the man's suicide in the face of the torment of hearing his wife's potential death in childbirth. Still, Nick's moment of growth is related to the idea that the suicide was a result of a lack of sufficient manliness. Boiling a complex psychological situation down to such a conclusion is symptomatic of the ways in which our culture has mythologized violence without proper meditation on the reality of the consequences.

In “The Killers,” another Hemingway short story, an older Nick Adams is briefly tied up in the kitchen of a diner while two men lie in wait to kill Ole Anderson. Once Ole does not arrive as expected, Nick and the other hostages are released. Nick goes to warn Ole of the threat. Ole is paralyzed by fear and trapped by his past, refuses to make use of Nick's warning. Although he doesn't have to witness killing first-hand, Nick's response to the situation is tellingly complex. Though he has done what he could, Nick feels helpless due to his inability to get through to Ole and save the man's life, and the closing lines of the story demonstrate the problems inherent in the way Hemingway views manliness and morality. “I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful.' / 'Well,' said George, 'you better not think about it.’”

(Hemingway, 69)

George's advice to Nick is again illustrative of a somewhat simplistic way of dealing with violence. If Nick takes the advice, he washes his hands of a potentially emotion-packed and important moment of psychological growth. We all do this of course, when first confronted with the reality of our own helplessness in the face of death, but it should not be our default stance, as along that path lies a tendency to label things unexplainable, or impossible to deal with, much as early mankind made up stories to explain natural phenomenon which were as yet unexplainable.

None of this is anything new, in fact, far from it. Mythology is rife with violence, from Hercules' 12 labors, to Gilgamesh, most cultures have a firm mythological backing of violence, heroes who kill their way to high status, in some cases, to godhood. This is

hardly a respectable goal, but this sense that 'might can make right' is oftentimes taken at face value. Examples are too numerous to list properly, and counter-examples disturbingly rare.

In *Blood Meridian*, a novel by Cormac McCarthy based on actual events in Texas and across the border into Mexico in the 1850s, a young man known as The Kid joins up with a gang of outlaws and attempts to corner the market on Indian scalps. Eventually, the bloodshed and horror subside, with only two men from the gang living to tell the tale, The Kid, and The Judge, an almost otherworldly and enigmatic figure of almost unrelieved evil, who finally kills The Kid years later.

Cormac McCarthy takes a healthy step in the novel to shifting the discussion of violence into productive areas. By fictionalizing actual events, he takes charge of many complaints of viewers of Western films and readers of Western literature, in regard to the overly competent hero. Bringing death efficiently is sometimes looked at as supremely manly, as in the case of nearly every Clint Eastwood movie. In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy uses the amorality of his arguable protagonist and brutally graphic depictions of violence to muddy our expectations. Every fight that The Kid and the rest come through in *Blood Meridian*, every slaughter of peaceful Pueblo Indians that goes unavenged, strikes against the kind of White-hat, Black-hat morality that we wish to be the case in reality.

When the end finally comes for the gang, and The Kid is wounded by an arrow, it gives the reader a sense that there is *some* justice in the world, but without allowing the

substructure of our stylized and fictionalized notions of morality to dictate the flow of events in a way that ruffles necessary suspension of disbelief. The details regarding the arrow wound the Kid suffers are too graphic for that, and the danger so pronounced that his escape is acceptable.

Making fiction conform to the wishes of the readership for recognizable notions of justice and potentially, Karma, can have its uses, but at the same time, and on another level, it fails to account for real world problems that are involved in violence laden stories. In reality, the good guys don't, can't always win. If anyone could even agree as to who the good guys are, anyway. Violence is a major factor in each of the five stories that follow, but, in each story, a different aspect of violence is examined, with each story filling in some part of the picture of two boys' lives shattered by, and equally defined by violence and death.

In “Dead Foxes,” the opening story of the collection, a young Tom Chilton deals with death and loss for the first time. The standard coming of age story sometimes deals with death, but more usually at a remove; a grandparent dies and a parent must explain the nature of death, or fail to do so effectively, as is more common, spurring growth as the protagonist comes to terms with the reality of death on his or her own. My goal with “Dead Foxes” was to challenge this framework but still tell that same story, where a young boy learns to deal with death, however imperfectly.

On his way to school Tom finds a fox trapped in a bear trap, and the encounter takes away any separation between Tom and death. His first attempts to save the trapped

fox are doomed. An older, more worldly Tom might have recognized the hopelessness of the Fox's predicament. Tom, and the reader are shown the gruesome nature of the fox's wounds to underscore this hopelessness and senselessness.

Two weeks after trying and failing to save the fox, Tom finds his own father shot dead on a pool table. The two weeks between Tom killing the fox and his father's death, is the time that one might expect to encapsulate the epiphanic moment, where with the help of his father, Tom comes to grips with the fact that everything dies. I considered and rejected the notion of inserting such a scene in favor of showing Tom's run-in with the trapped fox as a flashback while riding to his father's deathbed.

Often we are tasked with making sense of loss, whether of family members or friends. We attempt to rationalize death in sometimes bizarre ways. I lost my grandmother while working on the first full draft of this story, and Tom's reaction at the end of the story is something of an echo of that. Even though I was "prepared" for her death, it still struck me unexpectedly. The phone call came, and even before I had answered it, I knew what it meant. Tom's talk with deputy Mills before being rushed to his father fulfills that same function. He still has to go through the motions of asking the question, of completing the social contract before grief can invade.

The difference between an expected, peaceful, death and the fate of Tom's father is, of course, considerable. However, to a large extent, parallels can still be made usefully to any death.

For Tom, the difficulty lies in his own sense of guilt. The killing of the fox, an act

largely of mercy, is still fresh in his mind when he is forced to confront his father's death. He goes from perpetrator to victim so quickly that he still hasn't come to terms with one brush with death when the second arrives. That's how things really are. There's never enough time for Tom to be 'reconciled' with death.

In “Cow Pen,” events follow on from “Dead Foxes,” with Tom now living with his friend Eli and Eli's mother. Tom is still dealing with his father's death, and makes room in this story for Eli to share some of the spotlight in terms of point of view. This story was an experiment of sorts in that regard, with a sort of collective third person 'the boys' at the center as opposed to one or the other, though the third person is close enough that both Tom's and Eli's thoughts come through.

The trope of the abusive stepfather is such a cliché that one hesitates to introduce such a character without good reason, especially so when the man isn't going to survive through the end of the story. But McCantless serves a function in “Cow Pen” beyond that of being a one-note antagonist to the boys. He introduces Tom and Eli to shooting firearms, which is a quintessentially “manly” thing to do. The target practice foreshadows darker things to come, both in later stories as well as later in “Cow Pen” in particular, though no guns are involved there. I spoke earlier about the way in which hunting prepares would-be-soldiers for war. In the 1850s hunting was also potentially a life-saving skill, allowing boys to put food on the table later in life.

In a series of stories dealing so heavily with violence and death, a little levity will go a long way, but how much is too much? The scene where Tom and Eli spook

McCantless' horse was originally more slapstick, more broadly physical. But then, McCantless' punishment of the boys was more emotional. The collective culpability for Eli and Tom in McCantless' death is another important aspect given the way that the collective point of view obscures their specific intentions. The boys' decision to go into town in search of McCantless might have been for any number of reasons, including a subconscious desire to kill him.

Domestic violence is now almost universally seen in this country as the crime that it should be, but culturally, it's taken hundreds of years to get there. And even now, a worrisome number of cases go unreported and undiscovered. In the time of the story, McCantless wouldn't really be criminally culpable for anything he does. The violence he commits toward Tom and Eli can be somewhat rationalized away as discipline, considering his lack of emotion when beating Tom and Eli. When the boys hesitate in the cow pen, leaving McCantless to suffocate in the mud, the line they cross is all the more devastating because it is in fact mostly unintentional. Subconsciously, the boys might be aware, but they are frozen, until their indecision takes matters in hand.

In "Fatherless," Tom and Eli must deal with the distinction between socially acceptable violence and unacceptable violence. The cultural milieu of the period is helpful in setting up this dichotomy, as for a time revenge was an acceptable defense for murder. Tom's quest for vengeance against his father's killer takes something of a backseat to Eli's attempt to stop him. It is not primarily an attempt to keep Tom from going to prison or hanging for the killing, but to stop him from suffering the emotional

damage, from ending another human being's life, even if notions of manliness don't allow Eli to put it in those terms.

Also in this story, the question of Eli's parentage and the identity of Tom's father's killer are addressed, filling in the unanswered questions from previous stories.

“Fatherless” is meant as the hinge of the group of five stories, shifting the focus from mostly second-hand or indirect violence to active participation. This shift, perhaps more so than any actual criminal culpability, separates Tom and Eli from their youth and from society. Having purposefully killed a man, as opposed to standing by in mute shock while McCantless suffocated in *Cow Pen*, it is a combination of emotions that send Tom and Eli running from town.

Additionally, Tom's emotional outburst at the end of “Dead Foxes” is shown to have been justified, while the murder itself is less clear cut outside the frontier mentality that reigns over the boys. While Tom makes the initial attack on Mr. Dutton, it is Eli who actually kills the man, in a moment of fury and without real forethought. Nevertheless, both Tom and Eli have crossed an important line, and divorced themselves from their previous social structure.

As the setting moves forward into the 1860s, Tom and Eli's desire to belong to something lands them in the Confederate army for “Woodsmoke,” which examines the way that military struggle completely rearranges our moral compass. Something in the case of the Civil War as arbitrary as color of clothing marks fellow human beings for death. Hiding among the dead after a charge gone wrong, Tom wanders the battlefield in

search of his unit, and safety. Tom's moral confusion is magnified by the loss of his comrades. Alone on a battlefield, his own notions of right and wrong can come into conflict with his supposed duty.

His instinct to help those in danger and distress is called into conflict with his duty when he sees a Union soldier cut down by his own artillery. The way Tom deals with the demands of the war upon him is not meant as an example of moral courage or exactitude but rather a fallible person attempting to make the best of an impossible situation. By the closing of the story, the war and its attendant bloodshed have so shifted Tom's outlook in this regard that he can rationally choose to kill a man in an act of mercy, as he once did a fox in the opening story. There is of course a huge difference in the two acts. A fox is not a person, and making a moral equivalency to the killing of one to the other is an intentionally false parallel. However, as enmeshed as Tom has become in the horror and bloodshed, he can no longer see this objectively.

In "Brotherhood" we rejoin Tom and Eli years later, with a physically injured Tom on the run from the rest of the deserters turned outlaws from "Woodsmoke." The lingering damage of violence is not merely physical but psychological as well, and Tom's gunshot wound becomes emblematic of the reality of this phenomenon. He is unable to come to terms with the things he has done, dating back as far as "Cow Pen," through the war and the intervening years' attempt to survive first as a deserter and then as an outlaw. Strictly speaking, Confederate deserters would not need to be on the run from the law after the close of the war, but the group has turned to violence to survive by that point. It

is a result of this turn to outlawry that keeps Tom in such an abject state.

In “Brotherhood,” Eli has not yet come to such a pass, and finds himself forced to numb any twinges of conscience with liquor and saloon girls. However, when Tom makes his run for freedom, his years of friendship with Tom count for more than the time spent as an outlaw with Neustead and the others.

The inciting incident, a shootout in a crowded saloon leading to the death of a saloon girl is too much for Tom to take. One more senseless death on the pile of death and violence that has made up his adult life is the proverbial straw breaking the camel's back. For Tom, the act of burying the woman's body is an attempt to assuage his feeling of complicity in her death, despite the fact that he did not shoot her, and in fact kills the man who did. The interruption of the burial and Tom taking a bullet in the arm make the futility of such a gesture as a means of atonement apparent to the reader if not to Tom himself.

Cutting back and forth between Eli and Tom in this story is an important device, though it complicates matters, because both Tom and Eli are in emotional turmoil that becomes important to the closing moments of the story. The time spent with Tom and the details of his struggle with his physical wound stretch for nearly half the story, mirroring his struggle to come to grips with the violence he has perpetrated on others.

Eli's struggle of course is vastly different, as he has yet to face up to the evil he has done, choosing instead to drown his sorrows before they can come to a head. With Tom singled out for the blame in the shootout, Eli is placed in an impossible situation,

when his tracking skills will be used to locate and kill his truest and oldest friend. This forces a crisis for Eli, and he makes a valiant but doomed attempt to save Tom's life.

Doomed, because of the lingering effects of the gunshot, but more importantly, the life of violence that Tom has lead, and the way that he has come to view the world. There is no happy ending for Tom, as his own depression and cynicism become self-fulfilling. He misconstrues Eli's attempted rescue because all he has seen from Eli recently is drinking and spending his stolen money on prostitutes, and Tom cannot make the leap in logic necessary to see that Eli has met his own crisis point in terms of what is moral and what is not.

With both men injured now, the aspect of choice is removed; neither man is fit to mount a horse unaided and make an escape, and so Eli is forced to kill Tom as a means of cementing his standing with the others. If he doesn't finish things and kill his friend, the others will be able to figure out what happened, and Tom will die eventually anyway, whether from his wounds or in a noose if he somehow managed to survive long enough to be taken back to town. This last act of violence, ironically enough places Eli in much the same position that Tom was in before attempting to run, trapped by circumstances and his own previous actions in a prison of his own making.

In setting out to write a series of stories with such violent and at times graphic themes, it was important that each story be grounded in hopefully realistic depictions of both the physical and emotional ramifications of those actions. Failing to sufficiently draw out those aspects of violence would be tantamount to condoning them, in my mind.

The ways in which popular entertainment stylizes and lionizes violent acts are problematic for many reasons, and not merely for the most commonly touted reason, potential effects on childhood development. Even as adults such structures within society act upon our moral centers, and to stubbornly stick our heads in the sand and insist that we can ignore violent imagery and action in literature in favor of more narrowly emotional moments is perhaps one of the very reasons that there is a distinction between literary fiction and commercial fiction, when there need not be one.

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PART II
THE COLLECTION

Dead Foxes

Tom and Eli had already started back from school when they noticed a plume of dust that signaled a rider come up from town. It was a little odd that neither Tom's father or Eli's momma was visible waiting for them at the lightning-blasted oak outside of town. Tom glanced at Eli, "What do you make of that?"

The shorter boy shrugged a bony shoulder. Tom frowned hard enough to furrow his brow and stopped on the dirt path a hundred yards or so before the lightning-blasted oak tree. Somebody had tried to yank the stump out in the last few days, but the soil had been baking hot lately and they had eventually given up. A snapped-off bit of leather harness lay discarded, still hooked over one of the shattered limbs and flapping in the breeze if a big enough gust came through and stirred the dust.

The rider came closer, and Tom and Eli could start to make out details. The man was young, barely into his mid-twenties, but he wore his deputy's badge with enough self-assurance that he didn't have much trouble with local drunks as he might have. A thick line of white scar tissue stretching up his face where he'd been burned in a fire when Tom and Eli were just babies probably had something to do with it. If you didn't know Mills very well, you could get the wrong idea about him.

He reined in, taking his horse down from a gallop to a trot and walked him up to a stop in front of Tom and Eli. The scar dominated his face, as usual, tugging the corner of

his mouth down and obliterating most expression from the right side of his face, as it looped up to obscure his eyebrow, but on the left side, Tom could tell right away something was bad wrong.

“What's the matter, Deputy?” Eli said.

Mills frowned, or frowned harder. “I need you to come into town with me, Tom,” he said. “Right now.”

“Why? What's going on?” Tom demanded.

“We ain't got time for that,” Mills said and leaned down, holding out his hand. He sighed when Tom crossed his arms, stuffing his hands in his armpits. Mills tipped his hat forward to shade his eyes from the glare of the late afternoon sun. “It's your pa.”

“What about my pa?” Tom said after a moment of shock.

“We need to go now. So you can say goodbye,” Mills said.

Tom forced himself to meet the deputy's eye. “Where's he going?” Tom finally got out.

Mills shook his head and held out his hand again. “It ain't that kind of goodbye.”

The deputy grabbed Tom by the hand and swung him up on the saddle in front of him, sawed the reins as he turned the horse around abruptly, and kicked his mount into a trot. He waited a little to move to a canter so Eli wouldn't be coughing himself to death in the dust plume they kicked up. As they trotted past the ruined oak tree, Tom couldn't help but think of the fox two weeks past.

Aside from one or two things, it had started like any other day. It was spring, coming on into summer, and even walking through town over to Eli's place, it smelled of pollen, and of that one kind of flower. The name would always elude him later in life, but the smell stuck with him. The name wasn't all that crucial, when it came down to it, but he sometimes worried that if he ever had kids of his own, they'd expect him to have that detail. They'd expect him to be a better storyteller. That had always been one of his father's strengths.

One thing that didn't usually happen, was Tom's father escorting him from the Chilton lodgings across town to meet up with his best friend for the walk to school. Usually, Frank Chilton would just sit at the table nursing his morning-after headache and a pot of coffee while Tom did his chores. This morning, Frank was tense, and he dragged Tom out of the house a few minutes earlier than normal.

Eli was waiting for them out front by the clapboard house that served as the Briggs family home. Tom's father waved. "Your ma around, boy? Only I wanted to talk to her."

He just shrugged. "I think so. Come on, Tommy. Let's go! Miss Chambers don't like it when we're late." Even though they'd started out early, Tom usually made better time when he wasn't slowed down by the deliberate pace his father set.

"Now you two hold up," Tom's pa said. "I don't want you little heathens tearing off by yourselves. Eli, why don't you run on inside and fetch your mamma?"

Eli knuckled his forehead and darted inside. Tom frowned and looked at his father

intently. There was a set to his shoulders and a kind of grim determination about his sturdy features that wasn't normal, in Tom's experience. Frank Chilton was by no means a frivolous or a flighty personage in the town, despite his tendency to drink. That was almost always after Tom was asleep. In the cold light of day, Frank Chilton was soberer than most. So, when there was trouble, and Sheriff Howard and Deputy Mills needed an extra pair of hands, more times than not, Tom's pa was next in line for a tin star on his chest. That was what it was, Tom decided. His pa was acting like he was deputized. He wasn't wearing his gun, but the effect was the same, body-language wise.

When Eli came back with his mother, Tom's pa tipped his hat to her, and then when Tom didn't follow suit, kicked him pointedly in the ankle. "Mornin' Stella."

Eli's ma was plumply pretty, with a long braid of dirty blond hair thrown over one shoulder or the other. She pursed her lips. "To what do we owe the personal visit, Frank?"

He shrugged. "I was hoping I might speak to you as you walked the boys to school?"

"You say so, Frank."

Tom and Eli ranged on ahead of their respective parents, roughhousing just enough so they wouldn't get called down for it. Tom tried to beg some rock candy as they passed the general store, but his pa snapped something from back a ways and Eli dragged him on. The boys didn't bother paying much attention after that. In fact, Eli's momma had to tell them twice to run along ahead.

She raised her voice to get their attention. "You listen good now, boys, get on to

school and don't you dawdle.”

Tom glanced at Eli and shrugged. Being let loose for the half mile out of town to the schoolhouse was something that rarely happened, and the boys did not need to be told twice. They left the adults behind without a second thought.

The path to the schoolhouse was dusty this time of year, the soil already baked dry even though it wasn't yet full summer. The heat sometimes got to him, but this day he remembered the sun on his back fondly. It had felt like he imagined a mother's arms would have done. When they left the town behind, there was a thin line of squat bushes that slowly died off to their left. Beyond that was a stand of trees near the lightning blasted oak where they would play sometimes before coming home after school let out.

“Come on, hurry up, Tommy. We're going to be late.” Eli ran ahead, and the dust kicked up by his boots made Tom cough. He fell behind a little.

“Ain't that half the fun?” He shouted as they neared the trees. They had to turn north at the oak. The gray bulk of the schoolhouse was visible through a heat-haze in the distance. Tommy shook his head and Eli ran on ahead, afraid Miss Chambers would take the slipper to him for being late. Come down to it, Tom didn't want to suffer that fate either. Miss Chambers' arm was stronger than it had a right to be.

A whimper from up next to the big oak stump brought him up short. It sounded almost like someone crying. Tom frowned and thought about calling Eli back, but his throat was still a little raw from coughing and he didn't want to shout himself hoarse. He

wasn't doing himself any good standing around, so he crept forward into the stand of oak, mostly they were smaller trees, and the shade from their branches wasn't full and deep like it would have been with older trees. Still it was noticeably cooler underneath. The grass rustled under his boots and he stopped periodically, listening for the sound.

After a few minutes searching around in the hollow made by the roots of one of the bigger oaks, he found the source. Lying in a little half-congealed puddle of its own blood, was a fox, or maybe a baby wolf. It was crumpled and laying on its side, and the oddity of it was that he couldn't tell at first what had wounded it. At the sight of him, the fox—he had spotted a bushy tail, and a ray of sunlight through the leaves had played on the red fur; that was a clincher—tried to pull itself up and spring away. It thrashed and only half-made it to its feet before collapsing. Then he saw why. Its front leg was caught in the rough black iron jaws of a great old bear trap. Its arms were red with rust and fox blood in about equal parts.

The fox snapped at him, shuddered and thrashed a little more, then lay still, its ribs rising and falling rapidly while it panted for breath. It whimpered again. In its attempt to run, the fox had pulled its trapped leg maybe half an inch in the trap, dragging its flesh across the sharp edges of the trap and raising a new ridge of blackish bloody mess. Tommy turned away from the spectacle of blood and swallowed a rising tide of bile. He couldn't meet the animal's eyes after that first glimpse. Those eyes had held more than he could have expected. Fear and pain, and rage fit to blind a man. But that was silly. It was just a fox. Just a dumb animal. It couldn't know anything, feel anything. That was

what everyone said. He scowled and brought himself to look the trapped animal in the eyes again. He came to a decision.

“Alright, you mangy ol' fox. I'm gonna get you out of this mess you got yourself in. And then we'll be quits. But so help me, if you try to bite me, I'll leave you to bleed out slow, hear?” Tommy said. He snorted. Like the thing could understand any of that. But there was a glimmer of something in the eyes.

Tommy leaned forward over the trap and looked down in silence for a moment, before he worked up the nerve. He took a hold of both of the trap's arms, one in either hand and tensed, heaved with all his strength. He could have swore the jaws gave a little. A quarter of an inch, maybe just enough. “Go on, get movin'!” He panted, but the fox didn't even try to move, and he gave up. Tommy fell forward a little, bracing his hands to either side of the trap. The jaws tightened back up, and the fox thrashed and snapped at him again. He shot back in shock and blood squirted out of the fox's wound, it whimpered and lay still. “You son of a bitch! What did I tell you, you damn stupid thing? I done told you.” The fox lay still and panted at him, eyes staring. “I should leave you to broil. I should! Daddy always said a man's got to keep his word or he ain't worth spittin' on.”

Tommy wiped at the blood on his flannel shirt, but just managed to smear it around and get some on his hands. He looked down at the blood on his hands, at the smears on his shirt already starting to dry in and ruin it. Eventually he looked back up at the fox, and it was still looking at him accusingly, still panting, though the rise and fall of

its ribs seemed to have slowed just a touch.

“I already tried, you dumb fox. I *tried*. I can't help you, and I'm going to be late to school and Miss Chambers is going to whip my hide and you ain't *worth* it. Don't you look at me like that!” He hung his head and stifled a sob, and ran his blood fingers into his hair. “I can't do anything for you. I'm sorry.”

The fox twitched its whiskers at him and laid its head down on the tree roots. Tommy met its gaze again and sniffled. He scrubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand. After a minute, he nodded, and dug in his pocket for the little jackknife his daddy had got him for his last Christmas, and he opened the blade. He sat for a while, gathering himself.

The fox moved a little, settling itself down, but its eyes never left him. If it saw the knife, Tom couldn't tell. It just lay on the bare dirt, half on top of the oak roots, whimpering a little. His hand shook and he fought down the urge to run off to school and try to forget about this fox dying here under the oak trees.

“I'm sorry I couldn't help any better,” he said. Tommy pinned the fox down and leaned forward, drove the blade into the side of its neck. The fox jerked and inky blood pooled around the wound quickly, seeping into the dry earth. Tom squeezed his eyes shut and tried to ignore the pitiful sounds the fox made, but the image was seared in. Its back legs twitched in a spasm, as if still trying to run. He could feel the struggle slowing through the hand pinning the fox's head down. His eyes came back open involuntarily and he tried to close them again, but he couldn't look away.

His knife left a thick smudge of blood on his pant leg when he tried to clean it, and Tom knew he would have to do a better job of it before long, or it would etch the blade, and the whole thing would rust shut.

For he didn't know how long, he wept, looking at the dead fox, still with its leg caught but now at least it wasn't in any pain. Then he caught its eye again, empty and dead. Tom cut the wounded leg free, sawing with his little boy's knife. The bone had shattered when the trap sprung, so it didn't take long. He was at a loss what to do with the fox's foot then, and he stuffed it in his pocket alongside his knife.

Tom cradled the dead fox gently, stood with exaggerated care, and made his way to school.

Miss Chambers' voice carried well outside, and Tom could hear her instructing the other kids as he walked slowly up the path. There were a handful of parched flowers to either side of the steps out front. Wilting, dead or dying. It was all of a piece. The schoolhouse itself had seen better days. They would have been sometime in the '30s right after it was built. It had originally served as sick-house, when there had been some real bad outbreak of smallpox, or the like came through. Tom wasn't too clear on it, though he'd heard his father talk about the bad luck turning a sick-house into a schoolhouse would bring. But it had turned out only to be a scare, nobody'd ever fallen sick in town, and it had stayed unused until Miss Chambers came to town about a year earlier and fixed the place up a little.

The whitewash needed to be redone and a good third of the planks on the

windward side were half-gone to dry-rot. Proper maintenance was never Miss Chambers' strong suit. But the place was still standing, and that seemed to do the trick as far as everybody was concerned.

He clutched the fox to his chest and stomped into the schoolhouse. Tom stared at the town schoolmarm's wide back for a while without a sound. The dozen or so children had all turned to look at him, in various attitudes of shock. Miss Chambers paused her lecture on the War of Independence and started scratching something up there on the blackboard, making everybody's skin crawl with the sound of it. Tom froze. Any second now she would turn around and—

“Thomas Eugene Chilton! You're covered in blood. What have you been up to *now* you wicked boy?” Somehow, just the addition of Miss Chambers' eyes on him made everything worse. At least the other kids hadn't been judging him. Tom felt himself begin to wilt, to shrink in upon himself at the assembled stares of all his friends. He was holding a dead and bloody fox to his chest like a newborn in swaddling. All the others were still shocked, appalled at the blood, but Miss Chambers' glare was merely expectant. She seemed to demand answering.

The effort it took to find words was nearly beyond him. Eli stood and came over. “You alright, Tom?”

“Back to your seat, Eli,” Miss Chambers said absently, and started toward Tom.

Tom blinked for the first time in what seemed like forever. “I couldn't get him out of the trap,” he said. Tom raised his arms slightly to demonstrate. “I couldn't...”

“Get out of here!” Miss Chambers said. “Don't you bring that foul beast in my school house. Don't you dare!”

Tommy shrugged. “I got to bury him.”

“Don't you talk back to me boy,” Miss Chambers growled, and closed the distance with a surprising amount of grace for a woman as wide as she was. She grabbed Tom's ear and twisted, yanking him by the trapped bit of flesh toward the door. “Class, copy down the first chapter of Deuteronomy while I discipline young Thomas.”

Miss Chambers dragged him down the rickety stairs and around the side of the schoolhouse before she finally let go of his ear. “Drop that vile creature this instant.”

Tom swallowed back something hurtful and clutched tighter. “I have to bury him.”

“It,” she corrected him. “Put the thing down. Drop it.”

“I ain't goin' to drop him,” Tom said. Miss Chambers thwacked him across the shoulders with her ruler.

“Do as I say,” she said.

“I will not.”

Miss Chambers stared at him again, but now as if she'd never seen him before in her life. The tableau held for just a moment, before Miss Chambers glanced up and saw the faces of the others clustered at the tiny window. They were bunched up to watch and squealed and dispersed almost on the instant of their discovery. She shook her head and glanced back down to Tom. “Now I have to whip you,” Miss Chambers said. “Until you behave properly. Is that what you want? Just drop the filthy thing.”

“No ma'am.”

Tom took his whipping stoically, and Miss Chambers finally gave up and snorted. “There's a shovel out back, wash yourself off before you come inside.”

They made good time back to town. Mills had a good grip on Tom so he wouldn't fall off, and it was only half a mile or so. But they were still too late. By the time they got over to the *Dry Ditch*, Frank Chilton was lying on the billiards table in a puddle of black half-congealed blood. At one corner, the blood had dribbled down into the pocket and coated the ivory cue ball translucent red.

There was a little pool of drips and drabs on the wood floor under it. Chilton's hand was hanging off one side of the table, white and bloated looking in the lamplight. His head had lolled to one side and he stared out of empty eyes toward the door. Tom took in the sight calmly, and Mills put an arm around his shoulders in worry.

The owner was arguing off to one side with the Sheriff. “Should have let me moved the asshole 'stead of letting him bleed to death on my damn pool table. You have any idea how much it's going to cost to replace it?”

Sheriff Howard was fixing to say something back hot, when he noticed Tom and Deputy Mills in the doorway. “Shit. Mills get him the hell out of here!”

Tom shrugged Mills' hand off and launched himself forward at Mr. Dutton the barkeep, shouting wordlessly. Mills tried to grab hold of him again, but he wriggled free. He dug in his pocket for his knife, and got it out. In his rush, his hand brushed the fox's

foot his daddy had helped him preserve and it tumbled out. Dutton put up his hands to try and catch Tom. He didn't see the knife until it went into the meat of his thigh. Dutton screamed bloody murder and Tom pulled back to stick him again, tears streaming down his face. Sheriff Howard slapped the knife away and grabbed him around the waist, swung him around and away, stuffed him into Mills' grasp again. "Get him out!" He bellowed.

While the Sheriff went back to check on Dutton's leg, Mills carried Tom out into the last minutes of sunlight the street had left. Eli's momma came bustling up out of nowhere with Eli trailing behind her and snatched him away. Tom clutched at her instinctively, and smeared blood onto her dress.

Cow Pen

Those first weeks, once they'd buried his father, Tom was quieter than normal. Eli tried to cheer him up, the usual way, tossing insects or bits of cow patties down the back of people's shirts when they weren't looking. Deputy Mills gave them both a dose of the strap when he finally caught up to them, and Tom got quieter still. He took to sleeping more and more. Eli's momma set him extra chores, trying to work the grief out of him, but it was another two weeks after the drought broke before he was back to his usual self.

“We're brother's now, Tommy,” Eli said one day once Tom was all the way talking again. They were out by the barn feeding the chickens. It wasn't really a two man job, but Eli's momma insisted that Tom come along lately. And for them not to come back for an hour or so, when they were done.

“You say so,” Tom said, doubtfully. It had been a couple months, but he still didn't feel at home with Eli and his momma. He missed the way his old house smelled. It just felt like home.

Eli wouldn't let it stand at that. “I mean we both lost our dads and momma takes care of the both of us now. Maybe we ain't blood. But you gotta admit...” He left it hanging in the dusty afternoon sun. Tom frowned and tossed a handful of corn at the chickens, harder than he really needed to.

“Yeah.” Tom finally said. “Figure you ain't entirely wrong neither.”

Eli grinned and tossed the last handful of corn out on the ground and opened his mouth to say something when they heard the shriek. Eli grabbed Tom and they jumped over the low chicken-wire and ran back for the house. They pounded up the steps and burst into the kitchen, ready to fight.

But Eli's momma wasn't in trouble. She had her arms around some man's neck and she was shrieking something awful, but she turned the second they came through that door with a smile on her face. She beamed at them and waved her hand in Tom and Eli's faces, showing off the ring.

“Look here boys! The good Lord has answered my prayers. George McCantless is gonna be your new daddy.”

McCantless put his arms around Eli's momma's waist and grinned at them over her shoulder. He was missing his right front tooth, and he wore his hair longer than most of the men in town, with a little wave to it and a sheen that had to have come from a tin. McCantless was tall and rangy, and reminded Eli of a daddy long-legs. There was something in his eyes that Eli didn't trust, his grin didn't quite match up right with his gaze.

Eli woke up early a few days later and filled a bucket with water from the horse trough. He recruited Tom to help him steady himself while he wrestled it into place over the door. McCantless was usually the first one up, smoking his pipe on the back porch and drinking coffee before starting up on his chores. Tom and Eli hid around behind the

side of the house and waited.

It was another quarter of an hour, but finally McCantless came out. The bucket tumbled down, seeming to take forever, caught in some little fluke of time, the water sloshing out like molasses. And then McCantless was drenched. Water slicked his hair to his head and darkened his shirt. He grabbed up the bucket and swung it out into the yard cussing his head off. Eli couldn't help but laugh at the picture it made in his head. He must have got a little carried away, because next he knew, McCantless was bearing down on him. Tom grabbed at Eli's sleeve, but the skinnier boy was stuck fast. His boots seemed to have fused right into the ground. Tom ran.

“So, you learn your lesson?” Tom said the next day.

Eli, snatched the stick Tom was using to poke up an anthill with. “I didn't learn nothin',” he asserted. Tom glared at him for a moment and put his hands in his pockets. “I wish I had a gun,” Eli said after a natural lull in the conversation.

“What're you so riled up about? He ain't done nothin' too bad.” Tom said with a shrug. “That black eye ain't worth killin' over, Eli. It ain't even that bad. 'Sides, you were asking for it. If it'd been me you dumped that bucket on I'd have fixed it so your eyes matched.”

“Try it and see what happens.” Eli said leaning against a tree, his arms across his chest. Tom grinned and went for it. Eli just dropped down and Tom punched the tree instead, and then they were rolling in the dirt. Eli got his hand on the stick again and

started using it for all he was worth, but Tom had him pinned. He shifted and writhed and managed to plant his knee somewhere sensitive, and Tom rolled off him, clutching at himself and wheezing.

“You okay?” Eli said, sitting up and trying to catch his breath. Tom groaned something Eli couldn't make out, and threw a halfhearted swing. Laying on his side all bent up like he was it didn't hardly hurt at all. “Tom. I said—”

Tom rolled over and kicked Eli in the shin, hard. “Heard you. I'm fine.” He gritted, hauling himself up on one elbow. “Ow.” He said, and slapped at something on his knee.

“What're you?” Eli started to say, before he began slapping himself as well. “Ow, dammit!” And then they were both on their feet, jumping around and continually slapping at ant-bites.

“Come on!” Tom shouted and ran for the house, still scratching and slapping at the back of his britches where he'd rolled through the anthill. Eli was only a step behind him, and though he hadn't rolled completely over the mound like Tom, the ants were angry enough from Tom's poking that they were taking it out on him as well.

As soon as they made it up to the back of the house, Tom jumped right in the horse trough next to where McCantless had tied up his horse between trips into town. Water sloshed out onto the ground and as the water closed over Tom's back with a wet clap, a spout of water shot up and seemed to linger in the air for a moment before it fell across the bay gelding's face. McCantless' horse was a little skittish around the boys

anyway, and the way they were hollering didn't help either. Eli hung back a little, to see what would happen, and was glad he did.

They didn't have a decent hitch out back, so McCantless had taken to just tying his horse to the porch railing. Nobody had worked on that railing since Eli's daddy had got killed— taking Mexico city the story went— and when McCantless' horse got spooked and started whinnying and rearing up like a prize stallion, the whole thing came loose in a crackle of old nails and tearing of rotten wood. McCantless came out the door just then and he cursed and lunged for the horse's reins, but tripped over the horse trough and just ended up flat on the ground. His hat came off and floated through the overheated air. There was a jumble of motion as the horse kicked and reared, knocking the trough over on it's side. Tom tumbled out in a puddle next to McCantless, eyes wide with shock. He opened his mouth to protest his innocence.

McCantless shook his head and angrily dusted himself off. Tom retreated onto the porch steps, and McCantless turned to aim an absent slap Tom's way before bounding off after the runaway horse, still dragging the railing and rearing whinnying like crazy instead of actually making a break for it. Tom fell off the porch thanks to the lack of a railing and clocked himself hard on the edge of the trough. His head felt like it had split open. He clutched at his forehead and his hand came away bloody. Eli rushed over and helped Tom try and stop the bleeding. He glanced after McCantless finally.

Maybe fifty yards, McCantless made a grab for his horse's reins but tripped and went down in a heap again and his horse ran off for good.

They watched him get awkwardly back to his feet and braced themselves for the coming Armageddon. McCantless' face was red and he looked fit to whip them into next week. "What in the hell do you think you two were playing at!" he demanded, but then his face softened a mite. "Shit," McCantless grumbled and loped up the steps and disappeared for a while. He came back with a bottle of whiskey and some clean cloth to rinse the cut in Tom's scalp.

"Sit still," he snapped, holding his chin to keep the wound pointing the right way. Tom glared at him and tried not to yelp when the whiskey hit his cut. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hit you that hard," McCantless said, trying to moderate his tone with little success. He sat on the porch a little ways off, and didn't look at them. "Now would you kindly explain yourselves?"

It was worse somehow when the man got like this, all trying to be calm and collected. Because then when he whipped them for it later, he wasn't even mad anymore. Tom was used to his dad getting angry and whipping him. McCantless was different though. Sure, he got mad, but that unemotional 'this is just and right' feeling he tried to impart with a whipping was going too far.

After they endured their coldly methodical punishment, bent over the still upturned horse trough, Tom sniffled. "Maybe you're right," he allowed.

Eli nodded slowly.

McCantless roused the boys out of bed early one morning a couple weeks later.

He'd been trying to get the boys to call him George, at least some of the time, but he remained McCantless to Tom and Eli both, or sometimes just 'Mister,' but never Mr. McCantless. After the bucket and the horse trough incidents, they kept their rebellions small.

It was well before dawn, first light was still a ways off even, and the cocks hadn't decided there was anything to even crow about yet. That wasn't exactly saying anything though, since the Briggs' rooster was notorious around town for its annoying tendency to crow at random. Sure, he'd set up a general ruckus around dawn like he was supposed to, but half the time, he'd get going around midnight, and wouldn't shut up.

McCantless had threatened to go wring the thing's neck a dozen times, but he never followed through. Tom grunted and glared at Eli's stepfather-to-be groggily. "Come on, you little hellions!" McCantless said. "Up you get, we got hunting to do."

"I don't know how to shoot," Eli protested. Tom didn't really either, but he stayed quiet.

The man was appalled "Well, hell," he said. "Ten years old and don't know how to shoot? That is just downright unacceptable. Move it you two, and we'll see what we can do about that."

He fried some eggs for breakfast, and pattered around looking through his old army trunk. He put a bunch of supplies in a gunny sack, making a spectacle of himself moving things around. Eli's mamma finally came out of her room and give McCantless a kiss on the cheek. He grinned, showing the spot where his right front tooth had got

knocked out, in a bar fight, the boys had heard. She waved to them out the door as McCantless led them away. It had the feel of a forced march through hostile territory.

“Where are we going,” Eli complained. “Why are we up so early?”

“Normally I'd just set you up some old whiskey bottles for target practice,” McCantless said as they walked. But Mills wants us to go hunting with him today, and if neither of you can shoot, well...” he shrugged. “That strike you as good planning on my part?”

Tom finally broke his silence. “Then where are we going?”

McCantless shrugged. “Out of town a ways. Don't want the gunfire to wake up the neighbors do we?”

Eli gave Tom a look.

They walked for maybe half an hour, a couple miles north of town to the edge of old man Foley's timber lease. The boys in town had all kinds of stories about the crazy old man who lived in the forest, even though it wasn't much of a forest anymore. Eli was surprised to see the wavy mess of white hair poking out of a nightshirt.

“Hey there,” Foley said. “You made it!”

Eli frowned. “You knew we were coming?”

McCantless grinned. “Foley's a friend of mine,” he said, and dipped into his sack for a pair of bottles. Foley grabbed one and held it up against a faint light from the east, before setting both bottles down on his porch with a satisfied air. “I told him you two

didn't know how to shoot, and he insisted we come out for target practice.”

Tom scowled at the old man. Trust didn't come easy for him, and the stories filled his head, how he killed and ate little kids who strayed onto his property. “Why'd we come out here again?”

Foley gestured expansively. “I'll show you, come on into my barn.”

McCantless herded the boys across the little bit of bare dirt between Foley's ramshackle cabin and his barn. Foley put down the candle and he and McCantless worked to undo the chain. Tom wondered why he bothered to lock his barn so securely. McCantless and Foley wrestled the doors open. It was dark inside, even though a predawn gray had started to suffuse everything in a kind of otherworldly glow.

Foley went in first, and Tom and Eli lingered at the doorway. McCantless laughed and nudged them forward. Eli thought the man laughed too much. “Ain't afraid of the dark, are you?” The darkness smelled of horses and something Tom couldn't identify, oily and just underneath it, the reek of something sulfurous. Brimstone? It gave him the shivers.

After a minute or so of muttered cursing from deeper in the darkness, Foley got a lantern going and the inside of the barn lit up. There were guns everywhere. Guns and parts of guns. On pegs above a workbench were half a dozen six-guns and a shotgun with the barrel sawed down. Tom stared in wonder. Who knew crazy old man Foley had a damn armory in his barn. “Surprise,” McCantless laughed. “I figure that ten-gauge I had over the fire is too big for them to learn on, Foley. You got something that'll go easier on

the recoil?"

"Course I do," Foley said as if wounded by the question, and set about searching through the long-guns lining one wall. Foley also had a range set up out back of his barn, with an earthen berm built up to catch any stray bullets that the targets didn't stop.

McCantless set Eli up with a light gauge shotgun to start and pointed him toward a wooden cutout shaped vaguely like a bear. Eli looked down at the gun in his hands and met eyes with Tom.

He looked up at McCantless, and then took aim. A fist sized cluster of tiny dots took out the 'bear's foreleg. The man laughed again, "Well that'll learn him. Not bad for a first try." McCantless got around behind Eli and put his hand over Eli's, moving his fingers around slightly. "Now you want to line up the sights. Don't look at the target. Just focus on putting the sights together."

McCantless took a step away and grinned. "There you go. Give him the other barrel."

Eli's second shot took the cutout right where its heart would have been. Foley let out a whistle. "Looks like you've got a natural there, George. Let me go get my revolver, see how he does with that."

McCantless took the shotgun from Eli and broke the breech open, replaced the spent shells and handed it to Tom. "Why don't you take a crack while Foley's loading up?"

Mills and old Sheriff Howard showed up a little after dawn, and made

appropriately impressed noises at the boys' proficiency. Tom and Eli somehow forgot, amid all the excitement, to find time to put a hole in George McCantless when they had the chance.

“I don't understand,” Tom said. “You still want to try and shoot him?”

Eli shrugged halfheartedly. “Yeah, I guess I still do. I mean he busted your head open pretty good.”

Tom didn't know what to make of that. “It was my own fault, really. I just took a bad fall. That ain't his's fault.”

Eli scowled, and puffed himself up, trying to look tough. Tom understood that this next bit was mostly bluster. Just boys talking, after hearing one too many rousing stories about outlaws and cattle rustlers. “I ain't gointa take him whuppin' on me lying down.”

Tom shrugged. He didn't like this sort of playing anymore. “You feel like you gotta kill him, then okay.”

“Aw, you're no fun anymore,” Eli said sourly. “You think we'll get out to Foley's to shoot some more any time soon?”

“I don't know,” Tom said. “Maybe if we hear about some Indian raids nearby or something.”

Eli nodded thoughtfully.

McCantless finally got fed up with all the Indian sightings the boys reported over

the next week or so, and set them to splitting firewood any time they looked like their hands were going idle. He didn't bother watching them at it most times. Tom hated splitting firewood. The ax was heavy and the handle was old and gave him splinters. About half the time he'd miss and put another score mark into the old stump they used as a splitting block.

It was coming onto dusk when McCantless finally came out to check on him. "Who taught you to split firewood?" he laughed like a mule braying. It was something else to dislike about him. "You're making a goddamned hash out of it."

Tom wiped his hair out of his eyes. It was naturally dark, but now gone completely black with sweat. "My daddy," Tom growled.

McCantless winced. "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't... shit. Nice job putting your foot in it George," he said to himself. There was just a slight slur to his words. "I was just foolin'..." The man waved a bottle around, and Tom nodded. He could believe that. "Here, let me take a whack, show you how it's done."

Tom eyed the man's none-too-steady posture. If he tried, he might just wind up chopping himself. Tom shook his head. "Maybe tomorrow," Tom said in an effort to be diplomatic about it. "It's getting dark."

"Aw, hell," he said. "You just think I'm drunk."

"Well, ain't ya?"

McCantless seemed to think that was just hilarious, he laughed as loud and obnoxiously as ever, and took another slug from the bottle and staggered off toward the

house. Tom rolled his eyes and turned back to his work, trying to get a few more done before full dark. He imagined McCantless' face on the log rounds he was supposed to be splitting, but that didn't help his aim any. Tom managed to get half a dozen logs split and quartered, but he still had a decent sized pile left when the sun passed all the way out of sight. His arms ached, and his back ached, and he was ready to drop blissfully into sleep as soon as he got back in the house.

Eli's momma had a pretty good start on a black eye. "What happened?" Tom said softly. Eli's momma frowned at his tone.

"It ain't his fault," she said. Eli snorted. "Don't you look at me that way Eli Briggs. You ain't too big to go over my knee."

Tom frowned. From the way they were talking, this conversation had been going on for a while, while he'd been chopping wood and 'making a hash of it'. "What happened?" he said again, nearly firm enough this time to be demanding.

Eli opened his mouth, but Mrs. Briggs hushed him. "George got a telegram from back East. His momma died. He's drunk as a skunk now, and I tried to get that damn bottle of his away from him and he lost his balance and clocked me in the eye."

Tom didn't think very highly of that story. Drunken beatings hadn't been common from Frank Chilton, but it also hadn't been outside the realms of possibility. Eli caught his eye. "I saw it," he said. "McCantless slipped and knocked over the lantern and cut himself pretty good on the glass. She tried to help him up, and he whacked her. Could

have been an accident.” Eli pointed to a pile of broken glass, obviously swept up just recently, though the oil had already seeped through the floorboards. There was some blood on one of the shards of the broken lantern.

“Should we go look for him, then?” Tom asked after a long silence. The scabs left over from his own father's death were still pink and tender in his mind.

Eli shrugged. “You can if you want. Odds are he's off at the saloon. You know Mr. Dutton won't give him any more to drink when he's like this, and he'll stagger on home eventually.”

“I'll just go make sure,” Tom said.

“Thank you,” Eli's momma said. Tom trudged back outside in the dark and made his way down the main thoroughfare. He'd never really given George McCantless a whole lot of thought, as a person. As a dispenser of chores and the occasional punitive strapping, Tom felt the sort of obligatory hatred that every boy felt. But that faded most of the time into an indifference bordering on complete apathy. Eli's momma seemed to like the man, and he'd taken Eli and him hunting with the Sheriff and Deputy Mills, so he probably wasn't all bad. He remembered imagining McCantless' face on those logs earlier, and shame coiled in his gut.

“Hang on!” Eli called, and Tom stopped and waited for him. They didn't talk much on the walk, and pretty quick, they spotted McCantless, staggering toward them down the street. His bottle seemed to have disappeared. Probably Mr. Dutton or the Sheriff had confiscated it. McCantless didn't look happy. Eli grabbed Tom by the back of

his shirt and dragged him down behind a rain barrel. They watched the man stagger on by.

“Think we ought follow him?” Tom whispered and Eli threw up his hands.

“Of course not,” Eli said. “We gotta get back *before* him.” They scampered out of cover and up the street behind McCantless.

“Come on,” Tom said, pointing. “If we cut through the cow pen we can beat him home for sure.”

McCantless must have heard them despite the decent drunk he had going. He turned around and raised his voice. “What’re you two doin’ out. C’mere!” He lurched into motion after them.

Tom gave Eli a leg up over the fence into the cow pen and then tried to scramble over himself. He was taller than Eli, and when his friend grabbed onto his shirt, he popped over the railing. Eli spun and somehow managed to extricate himself from the tangle of limbs. Tom fell in the muck with a splash.

“Aw, hell!” Tom said, hauling himself to his knees. He put out a hand, for Eli to help him, but Eli just batted his hand aside and started tromping across the cow pen. A lone heifer bayed at them in annoyance. Tom rubbed his hands clean on his shirt and started off after Eli.

Behind them, McCantless shouted for them to stop. Tom spared a glance over his shoulder and spotted McCantless with one leg already over the fence. Tom’s boots tossed up a rain of manure in his wake, and he caught up with Eli at the far fence. Eli was

looking back the way they'd come, sitting on top of the fence and frowning.

Tom fetched up against the fence and risked another look over his shoulder. McCantless' gangly bulk was nowhere to be seen. "Where'd he go?"

"He fell," Eli said.

Tom peered into the gloom. He could just make out a lump in the dimness that had to be where McCantless had lost his footing, in about the center of the cow pen.

"Why isn't he getting back up?"

"Oh, God," Eli breathed and threw his leg back over the fence. His boots squelched in the mud. "I don't think he can."

The boys charged back across the cow pen to McCantless' side. He was face down in the muck. Tom started to kneel down to see to him, but Eli grabbed him by the sleeve.

"Wait," Eli said softly. Tom blinked in shock and hesitated.

Tom couldn't tear his eyes away from Eli's face for a time. He'd never be sure how long it was; Tom felt like it could have been seconds, or a week. Finally he snapped out of it and opened his mouth. "Come on," he said and Eli lurched into motion a moment later.

They grabbed hold of his arms and tried to haul him up, but he was stuck fast. They heaved and McCantless moved maybe an inch. Their boots slid in the mud and any progress they made vanished.

In a near panic, Tom sat down at his head and dug a little trough around McCantless' mouth. He grabbed a handful of the man's hair and tugged his face clear. His

hands shook. “Run get help, Eli. Get the Sheriff, or somebody!”

Eli hesitated. “Tom,” he said with an awkward softness. “It's too late for that.”

But he went anyway.

Fatherless

Eli grabbed Tom's arm roughly and spun him around. "You're not serious," he said into his friend's face. "Don't do this."

"I've got to," Tom said and shrugged him off. He cracked his knuckles and stooped to pick up the new ax-handle he'd been carving earlier that day. "He deserves it."

"Don't, Tom," Eli said, following after him and trying to grab hold of him again. "It ain't going to change anything. You pa's still going to be dead. It ain't going to do nothing 'cept get you hung, or shot or—"

"I don't care," Tom said. "She told me. She was there when it happened." He shook off Eli's hand again and shouldered the length of hickory.

"She was probably drunk, Tom. I won't let you go off like a damn fool and kill a man on her say so," Eli called after him, followed him around back into the warren of chicken coops Ma Briggs kept.

"I don't care. That son of a bitch killed my pa."

"And all you got that says so is a wasted up old saloon girl who'd tell you Moses himself rode down out of the sky and killed your pa with *lightning from his ass* if she though you'd give her two nickels to rub together." Eli said. "At least tell me who she said it was. Shit, tell me which of 'em it was told you!"

"You'd just try to stop me."

“Well what the hell do you think I'm doin' right now! It ain't worth it.”

The hell with you, Eli,” Tom said. “He was my pa.”

“Well the hell with your pa,” Eli said right on top of him.

Tom swung the ax-handle off his shoulder and jabbed Eli right in the chest with it.

“At least I knew my pa.”

Eli slapped the hickory aside and cracked Tom one good shot in the mouth. Tom dropped the club and fell on his ass. He sat in the dirt and looked up at Eli, a little dazed for a moment. “Fine then. Go get your damn neck stretched then. No skin off my ass.” Eli said, and kicked the ax-handle off into the dirt.

Tom wiped a trickle of blood from his nose and got to his feet, grunting and groaning. He went for the ax-handle, dragging it up with both hands in a fighting stance. Eli sighed and put his hands up, backed away a step or two. “I'm done Tom. I don't want to fight you.”

Tom nodded and swung the club up on his shoulder again and walked away.

Eli watched Tom's back as he disappeared off into the town, and he grumbled under his breath. Hell. He sat down on the rickety back stairs and wished he had some whiskey. Tom was on his way to the *Dry Ditch*, to get tanked up before he went out to kill whoever he'd been convinced killed his father. So that was out, Eli didn't want to deal with Tom's drunken temper any more than if he were sober. Maybe there was a bottle in the house, if Ma was still having that trouble with her teeth.

The sun sat low on the horizon and the evening was beginning to take on a chill. It was early in the season yet, but there was a bite to the air lately like winter was impatient to step in and just have done. If Eli was a different sort of man, he might have sat and watched the sunset. After maybe a minute's thought, he hauled himself up and went inside to see about that bottle. Sunlight angled weak through the wax-paper window they had to put up with since Tom and Eli had broke the one glass pane Ma Briggs had ever been able to afford.

There was no sound except the echoes from his boots hitting the floorboards and the incessant clucking from behind him in the yard. He breathed a sigh of relief into the lengthening shadows and shucked his boots before he padded into the room, over to the sideboard and the cupboard.

But in the darkness, he couldn't make out anything under the polished wooden counter, even when he threw open the carved doors and felt around. He hauled out a small bottle and turned and held it in the low streamers of light still coming through the wax-paper. Castor oil. Eli stuck out his tongue and stuffed it back in the cupboard. He puffed out his cheeks and squinted around in the dark, but it was useless and he gave it up as a poor use of his time.

Tom's words about his father kept echoing over in his head. He stood and closed the cupboard doors and knuckled the small of his back. He leaned on the sideboard for a moment, lifted the frying pan and set it back down. Tom was supposed to see to the dishes. He turned a dirty plate, swiveled it in its place on the sideboard idly. Eli could

barely make out what the residue was, even knowing it was beans and a little crust of bread and some eggs.

“Son of a bitch,” Eli said. “You son of a bitch, Tom.”

Finding a lantern in the dark was just as difficult as trying to find a bottle of whiskey. Either one would put a whole mess of flammable liquid on the ground if you kicked it over accidentally in the dark. When trying not to wake a sick old woman in the next room, it took on a complication or two. The Briggs' lantern though, was an old bullseye, mostly hammered out of pig iron, by Mr. Connors the blacksmith a couple years back before he'd lost that altercation he'd been having with gout. Tom had found it somewhere a few months ago after their old lantern had broken. Neither Eli or his mother had investigated the 'found' part of that very close.

At least the lantern was unlit, wherever it was, so he wouldn't have to worry about burning himself on the hot metal if he found it with his foot unexpectedly. And that all-metal construction came in handy too, if he kicked the thing over, there wouldn't be any broken glass to sweep out in the morning. He tried to keep the noise down as he looked around, but after a few minutes of fruitless searching, a solid beam of light sliced across the room and bit him in the eyes.

Eli threw up a shielding hand and made out a bent over, crooked figure in the backslash of light put off by the missing lantern.

“What are you sneakin' around in here for, boy?” she said.

And he still hadn't found any damn whiskey. “Tom's gonna get hisself killed.”

“And you ain't gonna stop him this time? Didn't I raise you better'n that? Get the lead out, boy. Your brother needs you.”

“He ain't my brother,” Eli said. “Sides, if Dutton really did kill Tom's pa, then he probably does need killing his own self.”

His mother went into a coughing fit, and when she finally came through the other side, wiping her mouth with a handkerchief, she shook her head and glared at him, looking more pale than usual. “Blood don't make kin, child. Move your sorry butt and go save him.”

Something in the way she said it drew the words out of him. “Which him, mamma?”

She turned the lantern down and sat in the chair with the creak he always meant to fix. His mother sat in silence for a long time, just looking at him. The shadows made her face hard to read, but there might have been tears on her cheeks. “Tom,” she finally said, like the tolling of a death nell. “Save Tom.”

“Goodbye, mamma,” Eli said, and walked out.

Eli walked into the *Dry Ditch* expecting to see a milling crowd of horrified onlookers and Tom laid out next to whoever had stepped between him and Mr. Dutton, one man with his head caved in and the other with a bullet through him. He was disappointed on all counts. Tom was nowhere to be seen. He sidled up to the bar and flagged Corben, a boy a little older than him and Tom, maybe twenty, who worked the

bar when Mr. Dutton was otherwise occupied.

“What can I get you, Eli?”

“Nothin', you see Tom in here tonight?”

Corben pointed down the bar a ways to an empty shot glass. “Came an' went already. Stared murder at a couple of out-of-towners playin' pool. Guess they ain't heard about his dad, huh? Then he just walked out. Never said a word.”

“That doesn't sound like Tom,” Eli said.

Corben nodded. “Speakin' of doesn't sound like Tom. He went upstairs with Lizzie yesterday.”

“Lizzie,” Eli said flatly. “That's the one old enough to be his mamma?”

Corben nodded again, so vigorously Eli thought for a second the man's head might come right off. He had a long spindly neck and his adam's apple poked out weirdly. Eli frowned. “I think I need to talk to her, myself.”

Corben cleared his throat. “She got a customer. It's three dollars if—”

Eli arched an eyebrow. That was it, but the barkeep shrugged at his helplessness as middleman in the exchange. “You talk to her after, and see what she say I owe you,” Eli said at last. Corben nodded reluctant agreement.

He made his way through the press of bodies to the stairway. The *Dry Ditch* was more crowded than usual, but it wasn't surprising. People had been flocking to town recently. News up from Austin wasn't good. Recruiters had been through only a couple weeks earlier, and if not for his mother's illness he might have been tempted by their

long-winded speeches about 'glory' and 'honor of the cause'. It was a rowdy crowd, and he could barely hear himself think over the din. It had been quieter over by the bar itself. Most of the hard, no-nonsense drunks had stationed themselves there. The tables were filled with mostly friendly, if boisterous conversations, and the occasional low-stakes game of cards.

Eli found Lizzie's room and banged on the door with his fist. "Lizzie, open up. I need to talk to you." When there was no answer right away, he kept pounding on the door with his fist until pain started radiating up halfway to his elbow.

Then the door whipped open and he was staring at the tip of a knife. "I ain't finished," the man behind the knife said. He was naked except for a pair of trousers he'd hastily yanked on. "You can talk to her when I got my three dollars worth."

Eli peered around the man into the room. Lizzie was curled up in the bed with the sheet drawn up under her chin. She had the beginnings of a black eye, and a split lip. "I think you had that and then some."

The knife wavered. "Awful young for a pimp. An' I already paid the other—"

Eli grabbed the man's knife hand and hit him in the face with everything he had. Lizzie's customer staggered backward and tripped over the chair from the dressing table, and landed in a heap. Somehow the man had managed to keep hold of his knife, and he surged back to his feet to charge at Eli.

A metallic click from the area of the bed brought the man up short. His eyes flicked toward a gunbelt slung over the bedpost with an empty holster. "Well, shit."

“I'd drop the knife if I was you,” Eli said. The man complied, setting his knife down on the dressing table in front of the mirror and backing away slow. Eli retrieved it and slipped the knife through his belt.

“Get out of here, both of you,” Lizzie said. She was still training the gun on her former customer, but Eli was getting more than his fair share of angry looks. The other man stooped for his shirt and his boots and lit out, the gun barrel following him the whole time. Once he was out of the room, the gun centered on Eli's chest.

“I need to talk to you,” he said.

She rolled her eyes. “One of them? Just want to talk, he says. Like I haven't heard that before.”

“About Tom,” Eli said. “You told him—”

Lizzie lowered the gun and fingered the swelling under her eye gingerly. “He's gonna kill ol' Norris.”

Eli grunted. “That was my take on matters. I figure I'd try and stop him. What crock of fabricated shit did you sell him?”

She glared at him and shook her head. “I didn't,” Lizzie said and the glare died. The crows feet at the corners of her eyes became more pronounced and she looked almost motherly. As much as she could wearing what was left of her saloon girl's getup. “I saw Frank get shot. I was there.”

Eli opened his mouth to say something. He never really knew what. She kept on, and he let her talk. “Think I'll forget that? I was so scared. Mr Dutton would have killed

me too.”

Eli blinked. “Why? What really happened?”

“You really care that much?”

Eli shrugged. “I’d rather know than not,” he said, still with his hands as far away from the knife as they would get. “You mind putting down the gun?”

Lizzie glared at him for a moment and then hitched her sheets up around her like a cocoon, and tossed the gun down. Eli winced but the hammer didn’t catch on anything.

“How much do you want to know?” She said.

“What do you mean?” Eli frowned.

“I guess I’ll tell you all of it then,” Lizzie said. “Frank come in, and he sits down at the bar and he starts in drinking. Nothing unusual in that, but he keeps at it, like a man doing a job of work, not like it’s any fun. Getting himself worked up for something.”

“All you saloon girls saw it, then?” Eli asked. “You think he was going to kill all of you?”

Lizzie shook her head. “Middle of the day like that, the place was empty. I came out when I heard them shouting.”

Eli nodded. “Shouting,” he said. “Shouting about what?”

“Your mamma mostly,” Lizzie said. “Tom’s daddy was hollering about how Mr. Dutton needed to do right by you and your mamma, or he was going to the sheriff. How Norris wasn’t doing his duty to... to his son.”

“The hell are you saying,” Eli demanded.

“Frank Chilton was a hell of a man, Eli,” she said. “Problem with drink aside. Dutton just kind of went silent when Frank mentioned the sheriff, and that was that. Tom's daddy turned to leave, and Dutton pulled the gun he keeps under the counter, shot him in the back. He only saw me after the fact. I played dumb, asked him what happened, like I didn't see it. And when he come up with that story right on the spot, about some out-of-towner, I went along with it.”

“For nine and a half years,” Eli said. “And you never said anything, never went to the sheriff yourself, or just left town?”

Lizzie laughed softly. “Where would I go? This damned saloon's all I got in this world anymore.”

Eli shook his head. “Where is he now? Mr. Dutton, he's not tending bar like he usually does.”

“He don't tell us his every coming and going, kid.”

“He owns this whole place. Doesn't he keep rooms here?” Eli demanded. But Tom had stormed off after getting tanked up good. That's what Corben had said earlier.

“Like I said.”

Eli glared and took a step forward. Lizzie tensed, but all Eli did was fish her former customer's gun out of the sheets by her feet. “You mind if I borrow this?” he said.

Lizzie shook her head.

Eli paused at the door. “Why'd you tell Tom, why after all these years?”

She frowned. “You know why. It's been eating away at him for years, thinking

there was some shadowy figure who'd swooped into his life and took away his daddy. That mess with McCantless, now your momma a lunger, life took so many swings at that boy, I couldn't lie to his face again. I done a lot of things in my life I ain't so proud of. That was just one lie too far.”

“Son of a bitch,” Eli said and slammed the door behind him. He stopped on the stairs when he saw the pool table. Nearly ten years later, the blood stain had mostly faded. If you didn't know it was there, it might be possible to miss it entirely. Tom surely knew it was there. “Son of a bitch,” he said again and made his way back to the bar. But Corben didn't have any idea where Dutton might be either.

The last rays of the sun had already fallen under the horizon, but there was still a little bit of twilight before full dark. Eli headed outside and stared at the churned up mud of the thoroughfare, peering into the gloom in some vain hope of recognizing Tom's bootprints. It had been a couple of weeks since Tom had gouged his boot on that piece of flint and nearly cut himself. He squinted into the nearby muck. It should be distinctive, if he had a lantern, maybe—

“You alright, Eli?” Someone said, startling him. It was Sheriff Mills.

“Looking for... Mr. Dutton, if you've seen him, Sheriff?” Eli hoped Mills missed that hesitation.

Mills gestured down the street with his bullseye lantern. “I think he was walking out with the Widow Fairbanks. She's got a house a couple streets over. What's this all about now?”

“Hard to say. Ask me again tomorrow.”

“Now come on, boy,” Mills said. “What's wrong?”

“Gotta run, Sheriff,” Eli said, turning to go. Mills followed after him, into the darkness just outside the glow from the *Dry Ditch's* windows. He grabbed Eli by the arm.

“Tell me,” the Sheriff ordered. The dirt streets seemed sinister in a way he wasn't accustomed to or prepared for as the darkness deepened. Mills scar stood out on his face more than ever. “Come on over to my office and I'll get you a drink, on me.”

Eli ground his teeth. He was torn. The sheriff could help, if he got Lizzie to talking, they could bring murder charges on Mr. Dutton, or at least get Tom off the hook if he went through with it. Killing the man who killed your father was still technically a crime, but Eli hadn't heard yet of anyone hanging for it. But he needed time to think, Eli hated being pressured into anything, not having the luxury to think out all the angles. He didn't know exactly what to feel about Dutton anymore.

“I don't need a drink,” Eli said. He needed to stop Tom before he killed—what, Eli's father? That's what Lizzie's story meant didn't it, Eli's father had killed Tom's father. He remembered his mother's saying, 'blood don't make kin.' Tonight wasn't the first time he'd heard it from her.

Mills frowned. “If you don't need a drink right this minute, nobody on this *earth* does. What happened?”

The words were coming out before he could stop them. “Tom's gonna kill Norris Dutton tonight unless I stop him.”

Mills jaw did a fair impression of a tree falling. He recovered quickly though. “If we don't stop him you mean.”

Eli shook his head, and yanked the revolver out of the back of his breeches. “I said I, and I meant it.”

Mills laughed and put his hands up. “Eli, let's talk about this, please. Whatever he did warrants killing, you know you don't want to shoot *me* over it. Do you?”

“Ain't gonna shoot you,” Eli agreed. Mills started to relax, and Eli flipped the gun over and clocked Mills in the head. The sheriff slumped to the ground and Eli took off into the night at a run.

Once he got within a street or so of the old Fairbanks house, Eli slowed his pace, started scanning the star shadows and doorways for sign of Tom, or Norris Dutton either one. He still wasn't sure that he had a right to stop Tom if he was set on revenge. It was a stupid and reckless way of going about it even if it was justified. Still, this wasn't some mining camp on the ass end of nowhere. A revenge killing probably wouldn't get him all the way out of hot water. There would likely be a trial, with a circuit judge from out of town and a jury of Tom's peers wasn't likely to look on the killing of a saloon owner kindly.

The old Fairbanks house was bigger than most in town, two stories, and teakwood on the door. It stood out even on a miserable moonless night like that one, and Eli was only a few doors down when one of his scans sent a chill through him.

Eli spotted a lantern bobbing through the night, coming from the north, back the

way he'd come and he froze, ducked behind a barrel and watched them pass. It was Mills, damn it, with another couple of men with him. The Sheriff had recovered faster than expected, and mobilized his deputies in record time. He could feel the noose tightening around him and swallowed a surge of nausea. Waiting for the Sheriff and deputies to pass seemed to take a week. He crept off down an alley once he was sure they hadn't spotted him, until he came to a low fenced-in garden.

Eli was tall and leggy enough that he could hop the fences with little trouble. He winced when his boot made a sucking sound when it landed in the mud beneath him, but no one was around to hear. The big house seemed to crouch like a toad on a log, looming over everything, the closer he got to it. He didn't know quite why, but Eli felt like he wanted to burn the place to the ground. It wasn't a rational desire, just the sight of it set something off, deep down in his guts. He didn't like the house, but it wasn't even Dutton's house. At least the saloon was an appropriate place to find a man like Norris Dutton, who'd shot a man in the back. Eli still didn't know the why of it, exactly, but he believed Lizzie as well, and the story of Frank Chilton's mysterious death had been filtering through the town's gossip circuit ever since it had happened. Her explanation was better than any he'd heard yet.

The nicest house in town just didn't *feel* right, was the closest Eli could come to it. He stuck to the shadows and walked carefully in the odd gait he'd learned to stalk in, half crouched and rolling his feet so that he was perfectly balanced at every step. That was more important when you were actually going to shoot at someone, but it helped keep

you silent as well. Cutting through the gardens had bought him a little time, but the Sheriff and his men wouldn't be far behind.

Eli sidled up to the side of the house, stopped and peered through a window. Inside, the Fairbanks' house was neat and tidy and well furnished, shining wood floors and paneling and padded chairs like something out of a royal palace. It was mostly dark inside, but for a candle, bobbing its way toward the back of the house. Eli crouched down so he was under the edge of the windows and made his way along the wall back around. Tom was around somewhere in the dark, probably watching. If he was going to strike, if Eli was going to be able to stop him, now was the time.

The gray haired bulk of Norris Dutton shoved open the back door and shuffled out, in a silk robe strained around his belly and a pair of boots, mumbling to himself. Where the hell was Tom? Dutton moved like a sack of beans, more slowly than Eli would have liked, headed for the outhouse probably. His eyes suddenly latched onto the shape of the outhouse. It was oddly lumpy along one side, and his breath caught when the lump shifted in the night. Tom.

Dutton approached the out house and everything slowed to a crawl. The shadows near the outhouse resolved into Tom, brandishing that hickory ax-handle. Dutton didn't see him, and just kept muttering to himself. Eli burst from cover by the house, running flat out, no longer concerned about remaining unheard. Dutton turned at the noise—hell—and Tom took a lunge toward the man's exposed back, reared back and his club came down with a thump and a snap of bone, just missing the old man's head. Dutton howled

and went down in a heap with a broken collar-bone. Tom pulled back for another swing, but Eli finally got there and grabbed his wrist, shoved him into the side of the outhouse with a crash

“Damn you, Briggs,” Tom hissed. “Let me loose.”

“Shut up you damn fool! Mills is one street over,” Eli said. Dutton kept caterwauling, and Tom tried to wrench out of his grip. Tom was of a height with Eli, and he'd been the gangly one as a child, but now he was filling out like his father, and Eli wasn't sure he'd be able to hold him for long.

“I told you I don't care. I'm going to finish him.”

Dutton's howl slowly petered out. “Briggs?” He said weakly and sighed. He was slurring his words slightly, though that could have been from drink, it could have been from pain as well. “Briggs and Chilton. I should have known my sins would catch up to me.”

The boys looked down at him, similar frowns painting their faces.

“Shoulda killed her too...” Dutton coughed and heaved himself onto his side.

“Your ma finally told you? Should have killed her too.”

Eli had entirely forgotten about the knife he'd picked up from Lizzie's customer, until it was in his hand and darting for Norris' throat.

“Tom! Eli! Let's talk about this!” Mills shouted from around the side of the house. Eli flinched and the knife slashed a line across Dutton's throat with hardly a whisper of resistance. The man choked and gasped for a breath that wouldn't come. Then Norris

whimpered and fell back with just the faintest grunt.

The beam from the Sheriff's lantern flew across the yard. Tom grabbed Eli and they got around the side of the outhouse just before the light caught Dutton in its glare.

Eli gasped a breath and stared at the knife in his hand. Tom saw the blood glisten in the moonlight, and shook his head.

“You did it,” Tom whispered in breathy disbelief. “Damn it, Eli. You should have let *me* kill him.”

Eli started to tell him he hadn't meant to, that it had been an accident, but the lie curdled his tongue. “Sorry,” he finally said. Eli risked a peek around the edge of the outhouse. Mills had stayed to tend to Dutton, but he was shouting something, sending his men in pursuit. Tom and Eli huddled behind a cart in the darkness. “It was your pa he killed. You're right. I should have let you do it.”

“Come on. We'd better get out of town,” Tom said. Eli nodded.

Woodsmoke

Tom didn't know how he'd gotten there. He could trace most of the steps, that night Eli had killed Norris Dutton loomed large in his mind as a sort of death knell for his childhood. Joining up at the recruiting station, all those little steps to get him to today, those were still clear in his thoughts. But as soon as Lieutenant Colby gave the order to charge, everything turned to mud in his head. It didn't really matter, how exactly the battle had led him to such straights, and thinking about anything except the present would only get him killed. Still, when his fellow soldiers had started falling like cut barley around him, Tom had dropped too, just on pure instinct. It had probably saved his life.

He'd spent most of the battle trapped under a pile of his dead men torn open by canister shot and grapeshot and even aimed rifle fire. Those Spencer carbines were pure hell.

Tom felt the explosions of Union artillery off to the east more than he heard them, the rumble passing into his bones and on through his ear drums only at the last moment. He clawed his way out from under the pile at this new volley. Tom was beginning to be a real expert at judging where a shell was going to land.

Union artillery had been raking their positions for most of the morning. He was surprised to realize that it wasn't much past noon, despite everything.

Smoke blanketed the ridge where the Union position had been at the start of the

battle. That was hours ago, and so they could be anywhere in the murk. It was early afternoon, but it seemed like closer onto dusk. It was lucky Tom hadn't passed out with Bill's corpse on top of him in the pile. He didn't waste time checking to see if anyone else from the charge had made it. Tom was grazed on the arm, which for a day like this was damn remarkable lucky.

He still had his rifle, somehow, though it was fair on to useless at the moment. Tom scrubbed smoke out of his eyes and tried to make out the current disposition of forces. He could just make out faint sounds off to his right and up that hill leading to the ridge. So his hearing was coming back. There were pinpricks of light through the smoke, muzzle flares, pointing down into the valley of mud with him, so that meant the Yankees still held the ridge after all.

Tom grimaced and slid his hand into his coat, doing his best to rub his fingers clean. He needed to make sure the slash from the bullet stayed clean, which wasn't exactly easy to do. There was good cover here, so maybe he could take the time to figure out a course of action. He needed to find his way back to Colby and the rest of the regiment. He scanned the battlefield again, searching for some path back to safety.

Then he saw the first human being he'd seen in an hour, just as covered in mud and bedraggled as he was himself, but the other man stood ramrod straight, an officer maybe. Tom raised his voice, though he could barely hear even a shout. "Over here! Get down you damn fool!" He waved, beckoning the other man into cover with him, but the figure stopped and turned around in a circle. His hearing must have been just as bad as

Tom's was. It figured. Tom cursed under his breath and began to heave himself upward. Tom recognized the thump in the ground that signaled artillery and fell flat on his belly again. There was no time to close the distance. He shouted a curse, but the roar of the shell going off drowned it out as if it never was.

A second later there was a new crater where the man had stood, but it wasn't over yet. More explosions ripped the ground and Tom huddled in what was probably not a natural depression at all, but something carved by earlier bombardment.

At last the thunder of the barrage faded, and Tom took the time to pat himself down for new wounds. He felt giddy with the rush that always came after avoiding death, and he didn't trust his senses to tell his brain if he'd been wounded again. He felt the first drops land on his face, and sighed. Finally, the heavens opened up to give him cover of darkness. He might be able to slip back to find Lieutenant Colby and the others if it started coming down hard enough.

Tom stayed low to the ground and crawled on his elbows to where he'd last seen the man. He couldn't really say why, then or later. Maybe he just needed to be sure, to see a body and know the man had been real, not an apparition.

Some of the men in Lieutenant Colby's regiment liked to say you could sometimes smell the blood it was so thick. That was horse shit though. All you really smelled was the sulfurous reek of gunpowder and burning hair, and the outhouse stench of the dead that had been blasted open across the belly by grapeshot. Couple it with the ever-present cloying smell of decaying flesh, and that was that. Still a clever turn of phrase though,

and Tom never bothered to correct anybody telling a war story.

The mud was tinged red around what was left of the body, and impacts from raindrops set rings lashing every which way through the thin soup. Tom watched the rain slowly fill the new depression in the ground. Maybe it was an old creek bed. He tried to quell the absent thought. That wasn't what he should have been thinking about. Thinking about anything was like as not going to get him killed. Before, when bullets had started taking his unit apart, he hadn't thought about it, he'd just toppled like all the rest, and let nature take its course. But here he was alive, and all the rest were dead, near as he could tell. Tom stared at the mangled corpse. The mouth had a red wash around it, but the rain was slowly taking that and smearing it down across the neck of the dead body.

With the closer look, he could make out the man's colors. Blue wool. That was a dead enemy lying there, and that was supposed to be why he was out there, wasn't it? To make more men into corpses like that.

He sat in the rain for a long time, trying to rationalize it. This was the face of war, and he'd done his duty by not risking his life, not following that instinct to launch himself up and race over and tackle the man out of the way of the exploding shell. If he had, then what? He'd probably have had to kill the man anyway. That was war. Tom shook his head. He should probably have felt relieved. All he felt was cold. He blinked rainwater out of his eye. That was probably just rain.

Tom shivered and squinted through the drizzle, for a fix on the sun. The rain had dampened the drift of clouds and even though it still couldn't be much past mid-

afternoon, it was dark. Dark enough Tom might stand a chance of getting back to his unit, or at least people who wouldn't recognize his uniform grays as license to shoot cannons at him.

He crawled out of cover and glanced back at the nameless Union soldier. Rain had half-filled the tiny dip in the field, just a shallow ditch really. How had that been enough to keep him safe from the artillery barrage. He went back and swept the dead man's staring eyes shut. Tom hesitated for a long moment, and then finally leaned closer, patting the holster at the corpse's hip and coming away with a revolver. There was a crack in the handle that a tiny calm, authoritarian part of his mind noted would need to be repaired. He stuffed the pistol into his coat against the rain and started off again. It was a better weapon than his rifle at the close range the rain would force him into.

Yankees still held the ridge, the last time Tom had bothered thinking about that sort of thing, so he'd head the opposite direction. His hearing was better now, judging by the roar all that damn rain made sloshing around him. He could even hear his feet churning up more mud if he concentrated. The rain cut visibility down to barely a hundred feet. Beyond that everything was hazy and indistinct. He barely had any sense of direction anymore. Only large features would loom out of the dim gray and brown fugue. Thankfully, he recognized the shape and slope of the hill, so he could have some hope he was going the right direction, keeping his back to the ridge, and the enemy.

It was difficult to gauge time, much less distance, now that the drizzle was coming into its own, building into a proper downpour, but he thought he heard something.

Looking around wasn't much use, but he gave it a try anyway. The sound came through the patter of the rain, and even though the sun was still behind the clouds, just enough light bled through. It was a person moaning, long and high pitched, almost a wail.

Tom hauled the pistol out of his coat and trained it on the sound as he approached, splashing through puddles. "Declare yourself," Tom said over the rain.

"Blue or gray?" came the call back. Tom growled a curse under his breath and fell into a crouch to decrease the size of the target he presented.

"You first, or I'll shoot you where you lay."

There was silence just for the rain for a long time. Tom started sidling backward, not willing to turn his back until he had decent cover again, and the voice came through.

"Don't go... gray." It was barely more than a croak.

Tom breathed a sigh of relief and went to check on him. "What's your name?"

"Jonah," he coughed.

"Like the whale," Tom said, trying to drag some kind of reaction out of the man. "You surely get into all kinds of mess, don't you? Can you walk, Jonah?" Tom said, putting his hand out to shield the wounded man's face from at least some of the rain. He couldn't make out much of the man's wound except that his legs didn't look right. There were chunks out of one thigh, where the trouser leg was shredded. He was no field medic, but it didn't look too bad at first glance.

"I don't think so..." Jonah groaned. "My leg don't work so good."

"Well come on," Tom said, getting an arm up under the wounded man's armpit

and hoisting him onto his feet anyway. "Let's see how far we get."

Jonah screamed and tried to fall back down, and Tom grabbed him more securely. "Come on, quit your belly-aching," Tom said. "One foot in front of the other."

"Oh god..." Jonah moaned. "I only got one *left*."

"What? You're fine, I just saw..." He looked down and retched. A jagged end of bone was poking out below the other man's left knee. He'd felt something try to stay stuck in the mud when he shifted Jonah but... "Shit," Tom said. He'd just torn the man's leg off. He nearly retched again. "Shit." There was nothing he could do. First he hadn't had the courage to try, and now he'd tried and probably condemned a man with his good intentions.

"Don't leave me, Tom," Jonah said with an edge of begging in it. It made Tom's stomach churn. There was *nothing* he could do. He could never drag another man all the way back to Colby and the others. With the way Jonah was starting to blubber, he wouldn't be good to even limp along on his one good foot. Tom crouched down and dug in his coat. Jonah wouldn't look at him, just staring off into what little light there was.

"Take this," he said. Tom had to repeat himself and press the grip into Jonah's hand firmly. "Take this, and..."

Jonah turned the pistol on him and racked the hammer back. "Don't *leave* me!"

"Damn you, Jonah," Tom snatched the pistol back from him. "I can't do anything for you."

"Please, don't," he said. "Please don't just leave me."

“I got to,” Tom said.

“Kill me, then.” Jonah said.

Tom shook his head. “You could still make it,” the lie burned his tongue. “I just—I can't carry you. I'll let 'em know where to come find you once this clears up.” He held the pistol up where Jonah could see it. “Don't you point this at me again or I'll only leave you one bullet.”

“No,” Jonah moaned. “Don't...”

Tom wiped rainwater out of his eyes, and pressed the revolver into Jonah's hand again, “Don't shoot me in the back, goddamn it.” Tom was only a few steps away when he heard the gun go off. He flinched, thinking for a moment that Jonah had tried to kill him after all, but he didn't fall dead. Not looking back was harder than he expected. He was useless. Tom tripped and fell face first into the muck.

He almost didn't bother to get back up, but the rain was letting up slightly, and even if it didn't lighten his heart, it made walking easier.

Tom started making better time. It was still another half hour of trudging through drizzle before he recognized the ground where they'd camped the night before. He kept his eyes peeled for the Confederate lines, but he didn't see anything. They had been nearby that morning, and if the Yankees were still on that ridge they'd started out with, his unit should be right around. “Declare yourself!” someone hissed and Tom stumbled. He shook his head.

“Jesus, Eli,” Tom croaked. “It's me. Don't shoot, it's me, Tom.”

“Tom *Chilton*?” Eli seemed to pop up out of nowhere, but Tom knew better. There was probably a bit of low scrub brush or something he'd been hiding behind. “I thought you were dead you son of a bitch! You ain't shot are ya?”

“A scratch,” Tom said. “I can't believe I made it back.”

Eli snorted. “Me neither, the way you trample around. Come with me.”

“Where are we going,” Tom said. He smelled woodsmoke. Eli led him into a nearby stand of trees, where a handful of bedraggled soldiers were sitting around a fire.

Lieutenant Colby was laying with his back against the bole of a hickory tree that had been blasted off at about eight feet by errant artillery fire, from Union or Confederate, who really knew, and Tom tried not to let his jaw fall open for too long. They had put up a sort of canopy over him, to shield him from the rain. Colby was missing both legs at the knee, and somebody had managed to slap a tourniquet on his stumps. Judging from the sagging waists of Eli and Lt. Neustead's trousers, they'd used their belts.

“How the hell did that happen?” Tom demanded.

Neustead grunted. “Idiot decided to lead from the front,” he said. “Canister shot about turned his horse *and* his legs to stew.”

Colby was awake, though. “Is that any way to talk about a superior officer, Sergeant?” His voice was just a little slurred, and he was surprisingly alert. Colby's lips turned up in an odd smile and nodded when he finally recognized Tom's face through the

grime. “You're alive, Corporal? Good. I guess I done right by your old man after all then.” His head lolled to one side and his eyes focused on Neustead after a long couple of seconds. “What are our losses?”

“I told you already, sir,” Neustead muttered.

“Tell me again, then, you son of a bitch.”

“Most of the regiment is dead, or scattered. Last headcount put us at about thirty men still on the lines.”

“What kind of headcount d'you call that, Leutenant?” Colby said and rasped in a fresh lungful of air. “About, hell!”

“Tom makes thirty one, Sir,” Neustead said.

Colby tried to cough up a lung, but just came up with some blood-flecked foam that he wiped carefully from the side of his mouth with a scrap of cotton.

“You boys ever catch up with Jefferson Davis you tell him he can kiss my ass.”

“Sir?” Neustead said, with a weird grimace.

“Is it all like that?” Tom whispered to Eli.

His friend tucked stray hair under his cap in want of something to do with his hands. He shrugged. “Some, not all. Though I kind of agree on the message he wants to send our beloved president.”

“Keep your voice down,” Tom said, but only with half his attention.

Colby waved him closer. “Tom...”

“Yessir,” he said, saluting as crisply as he knew how.

“You take a good look at me?” The Lieutenant gestured vaguely with one hand, indicating his legs.

Tom mumbled a yes, and Colby shook his head. “I said did you take a good look at me lately?”

“Yes. Yes, Lieutenant,” he said with more force.

“I ain't got no legs,” Colby said. “Is what I was getting at.”

Tom managed to bring his eyes up to meet the Lieutenant's. “I saw.”

“Your daddy was a good friend of mine,” The Lieutenant said, then went into another coughing fit.

“Sir? I don't know what that has to do with—”

Colby shook his head and slashed his hand to cut Tom short. “I didn't say it had anything to do with my legs,” Colby wheezed but held off another fit. Tom spotted a bandage poking out under the flap of his coat. Apparently the legs weren't his only wound. “Let me finish. I don't... I don't have long either way. I'm gonna bleed to death or gangrene will kill me. I don't like the thought of either one. So...” Colby fumbled his pistol out of its holster and held it out to Tom, ivory handle first.

“Lieutenant Colby,” Tom said. “What are you asking me to do?”

“Sergeant Neustead,” Colby said sharply. “In very short order, I expect to be dead. The rest of my officers are either dead or missing, and so command will devolve to you. This is the last order you will receive. Gather any of your men that will go, and get the hell out of Virginia.” His head lolled to one side so he could look Tom in the eyes. “When

you're ready, son.”

Tom shook. “I can't do that, sir.”

“Shit,” Colby said. “Fine, give it back, and I'll do it myself.”

Eli stepped in, grabbed Tom's wrist to forestall him. “Sir, I can't let you do that. Suicide is a sin.”

Colby laughed, rich and full, but it turned into a gurgle and then another fit of coughing intermingled with wet sounds from his chest wound. Finally, he mastered himself once more. “I appreciate your concern for my immortal soul, Corporal Briggs. I surely do. But you are at least one war too late. Neustead? Will you—”

Tom shook his head, and tugged free of Eli's grasp. “No. I'll do it.” He shook himself and looked Colby in the eye again. “I'll do it.”

“When I say I'll see you in hell, it ain't nothin' personal, son.” Colby shrugged. “We're all headed for perdition sooner or later.” He tugged his coat open to give him a better point of aim.

Tom wavered for a moment. He closed his eyes and shook his head in denial. This was a failure too, wasn't it? He shot him in the heart anyway, and opened his eyes to watch Eckhart Colby die with a faint smile on his lips. At last, Tom shook himself out of his stupor and tried to give the army revolver to the sergeant. He just wanted it out of his hand.

Neustead waved the proffered weapon away and turned to survey the rest of the men.

Tom shook his head. "I don't want the damn thing, somebody—"

Eli grabbed the gun away for just a moment, and then seized a hold of Tom's wrist and pressed Colby's revolver firmly into his hand. "He wanted you to have it," Eli explained. "He said, earlier, when he thought you were dead. Your daddy gave it to him."

Neustead raised his voice to carry to the rest of the survivors. "You heard the Lieutenant's final order. Anyone wants to stay and die? Just sit your asses down and wait. I expect someone'll be along to sweep you into that furnace soon enough. Everybody else can ride with me."

"Ride where?" one of the men protested. "Where can we possibly go? They'll hunt us, Yankees, Lee, Jackson, everybody. Where can we run?"

Neustead thought about it. "Hell if I know. But I know this fight ain't worth my life. Maybe I just have too high an opinion of myself. My momma always did say that." As far as speeches go, it wasn't much. "Tom, Eli? You coming with me?"

Very slowly, Tom nodded. "Don't forget your belts," he reminded them, and nodded his head toward the body.

Brotherhood

They were supposed to have been lying low. Neustead had some kind of deal going with the local sheriff so they wouldn't get hassled, mostly it seemed to entail only shooting those folks the sheriff said to. Which still gave them a fair amount of work, and more honest than what Tom had grown accustomed to. The town was like a hundred others they'd come through since that first day riding with Neustead. Full of people scared shitless the war was going to start up again, that there'd be soldiers on the march again, and some asshole burning everything in sight just to win a little faster. If the shithole mining town had a name, Tom never cared to know it.

About all he did care about at the moment was the bar in front of him. Of course he was watching everybody in the mirror, looking out so he didn't get shot in the back, mostly. But that was second nature by now. Had been since that time in Omaha he nearly got his ass shot off. Even after he'd killed a half empty bottle of redeye, that was one lesson that was in him to the bone. Tom picked up the bottle and looked at it, then grunted. Maybe it was a good thing the barkeep had watered his stock. There was a price on his head, and on Eli's, Neustead's, the Italian's, even Ellson; who hadn't even been with them three months yet. He was no deserter, just some black bastard with no where else to run. Seemed decent enough for that.

“How about you buy me a drink,” a woman's voice slurred near his ear. Tom

blinked. She'd just been background. But he should have spotted her approach in the mirror. She was drunker than he was, he could tell that right away. "It'll be worth your while." Besides that, she had the look he'd come to recognize. Life had chewed her up and spit what was left into this bar. The desperation didn't put him in an amorous mood anymore. She was too much like him, even if she hadn't recognized it herself yet. And she was wearing a stole or a shawl made from a full fox-fur. A wrap of some kind, what did he care about names anymore. The head of the skin looked at him with empty eyes from atop her shoulder. Some idiot had but glass beads in there for some idiot reason.

"Where'd you get that?" He said.

"Get what?"

"The fox," Tom said.

"Why you care," she shot back. "I just want a drink, not a damn shoulder to cry on."

"Maybe you don't want it," he said. "But looks like you could use it."

She looked at him with two sets of numb, blank eyes. "You ain't getting' in my skirts with no nice-guy song and dance, mister. About that drink?"

"Talk to my friend at the faro table," Tom said, pointing toward Eli. "Black hair with the scraggly beard. Skinny. He ain't lost all his money yet, maybe he'll be good for a drink." And off she went, barely bothering to mutter insults at him as she made her way. Maybe there had been a better way to handle that. He was caught in a trap sure as he was still breathing. Just because the noose hadn't snapped tight, the rope brought him up short

just yet, didn't mean a damn thing. So was she. So was Eli, so were they all. He should have laughed til he couldn't breathe.

Tom never had been one for introspection, but he could recognize now in hindsight how this was all his fault. He could trace the line back years really, if he tried to, but that wasn't helpful. He flagged the bartender to bring him something else to drink, to help kill that line of thought.

The man was harried and absentminded with the press of bodies. For such a small town, they were packed in cheek to jowl. Tom grabbed the cuff of the barman's sleeve. "Get me somethin' ain't watered down to hell this time," he said. "I can still tell the difference."

The bartender arched a graying eyebrow and Tom tossed a fistful of crumpled bills on the bar. Tom watched the girl in the slightly warped mirror as she made her way across the bar. Eli caught his eye and raised a bottle of whiskey in his direction in a lazy salute before handing it off to the saloon girl. Tom kept watching absently, nursing another drink when the bartender got around to him. He waited for something to happen. She started pulling Eli away from the game and Tom stopped watching the pair of them, started scanning the room again, like he should have been doing.

Eli and the girl with the fox-fur were halfway up the stairs when Tom saw the gun. He about fell off his stool.

"Eli!" Tom shouted a warning. Eli turned, pulling the girl around with him. Some big bastard of a mountain man was aiming a 12 gauge up the stairs. How he could have

missed him coming in, was beyond him. Eli shoved the girl down the stairs at the big man just as he fired. She bloomed red and stray buckshot ripped scraps from the wallpaper and splinters from the railing. One scratched a line of red on the side of Eli's head, but that was all.

Tom drew and started across the bar. A drunk staggered into him in his rush to be out of the line of fire. He smacked the drunk in the nose with the butt of his pistol and shoved him away. The drunk smashed into a table, overturning drinks. Chaos erupted.

Eli and Tom shot the big man down there in the bar. As Eli made his way down the stairs, Tom emptied his gun into the downed mountain man, calmly and methodically. Just to be sure. Most everybody was already out the door by then. Eli grabbed him by the arm to pull him out as well, but he was rooted to the spot, staring up at the crumpled body at the foot of the stairs.

She lay on her back where she'd ended her tumble eyes open and slowly glazing. A puddle was spreading around her unevenly, soaking into the sawdust and through the gaps in the floor. Her eyes were as empty as the dead fox strapped around her ruined chest. For once he couldn't make himself look away. He couldn't *not* see it. He couldn't seem to move, or to think.

“Come on, Tom, let's get you out of here.” Eli pulled him a step toward the door.

Tom shook off his grip, shoved him. “Don't you feel it anymore?”

“Tom! We don't got time for this. We've got to go now,” Eli protested. “He's probably got friends looking for the bounty too.”

“Ain't never been time enough has there?” Tom put his gun up at Eli.

He snorted. “Get that thing out of my face, Tom. It's empty anyway. You gonna try to stop me going without any bullets?”

“You want to go, then get.” Eli took in the look in Tom's eyes and shrugged and made for the door.

Tom barely watched him go. He eyes were drawn back to the dead girl. “Anybody know her name?” he shouted to the empty bar. “Barkeep, I know *you* ain't run off.”

The man peered slowly over the rim of the bar. “Relax, I ain't got a gun.”

“You ain't? First bartender I ever met ain't got *some* kind of iron back of the bar.” He grunted. “You relax. I'm empty anyway. Talk fast. Her name? She got any people?”

The barman shrugged. “I don't know nothing certain sure. Wanted me to call her Rachel one time I remember. Weren't the name she went by in here, so it might be real.”

“Rachel,” Tom said as if testing the name out on his tongue. He stepped over the mountain man's corpse and went over and scooped her up, put her over his shoulder and staggered out.

“Your boys sure did make a mess over at the *Grand Jury*, Hal. I thought you had a better rein on them savages. Shot up a saloon girl and made off with the corpse? Shit! That ain't something gets swept out the door nice and easy like we talked about. Hear?”

“Which ones was it?” Neustead asked.

The sheriff nodded. “That one sittin' behind you and his big friend. The one done

carried the girl off for God knows what. But you knew that, don't try and deny it.”

Neustead shrugged ruefully. “You win. What do you want, Fred?”

“I need one of em in a noose,” he said. “Keep the peace.”

“He's worth more alive.”

“The bounty?” The sheriff spat. “You want to collect the bounty? You crazy son of a bitch.” He shook his head and rocked with silent laughter. He finally got over it looking at the serious expression Neustead wore. “Which one you want to give me?”

“Well, Eli'sd probably be easiest, him right here and everything. But he'd put one of us down before we cleared leather. I ain't fixin' to die over no saloon girl.”

The sheriff took a look at Eli and nodded sourly. Eli grinned. “Me neither,” he said.

Neustead chuckled. “He speaks! So Eli, how we gon' find your boy Tom.”

Eli shrugged. “He won't have got far.”

Tom was almost satisfied with the grave. It wasn't quite a uniform six feet, but nobody really cared about that when it came down to it, did they? Five and a half was good enough, deep enough animals wouldn't smell through the earth and did up the body. He knelt down and rolled her rolled her in. Not gently—it would have been impossible—bu tenderly. If he couldn't do the thing properly, he could at least make sure she wasn't dug back up. Tom took up the shovel again and started dropping in payloads of black wet dirt on the body. Something crackled in the underbrush. Tom had his gun out before he

turned. Neustead put up his hands and grinned.

“Easy there, Tommy. It's just us,” Neustead and Eli stood across the half-filled grave from him.

“Yeah.” Tom lowered the gun. “I think I'm done. It ain't in me no more. I just want to go home.”

“What home?” Eli said.

“I know, Eli,” Tom said. “Don't mean I can't want to go, do it?”

Neustead grinned wider. “Course it don't.” There was a twinkle in his eye when he said it, and Tom knew. He just knew. He threw the shovel at Neustead and it tangled up his feet. Neustead pitched into the grave on top of Rachel's body.

“Shoot him!” Neustead howled up out of the open grave. “Shoot him goddamn you!”

Eli hesitated for just a second and Tom turned to run. Eli shifted his aim and shot him in the arm. Tom staggered with the impact. He threw a couple of shots behind his back without looking, blindly trying to keep their heads down. Eli emptied his gun into the dirt at Tom's heels.

Tom ran hunched over, mostly clutching at his arm and trying to hold the blood in. But it trickled out anyway, staining his hands.

After that, it was all Neustead could do to keep the sheriff from whipping up a posse to go after Tom, and Neustead's horse. Neustead was more upset about the horse,

and the sheriff finally let up after their ringleader doubled the man's cut of the bounty.

The theft of the horse was itself a little baffling. Eli was near on to flabbergasted that Tom had managed to circle around to where they'd tied up, with a bullet in his arm. Maybe the bigger man had been paying attention in the woods with Sheriff Henry and Deputy Mills when they were boys after all. In the morning, the blood smears Tom had left had been a clear trail to follow, but in the night, he'd managed to get clean away. Eli couldn't help but be just a touch jealous.

If Neustead had been a little slower climbing out of the grave after the shoot-out, and the rest of the men a little less drunk than they were, Eli might have been able to catch up with Tom and just ride back home to Texas. He shook his head and fixed his eyes on the ground in front of them. Neustead was keeping a close watch on him, and it was all Eli could do to count the number of bullets he had in his pistol, and compare it to the number of men riding behind him. He never could get the math on that to line up, but he kept trying.

Five or six days later, the sun swayed in the distance, a burning red that ate Tom's eyes. Blood dribbled slowly down his numb left arm and into the palm of his hands. The bullet wound stank to high heaven, festering faster than he'd hoped. Tom blinked and wavered in his saddle, and reined in at the edge of a slowly dying creek. The horse shifted under him, nearly pitching him off on his ass. It had been almost two days since he'd seen anything of Eli or the others, but he knew they'd still be out there somewhere on his back-

trail. He couldn't afford to stop for long. Just time enough to wash out his bandages, rewrap the arm, fill his canteen, and then he had to move again. If he could still stand after.

Tom braced himself and swung one leg over. His head felt like it was stuffed with raw cotton. He put out his arm to catch himself when he fell from the saddle. The jolt of tearing pain in his left arm reminded him, too late. He lay in the dust for a few minutes, panting until the worst pain subsided. He rolled over in little stops and starts, and lay for a while more. Then he looked down at his arm.

Greenish pus was drooling off the tip of the inch or so of bone sticking out just above the elbow. It boiled out the edges of the new wound and dripped into the dust under him. The arm must be rotted clean through. The bandage around his upper arm was reddening rapidly, so it looked like he'd broken open the gunshot wound as well. When it rains it pours. But it didn't hurt enough. Funny thing to be worried about, but it was a sign things had moved clean through from 'bad' or 'worse' to fatal. What he was looking at, it should have hurt like hellfire. He wasn't going into shock, but it didn't hurt enough, not by a country mile. Tom grunted and eased his good hand around, nudged the end of the bone with his thumb. Nothing.

He puffed a curse into the emptiness and he craned his head up to get a better look and tried to wiggle the fingers. Nothing. Tom took a deep breath and grabbed the bit of bone that was sticking out. He couldn't feel anything in that arm anymore below the bullet wound his old friend Eli had given him as a parting gift. He would have thanked

god for small favors, but then he shook his head, halfway disgusted at himself for weakness. And halfway sure it wasn't god who'd done him the favor. With a slow, steady motion he shoved the bone back into place. He could feel the muscles twang off the broken off ends of bone in there, but only through his fingertips. Only through the slickness of blood and who knew what all else. It felt like somebody else's arm, a dead man's arm left in the sun to rot.

Tom reached up with his good hand and wiped his face and rested for a while. He rolled his head to get a look at the sun. It had moved more than he wanted it to have done. He needed to move. Not much time left 'til sundown, and Eli and Neustead and the others were coming closer every minute he was off his horse. He carefully bent his left arm with his right until he could slip the numb, useless hand through the waistband of his jeans. The fingers still didn't respond but he thought he could feel the cotton against the back of his blood-caked left hand. That was the best news he'd had in a long time. He half-rolled again to get his right arm into position and pushed up. Tried to push up. And when that failed he started to fall back onto his bad side, overbalanced. He caught himself up on his good elbow at the last second and a jolt went through the left side of his body. Not as bad as the first. He recovered faster this time—moments instead of minutes—but Tom figured he was better off crawling over to the creek. God he was wore out.

It wasn't easy, but he managed to keep himself half-propped on his right elbow while dragging his sorry carcass toward the lip of the stream. It only took him a quarter of

an hour. The crisis over, for the time being, Tom started cursing himself for wasting time. He snaked one hand into the trickle and cupped water over himself. Drank some, filled a canteen. He realized he'd left the two spares slung over his saddle-bow.

No use going back. Tom cursed under his breath. Wasted too much time already. He undid the bandage on his arm, unwinding it slowly. The whole exercise was almost more than he could stomach, in his weakened state. When he finally had the old gunshot exposed to the light of day he made a growl. Half grunt, half sigh—as if he'd expected it not to look so bad, and at the same time—not surprised at all. Veins swollen shut with gore spider-webbed out from the ragged edges of the tear Eli's bullet had made. A giant greenish bruise covered his arm from above the wound, almost up to the shoulder, down to the place where the bone had stabbed its way free a few inches south. The wound itself was a bluish black void with a smear of blood still trickling out. Gangrene was starting to set in despite his efforts.

Tom dabbed some of the blood away with the soiled bandages before dunking them back over his head into the stream. Wringing them out one handed proved something of a chore, one more minor irritation. More time, if not wasted, still lost nonetheless. He could feel Eli getting closer, feel the noose tightening around his neck. It was comforting in some vague way, knowing the chase couldn't last forever.

It used to be thrilling, the feeling of pursuit. The uncertainty of the chase, the rush it brought knowing a job had gone mostly to plan. This time though, all Eli felt was cold.

Maybe it was who he was chasing, or just the fact he was doing the chasing instead of being chased. It brought his mind back to the war, and he thought he'd left that well behind him. He squatted down over a set of hoofprints and squinted into the setting sun.

“Well,” Neustead stood over him, hands on his hips and bareheaded in the sun. His shock of red hair was more jarring than ever. “How far ahead is he?”

“Hard to say,” Eli said. He dug a pebble out of the ground under his knee as he talked. “He has to know we're closing in. I doubt he's stopped for the night yet.”

“I think he's about dead on his feet,” Neustead said. Eli looked back at him over his shoulder and flapped his hat to give himself some breeze. Neustead shrugged. “On horseback then if you want to be a asshole.”

“It's a good horse though,” Eli said.

“Think I don't know that! It's my goddamned horse he stole!”

Eli waved that off. “Didn't leave him much choice did you?”

“You stickin' up for the fink? He'd of got us all hung, yourself included.”

“I shot him, didn't I?”

“In the damn arm. Think I ain't never seen you shoot better'n that?”

Eli looked away, studying the tracks again. “He's maybe an hour ahead of us. Two at the outside. These look pretty fresh, and there's some scat a hundred yards back or so.”

“Changing the subject?” Neustead leered down at him, showing the gap in his teeth. He laughed then, as if there was something funny in it. “Then, we might as well stop here for the night.”

“He's getting farther away every minute we waste sitting on our asses here.”

“Nah, he's holed up for the night this time,” Neustead said. “Your friend may be strong as an ox, but he's still human.” Neustead waved his hand in a wide circle over his head, signaling Ellson and the Italian to fall out and start making camp. Ellson nodded wordlessly and peered into the distance, cupping one dusky hand to shield his eyes from the sun.

The Italian combed his hair out of his face with one hand and dismounted sharpish. He turned to Ellson. “I take first watch?”

The black man shrugged and pulled a half dollar to flip him for it. Neustead frowned back toward Eli. “My horse might could keep going through the night, but Tom knows better than to risk breaking the damn thing's leg. We'll start off early tomorrow, catch him up before noon.” Neustead patted him on the shoulder and turned back to the others. “Hey! Ain't I got a chance to flip out of second watch?”

Eli chewed his lip and watched Neustead's back. They'd stick him with second watch, and he'd put up a token complaint. But if he was to get Tom out of this pickle he'd dropped himself in, second watch suited him fine. Once he was sure Neustead and the others weren't watching, he shaded his face and peered off, searching the horizon for a likely spot his friend would have holed up for the night, and hoped he wasn't too late.

Tom's head rolled from side to side, looking for and eventually finding some dried twigs. They weren't much, but they'd do at least temporarily. He fished a knife out of his

boot, it took two tries to sit up enough to reach. He waggled backwards over to a boulder a couple feet away, holding twigs and bandages in his good hand, with the knife in his teeth. Leaning back against the boulder, he watched the sun set. He realized then that he hadn't set a fire. He didn't bother cursing aloud, just winced a little and set right back to work.

He couldn't be sure the bone was set right, but with the nerve cut he figured it wasn't the highest priority that the bone knit perfectly. If it even had time to. Still, he wrung out the bandage one last time onto his chest. This time the water was mostly clear. Satisfied, he re-wrapped the old bullet wound, tightening it with his teeth. Then Tom unbuttoned his shirt and started slicing away strips to use in his makeshift splint. He had another in his saddlebags. Neustead's saddlebags. Not that he'd be able to put it on in this condition. Fashioning the strips for the splint took longer than expected, but he kept forgetting he could only use one arm. It had been almost a week since Eli had shot him, but he still wasn't used to working one-handed.

He was tying the first strip, tightening it with his teeth, actually, when the twig snapped. Tom let out a sigh, slid the twig out and replaced it for a thicker one. He only had a couple more spares. This time he was more careful. He went slower, sacrificing precious seconds to make sure he didn't break this one too. The third strip he tightened down brutally, just above the bullet wound, trying for a kind of tourniquet. The arm was probably a total loss anyway. The pain was more than he expected. Tom bit off a scream and fell over to his side still groaning. It took an effort not to let out a sob as he finally

levered himself back up against the boulder. He pulled his revolver and placed it in the dirt next to his side. The knife, he tucked into the hollow formed by his body and the boulder. He stuffed the sheath down into his boot to make the absence less conspicuous.

His last thought before he drifted off was that at least his back was to water and the sunrise. His pursuers would have to come at him with the sun in their eyes. He'd need the advantage if he lasted the night.

A sound woke him in the cold and the dark. For a minute or so he couldn't remember where he was, and couldn't drag his eyes from the yellow half moon leering down at him, yellow like a wolf's eye. The cold brought him back around, finally. Tom grabbed his gun and scanned the arc of the rocky slope that he could see from his vantage near the stream. Down the sights of his army revolver shadows from dead pine trees, and some kind of underbrush he didn't recognize amid folds in the ground down below, seemed to hide fantastic shapes that wanted to tear the flesh from his bones and drink the marrow. He wondered if he was still dreaming. He hoped so.

A star blinked on and off below the moon like a beacon, or an omen of some great catastrophe waiting in the dark. He should have thought to light a fire. It was too late now, the fingers of his good hand were beginning to go numb against the cold metal grips of his revolver. He shivered involuntarily, and tried to remember. A sound had woken him, but he couldn't see what it had been. Just a wild animal, or something more sinister, he couldn't know.

A gust of wind rustled the needles on the trees and sent their shadows skittering across the nightmare landscape stretching out before him like a silver-limned vision of hell. He shook himself roughly to stay awake and fend off the tendrils of exhaustion slithering into his brain. But soon he slumped back against the boulder and the gun slipped from his nerveless fingers.

Eli didn't dare mount up at first. He led his horse down around the ridge from the camp and away a couple hundred yards before he figured he could risk it. He took it to a trot for a little, and then reined in, holding his breath and straining his ears to catch the sound of alarm from Neustead and the rest if any of them had woken up and missed him. His horse snorted, and Eli nearly fell out of his saddle in surprise.

He shook his head and put the spurs in gently. Riding at night wasn't exactly the best idea, and he kept to a trot, in case his horse caught a foot in a dip in the trail, and threw him. Eli had to stop every so often to check that he was still on the trail, but he knew Tom well enough to predict where he'd have set up for the night. Probably get close well before first light.

When Tom woke again, it was absolutely still. He couldn't even make out the sound of the stream behind him. In the preternatural quiet he sat, working some warmth back into his good hand by opening and closing his fist. The knuckles crackled at first, that was the only sound. He imagined he could hear the echo of it rifling back to him

across the valley.

The sun was coming up soon. It hadn't quite breached the horizon in front of him. The predawn gray leeches everything of color, of life. The plains below were barren and bleeding, just like him. He grumbled something under his breath and started gathering himself to stand.

“Don't move,” a voice said from off to his right. “Leave the gun where it lies.”

Tom grunted. “You always were a sneaky bastard, Eli Briggs.”

“And you never could hide a trail worth a damn,” Eli said with a brief chuckle. He had his gun out, and was scanning the ground around him.

“You just gonna talk me to death or can we get on with it?” Tom said.

“What's your hurry?” Eli said softly, reaching across him and pushing up the bandage. He let out a low whistle. “Now I get a look at you, doesn't seem like you got long anyhow. Figured maybe we just sit and talk.”

“Bout what?” Tom took a breath. “Did all the talking you needed to with a .45 back in whatever-ton, far as I can see.”

Eli sat in front of him, resting his forearms on his knees. “Ain't no less'n we all got coming, don't you agree? You get your head back on straight, or we ain't got shit to say. Neustead will get his money one way or another.”

“That how it's gonna be?” Tom said slow and careful.

Eli frowned and shrugged his shoulders. “I reckon that's how it is.”

“Fine by me,” Tom said.

“You okay to stand, or—” The knife went into Eli's chest easily, slipping right through ribs on the left side just as easy as you please. All his breath went out in a rush. Tom felt the lung pop through his fingertips on the handle and he twisted the hilt. He thought maybe he'd get lucky and the tip would go into the heart, but it wasn't to be. Eli dropped the gun before Tom could even make a grab for it. He had his hands around Tom's throat a moment later.

He only had one hand, but Eli was already weakening, and Tom shoved him over onto his back. Eli coughed and clutched at his wound, staring up at the gray sky. Tom levered himself up to his knees. His head was feeling a little clearer somehow. He scooped up Eli's gun and got to his feet, and started for his horse. He stopped and looked down at Eli for a moment.

“You stupid son of a bitch,” Eli gasped. Tom aimed a kick at his head, and nearly lost his balance. He spat in the dust and staggered in the direction of his horse. It was harder than he hoped it would be, getting back on the horse one-handed. He had to stuff the gun down the back of his jeans and haul himself up raggedly. Without a week's experience at it he probably couldn't have done it at all. Still and all, he seemed to have turned the corner on the whole affair. Without a doubt he'd have to find a sawbones. The smell of his arm was worse, and he'd probably lose everything below the elbow at the least. On the other hand, without Eli, he doubted Neustead and the others could follow. Eli had been the best tracker Tom had ever known. It'd come in handy enough in the past that the thought was jarring, Eli in the past tense. He was numb, but the reality started to

sink in on him even as he got his leg over into the stirrups. He'd stabbed his best friend.

The first bullet came as something of a shock when it shattered his right knee. The gun barked its fury in the stillness of the predawn morning. The horse screamed and reared while blood shot out. That was odd. Tom looked down at his new wound in disbelief. Not at the wound itself, he didn't think he had that much blood left in him. It must have gone through, punctured something in the horse. He turned his head just in time to see Eli's second shot. It was all he could do to cling to the saddle. Horse blood and brain matter spattered Tom's face and his mount started to teeter over.

“Shitfire!” Tom tried to jump clear, but with his leg hanging on by a thread he couldn't get the foot out of the stirrups. A third shot grazed his side and the horse finally finished collapsing. His good leg was pinned under the dead beast. He tried for the gun, but he was pinned to the ground by a thousand pounds of horseflesh. Tom could feel the gun digging into the base of his spine. His whole body hurt. He looked up and saw Eli, sitting up and holding his guts in with one hand. The other was busy pulling back the hammer on his gun. He could feel vibrations in the ground, horses coming closer.

“You stupid son of a bitch, Tom,” Eli coughed. “Can't you tell a rescue when you see one?”

“Shit,” Tom said and collapsed. He blinked and looked around, searching. He could make out figures on horseback off in the distance, outlined against the first rays of the sunrise. “Shit,” he said again. “Do it. You ain't got a choice now, Eli.”

“I know,” Eli said.

He didn't shoot right away. Eli pulled the hammer back slowly, feeling the click as it caught through down to his toes. He took the time to do the thing properly, sighted in careful. And then that damn old army .45 blew Tom's brains out his ear.

Eli sat in the dust by the creek while the echoes bled away. Calling it a river was a bad joke. Of all the places to die. He'd hoped to die old and toothless and fat someday, not out here on the ass end of nowhere. Idly he thumbed the catch to break open Tom's pistol. The backs of five spent rounds glared back sullenly. There was something rolled up in the sixth chamber. Eli coughed and dropped the gun in his lap. He wiped his chin, then his hands on his pant-leg. It took a couple tries before he could get a good grip with his fingernails. At last he pulled a worn old Confederate hundred dollar bill out of the gun. Worthless of course, even if he lived through this by some miracle.

On that front, his breathing was better than it had a right to be. Ragged to be sure, but still strong. He just couldn't figure it, so he let himself lie back and prepared to slowly bleed to death in the dust by the creek as he watched the sunrise.

Of course it wasn't that easy. Neustead and the others were there before he even lost consciousness. They made a certain amount of fuss. Neustead in particular. "See? This is what happens when you run off by yourself."

"You want to make something of it?" He managed to croak. The Italian looked up from working on Eli's chest, a little annoyed.

"Quiet down, so I can see how bad is it."

“I still got a bullet on me somewhere. Somebody throw me their iron.” No one would, and that was pretty much that. Ellson spoke up to complain that the reward for Tom was bigger if they'd taken him alive, but Neustead looked down at Eli and shook his head.

They tried to get him up on a horse once the Italian had the bleeding mostly stopped.

“Fuck you. Leave me.”

Neustead grunted a half-hearted laugh. “Sure thing. And that piss-ant crooked sheriff a few days back'll just take your share too. You can die *after* we collect if you've still got a mind to. No skin offa my nose *then*.”

Eli shook his head helplessly and Neustead tipped his hat and grinned, and motioned for the others to raise him up like he was some goddamn hero.