

GUY ADAMS



THE
GOOD
THE
BAD **AND THE**
INFERNAL

'Guy Adams
is just
magnificent.'
*Fantasy Book
Review*

**THE
GOOD
THE
BAD AND THE
INFERNAL**

BOOK ONE OF THE HEAVEN'S GATE TRILOGY

GUY ADAMS



SOLARIS

First published 2013 by Solaris
an imprint of Rebellion Publishing Ltd,
Riverside House, Osney Mead,
Oxford, OX2 0ES, UK



www.solarisbooks.com

ISBN (epub): 978-1-84997-492-9

ISBN (mobi): 978-1-84997-493-6

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Cover art by Dominic Saponaro

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*To Michael George Adams,
who fathered the outlaw that wrote this book
and taught him the difference between
good, bad and ugly.*

IN THE BEGINNING

1. THIRTY DAYS AGO...

“THE ATLANTIC IS a cruel and venomous woman, Father, just as likely to snatch you to her bosom, body and soul, as deliver you to your destination.”

“No mere ocean is capable of taking the immortal soul, Mr Quartershaft.”

“Father, this is why it’s good that you have me by your side; you may be all-knowing in the matters of spirit, but you are like a child beyond your monastery, naïve of the natural world’s cruelties.”

Quartershaft, confident that the monk’s gaze was elsewhere, took a swig of brandy from his hip flask.

“Why, the last time I sailed these waters, I lost two dozen men from my expedition, grabbed by the waves that writhe beneath us like a tuppenny whore earning her change.”

The monk scowled at that and Quartershaft reminded himself that his lewder metaphors were best saved for the country set. “I had to bring the vessel to dock myself, lashed to the wheel by rags from the dead men’s clothing.”

“How fortunate that, though their bodies were lost to the ocean, their shirts were not.”

Quartershaft stared at the young novice who had joined them with a look that he hoped, brandy or not, created the striking profile that appealed to magazine editors the publishing world over. The look that said: intrepid, brooding and authoritative. A man to be reckoned with (or, at the very least, read about). It was a look that he practiced often in the mirror, trying to emulate the sketches that had graced the cover of many a worthy periodical. It was a lot harder to achieve without pen and ink.

“Fortunate indeed, Brother William. Now, if you will excuse me, I must prepare for our landing, peruse the maps, maybe take an hour’s rest. I shall be in my cabin, Father, should you or any of your order find yourselves in deathly peril.”

Quartershaft sauntered below deck, leaving the two monks looking over the prow.

“You really must mind yourself with Mr Quartershaft, Brother William. He seems a sensitive man.”

“He is, begging your pardon Father, an idiot and a liar. A sham, cultivated to sell lurid publications, and nothing more. I cannot begin to understand why you insist on his joining us in our quest.”

Father Martin sighed.

“Money, Brother William; money. Without the financial support of his publisher, we would have been penniless halfway to Plymouth, let alone the Americas.”

“Ah.”

“Indeed, and while he may be prone to embroidering the accounts of his previous expeditions, you have no reason to doubt his abilities.”

“He got lost belowdecks twice, yesterday. I found him relieving himself in one of the galley cupboards. Claimed it was an ancient mariner’s trick to waterproof the timbers. Then there is the persistent sound of vomiting from within his cabin, as well as sundry other noises... I dread to think what he does in there away from prying eyes.”

“Nonetheless, William, he may have some use in the journey ahead. And do not forget, without the documents he retrieved during his recent journey to India, we would know a lot less about our sacred destination.”

“If it even exists.”

Father Martin looked disapprovingly at the novice.

“Oh, Wormwood exists, my boy, never doubt it for a moment.”

He gazed back out to sea, where the slim shadow of land grew closer.

“Although there may be times during our journey when we all wish it didn’t.”

2. TWENTY DAYS AGO...

THEY MOVED AS tight as pack animals, hugging the ground as they ran. Four in all, wrapped in dull cloth to cheat lazy eyes. Shadow clothes.

Los Redo Prison sat within a bowl of open land, surrounded by mountains. They ran towards it, virtually invisible against the ill-lit landscape.

MANCO SNORTED AND spat a wad of phlegm onto the ground. The dust filled his head. He’d worked here six months and his lungs hurt. He wished he could work somewhere where the air was clear.

Shifting position, he wedged the butt of his rifle against his gut and ferreted in his shirt pocket for tobacco. He slowly rolled a smoke in one hand, tamping down the tobacco and folding the paper around it with deft movements of his fingers. He gummed the paper down with a streak of spit and shoved the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, then flicked a match alight against the crumbling wall at his back, cupped the flame in his palm and lit up. He took a deep lungful and flicked the spent match to the ground, staring into the mountains.

The blade came from the left, sliding across his throat; the flesh parted, releasing blood and smoke. Manco slid, twitching, to the floor.

THEY CAME TOGETHER silently and vaulted one of their number onto the prison wall. Small and stunted barely more than three foot from toe to topknot, the figure scampered along the edge of the wall before tumbling to the other side.

The wall backed onto a small courtyard in front of the prison buildings, with their corridors and police cells. There were three guards, shuffling around the gate. The night was silent but for the distant persistence of cicadas.

Three shots rang out and the guards went down.

The midget dropped to the courtyard and, kicking at the bodies as he passed, pulled back the bolts of the gate and let his companions enter.

HENRY JONES ROLLED off his bunk and got to his feet. He pulled his belt tight and adjusted the fit of his trousers around the crotch, then ran his finger around the waistband, making sure his cotton shirt was fully tucked. Slipping his maroon silk waistcoat over his shoulders, he cleared his throat gently, testing his vocal chords. Buttoned up, silver watch chain evenly slung, he reached for his black jacket and pulled it on, rolling his shoulders to get them snug and flicking his cuffs forward. He just had time to run a careful hand over his oiled hair, checking for runaways, before the door exploded.

When the dust settled, Jones twitched his head at the sound of the small feet scuffling into his cell.

“Evenin’ Knee High,”

“Evenin’ Mr Jones, sir,” the midget shouted over the considerable noise of gunfire.

Jones strolled out of the cell and towards the courtyard.

The gunfire had ceased now, the dirt damp with the guts of prison guards.

“Henry!” One of the figures moved forward, pulling the grey cowl from its head to reveal beautiful red hair. A tanned face, inset with sparkling emerald eyes and rich full lips, surrounded by the bushie

and most luxuriant of beards.

~~“Evenin’ darlin’,” said Jones, giving her a tongue-filled kiss and a firm grab between the thighs, romantic as he was wont to be.~~

“We’ve got you, baby,” she murmured, stroking the smooth, eyeless skin that made up the top half his face, and pulling him closer to her. “We can find it together.”

He twitched his head momentarily, grabbed the gun she had slung in her left thigh holster and snapped off a shot to his rear. A wounded guard, who had nursed thoughts of being a hero, recoiled against the bullet and died.

“Sorry, darlin’,” said Jones, “you were sayin’?”

“Wormwood, honey,” she said, “let’s find Wormwood.”

3. TEN DAYS AGO...

“CAN I HEAR a hosanna?” Obeisance Hicks, emissary of the Lord and man of means, most surely could.

He cast a look at his fragile messiah, just to check the man’s eyes were open and bowels in order. People could stand all manner of vagaries in their Gods, he had discovered, but a lack of toilet training was frowned upon, ecclesiastically. People wanted their Christ to smell sweet.

“I had a vision this morning,” he went on to explain. “A message from God.” Here he put his hand on the war veteran’s shoulder, stroking the white robes he dressed the man in.

“He was telling me that the people of this town are almost lost to His sight.”

There was a predictable yell of rebellion.

“That is what He said,” insisted Hicks, pointing out at the faces of those gathered around the caravan. “I am merely His messenger. He told me that the devil himself had laid claim to this place, thanks to the help of his ministers and dark priests.”

Again, a roar of disapproval.

“My friends,” said Hicks, a man who knew how far to push matters, “you have no need to fear. I do not abandon you. And through me, God does not abandon you either. Behold!”

And with a gentle kick the tame messiah was awoken, calling out and raising his arms to the sky according to his training. Hicks never failed to take pleasure in the response of the crowd, the gasps of holy pleasure as the stigmata begin to flow.

“See how your sins are washed away in Holy Blood, see how I have the best interests of your souls at heart.”

He took a sip of whisky from his tin cup (it paid not to advertise one’s choice of beverage while spreading the word of the Lord; the only spirits crowds like this wanted to see were Holy in nature). He liked to leave a long moment after the blood, just to make sure it had really sunk in.

“We are here amongst you,” he continued, “to save your eternal souls. We want to protect you, oh, yes... we want to see you wrapped up in the warm and loving arms of the Lord. We do! We do!”

He reached into his waistcoat pocket and removed a small glass bottle. He held it up, letting the glass glint in the light so as to add an extra hint of the heavenly. Then he placed the neck of the glass against the false messiah’s wrist and let some of the blood drip inside. Just a little, a couple of drops; nothing that robbed something of its mystery more than quantity. He corked the bottle and held it up to the light once more.

“Which is why I want to share this gift, this holiest of relics, this charm against the devil, this potent tonic for Jesus!”

He threw the bottle into the crowd, where it was caught by a young black girl. She held it close to her

cheek and sang out in excitement. "Lord, how it sings!" she said. "You can feel God Himself just beyond the glass."

"Put it away, honey," said Hicks, "it's a precious gift." And she did so, amid the jealous clamour of the crowd.

"Friends!" Hicks shouted, "don't worry! I have a handful more I'm willing to donate to the holiest, most..."—he allowed a small pause here—"generous-spirited amongst you."

"I want to show my gratitude," shouted the girl, holding up a couple of coins. They glinted in the sun just the same as the bottle had done. Holy of holies, Hicks thought...

"I do not sell gifts from the Lord," he insisted. "If you wish to offer money to my ministry, then I thank you, and I swear to you that it will be used only in the furtherance of the holy message."

He took the coins from her and dropped them into a small basket at the front of his makeshift stage.

"There," he said. "In case anybody else might be so Christian in their wishes."

He brought forward a wooden chest and began to unload pre-filled glass bottles from it, stepping back slightly as the line began to form. Praise be, he thought; God helps those who help themselves.

"CAN WE PLEASE get moving?"

Hicks looked up at the black face of his first 'customer' and smiled. "Just as soon as I've had a short nap," he announced, taking another sip of his whisky (from the bottle this time, he had given up on the tin mug now he was out of the public eye).

"It's alright for you," she said, despairing of the man who had never quite got the difference between 'owner' and 'employer.' "You might escape a lynching, if they catch you out as a con artist. They'd hang me up just to pass the time."

By now Hicks was snoring and there was very little that Hope Lane could do to rouse him.

She gathered up her skirts and shuffled across the caravan to where her beloved Soldier Joe lay. Hicks stored him as you would an animal, boxed away in a straw-lined cage.

Hope unlocked the door and shuffled in next to the man, pulling him up so that his head rested on her lap.

"Never you mind, Soldier Joe," she said, "we'll soon be moving on, and then you'll be able to get a little sun on your face."

He grunted, dead to the world, and rolled his face against her thigh. Hicks kept him sedated most of the time, fed him on powders meant for cattle, as far as she could tell. Better that than let him cry out as he was wont to do. Soldier Joe had seen some bad things in his time, she was sure of that. If only the bullet that had taken out a good-sized piece of his brain and most of his sense could have taken the fear away too. When the powders wore off, he screamed like a beaten baby, and nobody did that unless they had something terrible rattling on them.

Soldier Joe tensed up and mumbled to himself. *Wumweh* he seemed to say, over and over again.

"I'm sorry, honey," said Hope, stroking his hair, "I can't understand you."

"Wormwood," said Soldier Joe, opening his eyes and speaking as clear as you like. "We need to go to Wormwood."

Then he closed his eyes and fell back to sleep.

4. NOW...

THE UNION PACIFIC got you as far as Omaha, but no further. In a few years the Central Pacific line, cutting its way east from Sacramento, would come to meet the western line, and travelling the length

of the country would be possible from the relative comfort of a rail carriage. Until then, the long-distance traveller had little option but to decamp from the luxury of iron tracks and make way under his own steam.

“Come along, my dear,” said Lord Forset, raising a wrinkled hand towards the sun as much to keep the dust from his eyes as the light. “They must be around here somewhere.”

“How can one lose a pack of monks?” his daughter wondered, clambering down from the carriage. “They hardly dress to blend in.”

“Quite,” agreed Forset. He pulled a pair of goggles from his pocket and put them on, making him look even more bizarre than he had already.

Elisabeth looked at him fondly. His crumpled suit and mismatched waistcoat. His hair, which appeared to have achieved autonomy from his scalp, writhing in the hot wind and snatching at the occasional piece of litter that flew by. He was quite at odds with his surroundings, but as this could be said of absolutely anywhere in the world, he achieved a universal quality. The only country in which he felt utterly at home was that strange and complex region found between his left ear and its corresponding fellow on the right. Lord Forset was a full-time resident of his own mind; elsewhere, he was only a visitor.

“Lord Forset?” came a call from further up the platform. “Lord Forset?”

It was a young porter. The loser, had they but known, of a bet between himself and his superior as to who would have to deal with the English pair.

“Yes, my lad,” replied the peer, offering a big-toothed grin that made the kid think of sand-blown marker posts.

“Where do you want your equipment, sir... I mean, my lord...”

“Never mind the manner of address, young man. After all, I can hardly be described as any lord of yours, now, can I? We’re many miles away from my country seat.”

“Thank God,” said his daughter.

“Thank God, indeed,” her father agreed, “considering who’s paying. Speaking of which...” He offered a little bow towards Father Martin, who was walking towards them, the rest of his order hanging back.

“Excuse me!” shouted the immediately recognisable voice of Roderick Quartershaft, pushing his way through his religious-minded travelling companions. “Can a man not set one foot out without tripping over a cassock?”

“This young lad wants to know where to put my equipment,” said Lord Forset, turning back to the porter. “Our transport is scheduled to meet us outside. Load everything up and ferry it to the street, there’s a good chap.”

“The driver should be here to meet us,” said Father Martin. “Perhaps he’s running late?”

“Taken your money and absconded for the hills, more like,” announced Roderick Quartershaft, on the back of breath so alcoholic it would have made a Baptist weep.

“I don’t think there’s any need to assume that yet,” said Father Martin. “Has anyone enquired after our arrival?” He turned to ask the porter, but the young lad had already run back to his superior.

“Can’t wait to be shot of us,” said Quartershaft. “No sense of service in the colonies.”

“Not colonies any more, old chap,” Forset reminded him.

“Not for a long time,” sighed his daughter. “Your knowledge of political geography is astoundingly limited, given your reputation as an explorer,” she added. “It sometimes seems startling that you’ve been anywhere. They say travel broadens the mind, after all.”

“It’s a weak man that lets the opinions and beliefs of others affect his own. I can proudly say there’s not a single continent I’ve set my boots on that has altered my perspective on life.”

“Yes,” Elisabeth replied. “You can say that proudly, can’t you?”

Quartershaft smiled dreamily and Elisabeth wondered if he might actually fall over. "I'm glad I impress, my lady."

"I say," Forset shouted, watching as one of his crates swung precariously from a luggage pulley, "careful with that! It contains equipment of a most fragile and temperamental nature."

The young porter waved his acknowledgement just as one of the ropes came loose and the crate plummeted to the ground.

HENRY JONES MOVED unerringly through the crowds of people on the platform. The dark glasses and cane he carried served to discourage undue attention; he certainly had no need of them. Along with the dark suit and wide-brimmed hat, they helped offer a degree of anonymity. By now, a lot of lawmen would be on the lookout for him. It was better for the life expectancy of those lawmen, and casual passers-by, that they not find him. Even had he not been wishing to keep a low profile, he frequently wore a disguise. Henry Jones had the sort of countenance that drew attention. Unfortunately, uppermost in the list of things he hated—a prodigious and changeable list—was people staring at him. Nobody, not even the beautiful Mrs Harmonium Jones, had the slightest idea how he could tell. His mood was so perpetually sore on the subject that nobody saw fit to ask.

Mrs Jones was also attempting to disguise her appearance, something only really achieved by using a derby hat and a particularly relentless girdle. Her facial hair was a source of great pride, and it would take more than a fear of law officers to get her near a razor, foam and strop.

They also had a crate to negotiate, the contents of which were a little harder to disguise in public and were therefore forced to travel freight.

"There something alive in there, sir?" asked the conductor as he admired the beautifully painted crate on the platform. DR BLISS'S KARNIVAL OF DELIGHTS, it said in curling, scarlet letters, the words sharing space with pictures of roaring lions, chuckling clowns and the snarling face of a top-hatted ringmaster. "Only some of the boys swear they heard something move when they were getting it off the train."

"It's just equipment, pal," said Harmonium in a passable, throaty tone. "Otherwise we'd have filled out the requisite paperwork."

"Good," the conductor smiled, "good. Only... we're supposed to check on all livestock; just for safety, you understand. I mean, I have my passengers to think of."

"Sure you do," Harmonium replied, tucking a dollar into his jacket pocket, "and you've looked after these two just fine."

"Oh, well, thank you, sir. Most kind."

"We particularly appreciated how you left us to our own devices," added Henry, tilting his thick black lenses towards the man.

The penny dropped. "Oh, naturally. Well, be seeing you, then." And away went the conductor.

"Rest easy, boys," whispered Harmonium into one of the discreetly drilled air holes. "We'll soon have you out of there."

But before she could receive a reply, everyone on the platform turned towards the air-rending crash of a large packing crate falling to earth and splitting open.

"What the hell was that?" asked Henry. "Someone hurt?"

"I sure hope so, honey," his wife replied. "What say we go and find out?"

"CAN I HEAR a hosanna?" Obeisance Hicks was, as always, inclined to wonder.

On this particular afternoon, his timing was not ideal; the answer was a resounding 'no.' The only

thing most people within preaching distance could hear was the sound of an almighty crash, followed by considerable panic.

“What in the name of Christ is that?” wondered the not-so-reverent Hicks. He decided that, since his congregation was inclined to abandon the word of God in the hope of finding out, so was he.

“Keep an eye on the messiah,” he muttered to Hope Lane, before wandering into the train station.

She sighed, horribly conscious that he had now drawn attention to her, and nodded.

Inside, Hicks wasn't the only one wanting to catch a glimpse of catastrophe. He noted, not for the first time, that if there was a way for him to market gawping at the dead and dying, he could pack in the God game for ever. People flocked to blood as surely as flies.

Today they were to be disappointed. As far as Hicks could tell, the crashing sound had been a collection of ironmongery dropped from a height. If it had fallen on anyone, then they were so deeply buried that the gathered crowd had little interest in attempting to save them. There was a good deal of standing around and shaking of heads. That's the other thing with a crowd, Hicks decided; they all have an opinion and it's usually the same one. People were dumb as sheep.

“I dread to think what you've broken!” cried out one man, with an accent so strongly British that a number of the gathered crowd automatically reached for their guns. There was not a great deal of good feeling towards that particular country; Hicks, being of Dutch stock, couldn't honestly say he gave a brace of shits on the subject.

“Some of that equipment was irreplaceable,” the man was saying. “Simply irreplaceable!”

As if in agreement, a loud hissing noise erupted from the centre of the piled metal, and the crowd darted back as far as the limited space would allow. Metal *clanged* and rang out like a church bell under gunfire as a large, crab-like device appeared from underneath the fragments. It sat at the centre of the heap for a few moments, as if content in its nest, and then jumped for the sky.

“Somebody stop it!” the Englishman shouted, and with no further ado, the young woman standing by him began scaling the stationary train.

Hicks decided he may well have fallen in love as he watched her run across the roof of the train in pursuit of the metal creature as it hovered along, like a vulture scanning the ground for carrion.

“Do be careful, darling,” the Englishman suggested—stupidly, in Hicks's opinion, and in that of many there gathered—before turning away in shock as the young woman made a leap for the escaped device. She grabbed it in its midsection and proceeded to fly over the crowd, in a manner that pleased the gathered gentlemen greatly. Showing a consistent lack of regard for feminine decorum, she swung her legs up and grasped the device between them so as to hang from it more securely.

She initially appeared to be fighting it, but after a few moments, Hicks changed his mind, having been reminded of a business acquaintance who he had often watched buttoning up her corsets post-congress.

“Well, I'll be...” he muttered. “If she ain't planning on *wearing* the thing.”

With a final, triumphant *click* and a whoop from the crowd, the young woman did just that. She righted herself so that she was now stood upright, albeit several feet above the ground, then grasped a pair of handles, pushed forward and swooped gracefully back to earth.

There was a round of applause and, having disengaged whatever engine the thing possessed, she unclasped the legs and took a small bow.

“The Forset Thunderpack,” announced the Englishman with considerable pride. “In full working order!”

The device in question gave an almighty *bang* and fell silent.

“And thank God I got it back before it had been operational for more than sixty seconds,” said the young girl.

“Why might that be?” asked an impressed observer.

“It has a bad habit of blowing up if ignited for longer than that,” she replied, “and would have likely taken most of this train station up with it.”

The crowd dispersed quickly after that, but Hicks lingered. He’d seen something that had excited the essential heart of him, the black pulsing mass of his pocketbook. He had seen *money*.

Eventually he turned around and headed back out to his caravan, disinclined to continue in his never-ending mission to save souls and accrue dollars. He might even stay off the whisky a little, give his brain time to think.

Looking up, he wondered why there was a crowd gathered around his caravan. Then he heard the sound of the dopey-minded motherfucker he offered up for the nation’s prayers. The old soldier was shouting his goddamned face off about something. He couldn’t leave the wet-brain alone for a minute.

“Mind out, now,” he shouted, pulling at the shoulders of the idiots that had clustered around.

“Nothing to see here. Man of God... coming through...”

They refused to move, fascinated by the sight of the hirsute figure, his white robes stained bloody and his stigmata gushed forth. And what in hell was that he was shouting?

“God damn you,” Hicks shouted, his temper frail at the best of times. He pulled out his gun and shot a couple of bullets into the air. “Shift your sinful asses, you worthless cocksuckers, or I’ll smite each and every one of you with the righteousness of a Colt .45!”

That had more success, and the crowd slowly dissipated while he clambered up onto the makeshift stage he preached from, wondering how to make the idiot shut up without shooting him.

“Wormwood! Wormwood! Wormwood!” the simpleton shouted.

“What the hell’s Wormwood?” Hicks wondered aloud. “Some kind of tequila?”

“It’s the name of a town,” said someone behind him. He turned to see two gentlemen, one with a long and bushy beard, the other blind. The blind man pulled off his dark glasses to reveal a smooth patch of skin where the eyes should be. “And I’d very much like to hear what else he has to say on the subject.”

5.

SUN-SHATTERED AND SCORCHED, the dust fields whipped tails at the sky.

The landscape roasted. A world suited only to the dead and to the reptiles and flies that scurry impatiently through the ribcage cathedrals of carrion. They, in turn, are picked off in hit and run assaults by birds, dipping in and out of this wilderness like pearl divers before returning to the skies where the winds blow fresh and clear.

The air was as thick as cooling cooking grease.

It was a quiet world. The feather-light brushstrokes of a sidewinder’s body seemed loud across the dunes; the occasional screeches of a hawk pierced the silence like a railroad spike. The delicate crunch of a horse’s hooves was almost unknown, an intrusive and unwelcome sound. Yet here it was, startling the snakes and lizards into the shadows of their rocks.

The horse moved gracefully, a ballet dancer moving through the inferno.

Its rider was suited to this world. His flesh dry as parchment. Old, tight eyes looked out over the terrain and refused to betray a single thought. The pale overcoat he wore fluttered around the horse, the hem ragged and torn. The leather of his boots creaked like coffin lids.

On he rode. On towards Wormwood.

**THE ROAD TO
WORMWOOD**

1

**THE OLD MAN
AND THE BANKER**

CHAPTER ONE

A STRANGER IN TOWN

I CONSIDERED PRAYING, I'll admit that much. This account will be difficult without a degree of honesty between us, so, yes, prayer had its charm. Thing is, I'd never had much time for religion, and back then, I couldn't quite find the hypocrisy needed for a hasty 'Our Father.' Convictions are dangerous things. Believe anything too hard and life will bite you on the ass for it. Having a little extra experience, these days, I'll pass some of it on: put me in that situation now and I'd dance buck-naked in a mound of mule shit if I thought it would give me a fighting chance. Pride is the sure and safe province of the idiot.

That said, remembering the look of those three: men made from stubble, cigar smoke, ancient sweat and anger. Skin like jerky, eyes like bullet holes in a dead man's back... Remembering all of that, it occurs to me that it would have taken a hell of a hosanna to placate them.

Their leader laughed. I remember that, more clearly than anything else. It was a shock. I was about to die (to my mind a very serious and solemn affair) and this son of a bitch was full of cheer.

I made the decision not to beg. To die with some dignity. Sometimes the best you can hope for is that your last moments are not filled with screaming and the smell of your own shit.

I held a brave face right up until the first shot.

IT HAD TAKEN me three days to cross from the small township of Dashett to Haskell. One day the railways would make this journey; until then, it had to be endured the old fashioned way.

My mount was old and unsteady, a mule I had picked up from a sadist in Kansas. I was convinced the beast would die rather than see journey's end. Lying on my blanket at night, I strained to hear its laboured breathing, monitoring its health like an anxious parent hearkens to a child. Frequently it would fall silent, and I clutched my blanket tight, certain I was stranded in the middle of this wilderness with no transport. Eventually, a sneeze or fart would break the silence and I'd fall into nervous sleep.

Once in Haskell, I found that I was better disposed towards him, regretful of the harsh words and curses I'd heaped on his narrow, scabby shoulders. I tethered him at a stables, gave him an affectionate rub on the nose, and agreed a price for his safekeeping with the unsanitary creature I took to be in charge (on account of the fact that he was the only one not tied up). With the small saddle and bag I had thus far carried halfway across the country, I set off into town.

Haskell was like many of the small towns I had visited on that long trek. I had left the security of home and family for the uncertainty of the West Coast and a job that I hoped to hell would still be there when I arrived. The trip had been full of these unambitious townships: untidy gatherings of houses and stores constructed around a 'main street,' a wide dirt avenue that offered all the traveller could need (providing he wasn't fussy about hygiene or longevity). There were a couple of saloons, a hotel that I would later discover doubled as a warehouse, a general store and stables. Around these perpetual fixtures, a littering of homes shuffled self-consciously in side streets. I assume they had taste and were as ashamed to be seen there as I was. At the head of the main street, the twin gods of Western life presided over the town, represented by their respective owners, well-heeled and conversing pleasantly on the boardwalk adjoining the two properties. To the left was Mr Joshua

Forrest (Banker), and to the right was Isaac Crutchins (Undertaker). May they forever rule.

I walked towards the hotel, enjoying the feel of the ground beneath my boots, my thighs curiously light with nothing between them. My plan was simple: food in my belly and sleep in a bed.

I knew the hotel was unlikely to be up to much, having spent enough time in shabby hostels to be relieved at the sight of a mattress in a room. Even so, the filth that peppered the foyer took my breath away. New life forms mingled with the tobacco stains. I swear I could feel the carpet moving beneath my feet. Here it wasn't just outlaws that you had to be careful with; treat 'em wrong and the roaches were likely to beat the shit out of you.

Skulking in the shadows to the left of the entrance, an old man was being pumped impatiently by an ageing hooker. She showed more interest in the dirt wedged beneath the nails of her free hand than the stunted dick that was, even now, helping to pay her bar bill.

Several men were sleeping off a night of whisky (or had got bored, waiting on the hooker's affections). They were littered around or beneath the chairs and benches that lined the walls. Perhaps there was an economy drive running, and the owner was trying to cut down on excessive wear of the beds.

Coughing self-consciously, bag in my hand, saddle slung over my left shoulder, I made my way to the small counter at the end of the hall. I felt sorry for it. Old and splintered, it struggled to keep upright beneath the combined weight of a small check-in ledger and brass bell. Thinking back, maybe I should have just given the thing a firm kick and put it out of its misery. Checking around, there was no sign of a manager, so I slapped the bell as gently as I could without breaking the desk's back.

"Wha' you wan'?" grunted a voice from behind me. It was the man being jerked off. The hooker didn't stop; presumably she was disinclined to get him all fired up a second time.

"Just a room for the night," I replied. "A meal, if you can?"

For a moment I thought the man hadn't heard me. Maybe he was trying to figure out some of the longer words. Then he grunted fitfully and slapped the hooker away, having spent himself with all the passionate energy of a man hawking phlegm into his handkerchief. He got to his feet and loped over to the counter, tucking himself in as he walked.

"Cash up front. No food." He sniffed, turning the ledger towards me so that I could sign it. I did so, he looked at it (maybe the shapes pleased him; I refuse to believe he could read), then threw me a key.

"Up the stairs, third on the right."

He waddled through a threadbare curtain behind the counter, presumably feeling the need for some time alone. Perhaps to read a little poetry, press some flowers. Either that or there were still some acts he considered should be performed in privacy, like eating children or fucking a horse. Maybe he got bashful about such things.

I went upstairs and along to the third door on the right. Looking at the lock, a good sneeze would probably have opened it. Stickler for tradition, I used the key.

Inside, there was nothing but a small bed frame, featuring a mattress with attractive body-fluid decoration. Looking closely, I figured that that there were enough mixed deposits on its surface to give birth all on their own in a few months. I needed to take a leak, and there was nothing so luxurious as a pan in sight. I checked out the window and saw precious little except a horse tethered below. I tried my best, but a slight breeze made aiming tricky; when I finished, I apologised to the horse and closed the window.

I lay on the bed, trying to keep to the edges as far as possible. The damn thing curved towards the middle, and in the end I was just too damn tired to be coy. I rolled with it, and fell asleep.

IN MY DREAMS I pictured the dirt road that I had travelled, the train tracks that might soon replace it

bursting from the rock and pouring forth like a river. With the tracks came the train, a hulking steel behemoth that roared and screamed in the desert night. It was terrifying, this creature: the cries of the dead that fuelled its cavernous engine billowed forth from its stack, caught in the grip of the smoke and ash that danced across the moon. The embers were fat and burned brighter than suns.

I was laying the track, running through the clouds of dust, hurling sleeper and line in its path, desperate to feed its hunger. I screamed as the razor teeth of its dirt plough chattered and devoured the sustenance I gave it, ravenous and insatiable. The muscles in my arms and back threatened to tear under the weight of the endless supply of iron, swearing that each foot of track I laid (instant and impossible as a spider's web) would be their last. But I couldn't stop. I knew this, sure and certain. If I ran out of track, those plough teeth would strip my flesh and run their last on peeled wet bone.

I woke up after that, the dream shaking me conscious as bad dreams do when a man's still young. Now, older than most would credit, I sleep right through to dawn without fail. I still have the dreams, but they don't shock me as they did. It gets so that you can live with fear.

I swung my legs off the mattress and peered out of the window. There was still little to see, except for a horse that had good reason to hate me. From the main street around the other side of the hotel I could hear the sound of a beaten piano hammering out a tune I almost recognised.

I reached for my bag, dug out a thin pouch of tobacco and began to roll a cigarette. As I rolled it, smoothly, methodically and, above all, awkwardly (this was a habit I had not long taken up, feeling that if I was adult enough for the road I should look like it), I began to hear a separate piano from my right. There were two saloons in town, I remembered. It appeared that they were in competition. The second player was no more talented than the first, but he made a lot more noise. After a few moments the original pianist kicked up the tempo a little and began to fight back, the notes becoming rougher and more painful but loud enough to give number two a run for his money. I struck a match and put it to my cigarette, awaiting the inevitable. Sure enough, as I exhaled, number two cranked it up. I figured that was his limit, surely he couldn't get any more volume without resorting to dynamite. Piano number one took a deep breath and gave it one last shot. Tearing the night in half with their godawful racket, both pianos played together for a few moments before a pair of gunshots rang out, one from either direction. Both pianos stopped instantly. Figuring now was as good a time as any to get some more sleep, I stubbed my cigarette out, removed my glasses and lay back down on the bed.

MORNING SURPRISED ME in its usual way. I've never been good at them. They sneak up on a man.

I shifted my weight, fighting against the dip in the mattress, and tried to get my feet on the floor. After a few minutes I found myself lying across the bed with my heels skimming the floorboards. Good enough, I thought, so I went for the vertical.

I shuffled to the window, unbuttoning my fly, and, forehead resting against the wall, I pissed out of the window as I had the night before.

I guess that was the point at which I truly woke up. Language the kind of which I heard has a way of doing that.

I grabbed my spectacles and looked down at the street below.

There were three in total, all the weathered outlaw types I had seen in great numbers since leaving home. There was a certain breed of gunslinger back then, a breed entirely divorced from the dapper, silk-vested creations people talk of these days. This was the true gunslinger: uglier than a fly blown dog that's been left in the sun for a few days. They looked for all the world as if they had been rolled in shit by their mothers directly after birth and sent out with a Colt on the hip.

Having made this distinction clear, you will understand my concern when I realised that the horse beneath my window was owned by one of them. What is more, not only had I pissed on the horse but

judging by the sagging brim of his hat and the damp patches on his shirt shoulders, I had pissed on the owner as well.

I stood there for a moment, pecker in my hand and gormless look on my face, while he stared right back, unable to believe what I had just done. I think it was basic shock on his part; being mistaken for a latrine obviously didn't happen to him often. Which is a surprise, looking the way he did.

What happened next is going to be difficult to describe without giving the boys names, and as our relationship never got on such terms, I guess I'm just going to have to christen them myself, something apt and charming. Rat Shit, Tinkerbelle and Horse Ass should do them justice. Fine upstanding gentlemen as they were, these may have been their mothers' first choices too, I really couldn't swear on it either way.

Rat Shit, whose attention I had drawn by emptying my bladder on him, replied by drawing his gun and shooting at the window. As much as I would like to claim lightning quick instincts, I think it was utter terror that sent my legs out from under me. I dropped out of harm's way even as the frame splintered with the impact of the bullet.

After that, a degree of instinct did take over, as I crawled back from the window, climbed to my feet once out of immediate harm's way and ran out the door to my room.

One of the other doors in the corridor had been opened by an associate of the hooker downstairs. She looked me up and down for a moment before rolling her eyes and stepping back inside.

Downstairs I could hear the sound of shouting as my new friends burst into the foyer. There was no escape that way.

I went back into my room and worked my way around to the window. I peered outside; it was clear that all three had come inside to find me, leaving this the only route out. I clambered onto the frame and tried to judge the distance between the window and the horse beneath me. I'd seen a couple of hustlers perform this trick back home, escaping from the lodging house at the end of my street in order to avoid paying the rent they owed. How difficult could it be?

I closed my eyes and jumped. For a second, there was a pleasing feeling of weightlessness, before my face connected with the horse's rump, dislodging a tooth, and I was thrown in the air by its startled thrashing. I came to earth in a cloud of dust, with blood in my mouth, but in a better state than had I stayed upstairs and waited to be shot.

Getting to my feet, I limped around to the front of the hotel, just in time to walk directly into Tinkerbelle (named on account of his sweet-looking face and gentle nature), who had waited outside in case I was stupid enough to try and sneak past the front door.

I gave a manly scream, pushed past him and ran towards the end of the street, where I had the good fortune to be run down by a coach.

Lying on my back, with a bloody mouth and a searing pain in my left side, I did a strange thing. I laughed my head off. I mean, *really*, laughed like a loon. Even as I heard a couple of passengers getting off the coach, felt their hands in my armpits as they pulled me upright, I couldn't stop.

"Jesus, fella!" someone said. "You're damned lucky."

"Not the way I see it," came another voice. "Figure he's just takin' a breather before I put this bullet in his face."

That would be Rat Shit.

"Hey, now," replied the first voice. "You'd better have a damn good reason to go talkin' that kinda talk, what did this man do?"

Things were looking up, I had a casual bystander willing to fight my corner.

"Bastard pissed on my horse."

"Son of a bitch."

The hands let go of me, and I fell back to the ground.

“Guess you’ve got due cause, then. I’ll leave you boys to it.”

Nice town. Under other circumstances, I would have considered settling down there.

I heard the sound of a pistol cocking. Its owner laughed with the pleasure of what lay ahead.

“Tell you what, boy,” he said, “I’m going to do you a kindness.”

For a second there, I hoped. He crouched down in front of me and I winced at breath that reminded me of my old mule’s gas.

“I’m gonna let you tuck your dick in your pants ’fore I kill you.”

Glancing down, I realised that, what with everything else on my mind over the last few minutes, I’d forgotten to ‘stable the stallion.’ So much for a dignified end.

Seconds passed.

Then a gunshot rang out.

I COULD CREDIT Rat Shit with many qualities: he was clearly able-bodied, had a force of personality stronger than most and breath that would embarrass a skunk with a yeast infection.

The one thing I would never have credited him with was possessing brains.

Shows how wrong you can be. The man had lots of brains. I knew this beyond all doubt a fraction of a second after I heard the gunshot, because most of them were now plastered in my hair and dripping off the end of my nose.

That boy had brains aplenty.

About a bucketful.

Tinkerbelle followed quickly after, left twitching in the dust bare seconds behind his friend.

Horse Ass fared better. Quicker to react, he ran in the direction of the coach, hoping for cover.

Nearly made it, too, before there was another loud report and his legs were cut from beneath him.

It takes longer to tell than it did to happen. *Bang. Bang. Bang.* Three sounds that left me bewildered, terrified and—fuck me, who would have thought it—*alive*.

I squinted at the shape walking towards me. A solid rectangle, tattered dustcoat whipping at his ankles. A rock of a man. He drew level with me, slipping his gun into its holster. I was surprised to see how old he was: seventy if he was a day.

“Do as the man said, boy. Put your pecker away. ’Tain’t seemly.”

I did as I was told and got to my feet.

“What’s your name, son?” His voice sounded as if it had been cured, left out in the sun for a few days and then put back in his throat. Somewhere between a whisper and a cough.

“Wallace, sir,” I replied, just as soon as I’d remembered, “Elwyn Wallace. You saved my life.”

“That I did. You gonna give me cause to regret it?”

“No! I don’t know how to thank you.”

There was a pause at this, as if he was thinking of options. He scratched at his face with a sound as rough as a gang of armadillos fucking.

“Mayhap you can ride with me for awhile, keep a man company on his journey.”

I had more than enough reasons as to why this wasn’t a good idea—I had a journey of my own to get on with—but all I managed to say was:

“Where are we heading?”

“Small town over that way a stretch,” he gestured meaninglessly behind me. “Place by the name of Wormwood.”

CHAPTER TWO

FACE TO FACE

MY TRAVELLING COMPANION had claimed to hanker for company on the trail. After half an hour I was a loss as to why. Trying to start a conversation with him was as productive as debating with a tombstone. Maybe he hoped I'd help keep the flies off.

He rode in silence, and I did my best to keep up. This was a battle lost within a few minutes. To begin with, my old mule—no doubt stirred to impress, somewhere within its ancient lustful heart—had made a good show in front of my companion's horse, but it couldn't keep the pace. Either that or it enjoyed the view from the rear. That's certainly where we stayed, with me gritting my teeth against the dust kicked up from the dry trail we followed out of Haskell and on towards Wormwood. Wherever and whatever the hell that might be. The old man hadn't seen fit to tell me. All I knew was that, for now, it lay in the same direction I meant to go. What the hell, I thought, I might as well ride with someone that could keep my sorry ass out of trouble for awhile.

The morning's journey passed in near silence, the only slight noise being my skin cooking under the heat of the sun. I never did have the hide for bright skies. My companion was quite the opposite: his dust-coat, stiffened to the texture of wood after years of weathering, still looked softer than his skin, which had a cured, reptilian look. He was a man who had been exposed to the most extreme of environments, and they had left their mark. If you pounded at him with a sledgehammer I could imagine he would crumble like rock, revealing not a drop of juice in his entire body. Watching, as we descended into the narrow pass that wound its way through the lower portion of the Southern Rockies I was put in mind of an animal rather than a man. He controlled his horse so naturally, so instinctively that the two of them moved as one, navigating the uneven ground like a serpent. I'll admit I found myself aspiring to the old bastard's composure. He was the man I wanted to be, someone who moved across the world as if he was in control, rather than—as I was—someone who bounced from one event to another, entirely at the mercy of whatever life threw at him. A leaf on a river, frantic and directionless.

I did my best to copy him, squeezing that dumb mule between my thighs and yanking at the reins in an attempt to guide him between the rocks and trees as we descended. My skills were not up to the task, and neither was my ride. At one point the animal drew to a halt and looked over his wizened shoulder at me, for all the world wondering what I wanted from him. 'I've been on this earth long enough to know how to put one hoof in front of the other,' he seemed to say, 'and you yanking the hell out of me while I'm getting on with it is a distraction, not a help. So sit back, shut up, and let me get on with my job.' In the end, I did just that.

WE TOOK A rest at noon, having found a perfect spot by the side of a narrow river where we could fetch water, wash and take a bite to eat.

Sat in the shade of a tree, chewing my way through the dried meat of an animal I couldn't place, I tried again to get the old man talking.

"So," I said, "Wormwood. What's there that's dragging you halfway across the country?"

"Home," he replied, in his usual talkative manner. He turned his eyes towards the trail we had been following, eyes narrowing, like a lizard sunbathing on a rock. "We've got company."

I turned to look, but couldn't see anyone.

"There, a ways back," he said, "six or seven miles, maybe."

"You can see that far?"

He chose to ignore the question, just gathered his stuff together and gestured for me to do the same.

It was no hardship; chewing that goddamned meat was as much effort as if the animal were still alive.

"You think they're following us?" I asked as we climbed onto our respective mounts.

"No reason to guess so," he said.

"So why are we running?"

He stared at me, and I felt bowels that had been tighter than a clenched fist loosen.

"We're not running," he said, "I don't run. But I don't like company, either."

"I can tell that much."

He turned his horse and began to trot deeper into the mountains, ignoring the comment, just as I knew he would.

THE AFTERNOON'S RIDE saw the old man pick up the pace, always with an eye to the trail behind us.

I spent the time imagining who or what he might be. I had plenty of territory to guess at, as he'd told me not one word about himself, not even his name. I kept meaning to ask, but he was such a mean old bastard, I felt scared to. I'd talked about myself, yes, because that felt like it was allowed. Asking about him, *anything* about him; that felt out of bounds.

My Ma always said I was meeker than a first-time whore. She was a woman of words.

To hear her talk, I spent most of my childhood leaping from one fear to the next. As a babe I would curl in my cot at the sound of a storm. As a toddler I would hide from the pigs we kept, twitching with every snort and squeal. As an infant I would run from the snakes in the yard. Everywhere I turned, there was something to be feared of. I guess she hoped I'd grow out of it. Find myself a backbone once my balls dropped. 'Course, I never did; I just found bigger things to be scared of.

The biggest of them all was my father. A man who changed his mood with the wind. Never have I known someone so fond of liquor to be so bad at drinking it. Every day he'd go at the sour mash, and every night he'd lose the battle as that sweet fire burned him up inside. Most mornings we'd find him on the porch, looking for all the world like he'd come off worse in a brawl. I guess he had, at that.

Not that he ever laid a hand on me. He would threaten as much, shout and promise 'a hellish whuppin' on either of us if we didn't do as we were told. He didn't have it in him, though. He was faulty dynamite, all fire and no force. Ma just ignored him. She'd live her life around him like he was a misplaced piece of furniture, a sideboard that nobody had seen the good sense to shove into a corner. It weren't no imposition once you'd got used to it. It got under your feet when you were sweeping. Sometimes it would scream at you for being an 'unholy, worthless cunt,' but after a while you just ignored that cumbersome old sideboard and got on with your life.

'So that's what you're running away from,' a woman told me after she'd got talking to me in a bar in Indiana.

I'd not been so long on my journey, then. A train ride across Kentucky and three days down on a twelve day coach ride to Illinois. I'd been tired and lonely, and despite the fact that I don't drink, I'd found myself in the bar, as there weren't nothing else to do and I missed the sound of people. She'd soon pulled up a chair, initially to sound me out as a potential client (she made it quite clear that a dollar would have her drawers down with the speed of a Texan sunset) but when it was obvious I had little interest and less money she settled for conversation. I was only too happy to oblige. She told me about her youth in Connecticut, her first husband who had died choking on a chicken bone, her decision to becoming a sporting woman because, 'when a gal can earn a dollar a dip doing something

she enjoys, why the hell would she wait tables?' All of which was just fine, and listening to it beat the silence. When I told her something of my own life, though, she seemed to feel it all needed cross-examining. She was of the opinion that everything was due to some deep-seated problem or another. Maybe it was the fault of a book. Or maybe one of her regulars was a philosopher who talked when he should be poking. Maybe she was even right. Though I told her clear that sometimes a man does a thing just because it occurs to him to do so. We're not all the deep thinkers she pegged us out to be.

I guess I could understand why someone might wonder with regard to my trek across the country in the name of a bank job. Surely there were easier stations in life? Certainly there were closer ones. Still, the opportunity was there and I took it. My conviction wavered en route, but the idea of a long journey across land I had never seen to a home I could barely imagine seemed like a worthwhile idea. I guess it was an adventure, though I don't believe I ever viewed it in such terms. It was simply something to do that I had never done. Sometimes that's reason enough.

Maybe that was why my nameless friend had his heart set on Wormwood? Because it was there? Even knowing nothing about him, I soon decided that wasn't the truth of it. He was not a man to do things on a whim. Whatever lay at Wormwood (and I never really imagined I'd find out, sure that I'd leave him to it after a couple of days together on the road), it was important as all hell.

WE SETTLED FOR the evening at a sheltered spot behind a rocky outcrop. I guess a practical man might guess this was to cut down on the wind, but I know he was thinking about whoever was behind us on the trail.

He sent me to look for firewood, which I did, only too happy to appear to be of some use. It also kept the two of us apart for a little longer, the unnatural lack of conversation getting more awkward with every moment in the man's company.

By the time I returned, he seemed to have mellowed a little. "Not much for conversation," he admitted as I built the fire. "Too long on my own, I guess." I shrugged, pretending not to have given it mind. "It gets lonely on the trail," I said, "once you're on the beaten track, anyways."

He nodded. "I don't mind that. Travel is a time for thought." "I guess, though I think I'd managed to do plenty of that by the time I got as far as Kentucky. Now I just want to get where I'm heading and get on with my life."

"What's the rush?" "I don't know how long they'll keep the job open, for one thing," I said. "But it ain't just that. I don't mind travelling, I've enjoyed some of it for sure, but I guess I'm impatient to start afresh."

"You did that the day you left home." "I guess I did. Still, until I get myself behind that desk, find a roof for my head, it feels like everything's up in the air. Is that what I'm going to be? A teller in a bank? What will my home be like? Who will be my new friends? It's all just life waiting to happen."

"You might not even get there. Which means you'll have spent all this time waiting, when you could have been living."

"There's a cheerful thought."

"Maybe it is. It all depends on your perspective."

"So you're not impatient to get where you're going? Whatever lies in Wormwood doesn't pull you along the trail?"

He paused at that, no doubt wondering how much he should say. "That it does. Though it's an unusual situation. The thing I'm riding towards won't be there forever. If I'm slow, I'll miss it. But I've lived most of my life just travelling, and there ain't nothing wrong with it. Happiness ain't at the

end of the road; happiness is the road..."

"Said like a poet."

"It's a profession I've had in my time. Along with many others."

"And what are you now?"

"Hungry. Let's get that fire lit."

THE COMPANY HE had been expecting arrived just as the pan of beans began to bubble.

He heard them long before me, my attention fixed as it was on that popping, spitting stew. After days on the road with only my own cooking skills to count on (of which I had none), the idea of a stew that might not need to be snapped into bite-sized pieces was appealing.

"They're here," he said, standing bolt upright and moving out of the light of the fire with a speed that didn't match his years.

Night had fallen, and he vanished a couple of feet from our camp. I pictured him taking up a position in the shadows, watching as they drew closer, maybe fixing them in his sights.

Which made me the lure, of course, and sat there in the fire's glow I found myself working up a sweat that was nothing to do with how close I'd gotten to the flames. Might they shoot me from a distance? Gun me down, meaning to steal our horses (well, *his* horse; they surely wouldn't even consider my mule worthy for meat, let alone riding). My only hope was that they must know I hadn't been riding alone, and you wouldn't shoot until you had both targets in sight. Would you?

"Hello, there!" came a shout from a short way off. "Would you have room for a couple more around that fire? We've a little food and whisky to share, if you're willing."

The voice had a slight Irish tinge to it which put me in mind of a man I'd known back home. A mindless ass by the name of Duggan who had offered shoe shine outside the prayer house on a Sunday. Of course, he'd turned out not to be so mindless after all, when he made off with the contents of the Eastern Savings bank. According to the papers afterwards, he hadn't been Irish, either. You never can take a fellow on trust.

"Come on over," I said, knowing that my companion wouldn't want the company, but unable to think of a polite way of saying so. I guessed if he was that opposed to breaking bread with fellow travellers he could shoot them dead or stay out there in the dark until morning.

"Much obliged," the Irishman said. "We've been on our own for near a week and if I have to listen to Willie's conversation one more night, I'm likely to cut his throat with my pocket knife."

They appeared within the light of the fire and I relaxed a little. They were not a threatening pair.

"The name's Thomas," said the Irishman, holding out a fat hand for shaking. He was a big man, but in all the wrong ways. His gut shook along with our hands, pressed against the cotton of a light blue shirt that had seen almost as many hot meals as its owner. He was balding, but for a pair of light grey wisps that rose, like cattle horns, towards the night sky.

Willie was a black man, long grey beard and a tailcoat that made him look like he was from the circus.

"You'll have guessed I go by Willie," he said, shaking my hand.

"Elwyn," I replied, "travelling to California."

"On your own?" Thomas asked, noticing the two animals we had tied up.

"No," said the old man, looming into the light of the fire, "but I wanted to keep an eye on you for a little while, make sure you weren't something I had to worry myself about."

"Can't be too careful, I guess," said Thomas, moving to offer his hand before the heat of the fire had him snatch it right back.

"That's right," the old man agreed, nodding to them both. "That said, sit down and let's eat."

I noted that neither Thomas or Willie asked the old man his name either. They offered their own, like any civil man would, and when his wasn't offered by return they simply carried on regardless. Maybe they hadn't even noticed. Maybe they were so put off by his attitude that they didn't like to inquire any further. Whatever the truth of it, we sat down and he set to stirring the stew one last time.

"Like I said"—Thomas began rummaging in his satchel—"we have some meat to add to the pot, if you've a mind."

"Never eat it," he replied, which seemed to strike Thomas as mighty strange.

"It's beef," he said, as if that might make the difference.

"I don't care if it's unicorn," he replied. "Beans are all I need. You got a plate?"

This question wrong-footed Thomas terribly, more because he was confused already than because he didn't know where his plate was.

Willie passed his over. "Just beans is fine by me, I've been trying to shit his dried beef out for the last five days, figure my ass could do with the break."

"You didn't complain when it was going down," Thomas replied sulkily.

Willie shrugged. "It tastes fine once you've broken it down some, but, you ask me, the spirit of the cow lives on in it. It fights back every morning."

"You sound like a goddamn Comanche."

"Too dark for an Injun, you blind fool."

They both laughed at that. I figured it was one of those jokes that built up between people on the road.

"The soul doesn't stay in the meat," the old man said. "Not unless you kill something just right."

Which put an end to polite conversation for a while.

We all focused on our beans, Thomas dropping chunks of his dried beef into it and to hell with Willie's comments. They looked like pieces of wood: as hard as oak and half as tasty. Thomas ate enough of them, though.

Willie lost half of his in his beard. The damn thing looked like a bloodied scalp by the time he was done, great streaks of dark red matting the grey hair.

They were good beans, I'll give the old man that. Spicy. I had no doubt I'd have cause to regret as much as the night wound on.

"So," said Thomas, not one to give up on conversation for long. "Where are you headed?"

I looked towards the old man, but he didn't seem to plan on replying. He had finished his food and was rolling himself a smoke.

"I'm heading to California," I told them. "Been offered a job in my cousin's bank."

"It must be one hell of a job to be worth the miles."

I shrugged. "I fancied a change anyway. He's heading for a town called Wormwood."

"Can't say as I've heard of it," admitted Thomas.

"I have," said Willie. "Well, no... it can't be the same place; the town I heard about was just a story"

"Stories are good!" said Thomas. "Food's been ate, time for drinking and stories." He rummaged around in his satchel and pulled out a bottle. This boy was a regular grocer on the trail.

Willie shrugged. "Don't mind tellin' it, though it'll take me a minute to get it straight in my head. Been some years since I heard it."

"And if that ain't an excuse for first go on my whisky I don't know what it is," said Thomas with a smile, offering his friend the bottle. Willie didn't argue, just took a mouthful and looked contemplative. He offered me the bottle, but I shook my head.

"I don't drink," I explained.

"No meat, no drink... Willie, my boy, I think we've found ourselves a pair of monks!"

"I didn't say nothing about not drinking," the old man said, holding his tin mug out rather than just

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