Winter's Lease

by Fontainebleau

Summary

They won. But what does victory look like?

No one comes through a battle like that unchanged: how the Seven recovered, and the consequences for them and for Rose Creek.

Month by month, August to March.
August

It’s dark. Fire. Billy—Falling. He falls into the dark and it rises up to engulf him.


It’s dark. He can’t move. It’s warm. Buried, he thinks. How can he be falling if he’s buried? Billy. Where is Billy? He turns his head and fire crackles through his body, running through his bones. He smothers it in a blanket of dark.

It’s light. He can see from inside his eyelids. He can’t move, but he doesn’t want to. Someone touches his lips. Bi- Water drips and he coughs. His throat is raw. ‘Don’t move,’ says a voice, not Billy’s. So he doesn’t. ‘Where …’ he says, and the exhale takes him back into the dark.

Goodnight lies shuddering in and out of consciousness, reliving an endless battle in fear and pain and exhaustion, all the time undercut by the ache, the absence, the terror: Billy. What happened? Where has he gone? Every time he thinks he’s awake he makes to get up, to go find him, but there are weights on his arm and leg, pain sheets through him when he moves, and every time he sinks back down, falling all over again. Sometimes it’s dark, sometimes daylight; sometimes faces he knows – Sam, Billy, his brother – come to pull him out of the flames, flickering into insubstantiality as he touches them; sometimes there are strangers, and he tries to seize their arms, to ask them what happened, but he can’t move and they don’t seem to hear him.

It seems all he does is wake up, over and over, dragging himself up from the well time after time and having to learn it all over again: the pulsing dread, the weight on his limbs, the fact that he can’t move, that his throat is parched, the struggle to pick apart what was dream and what was real. ‘We won,’ echoes a voice through his dreams, ‘we saved the town,’ but this doesn’t feel like victory to him.

It’s light, and this time pain brings him to. A man is leaning over him, hands pressing gently on his skin. Memory swims and wavers, and Goodnight dredges up a name for the face, Lynch, doctor. He
can’t frame the words.

‘Back in the land of the living?’ asks Lynch gently. ‘Can’t stop this being painful, I’m afraid, but I’ll soon have you settled again.’

‘Water?’ asks another voice, and Goodnight tries to turn, realising for the first time that his leg and arm are splinted, weighing him down. ‘Lie still,’ the woman says, and a cup appears at his lips: he sucks the water down his parched throat. She smiles at him. ‘I’m Harriet Tillman, Mr Robicheaux: you’re in my home.’

Goodnight closes his eyes to digest all this as Lynch bandages him. He’s alive. He’s injured and in bed, being nursed.

Billy. His eyes fly open and he starts to struggle up, but Lynch holds him down with a practised hand. ‘You must lie still, Goodnight. You unset your bones, it’ll be the devil’s own work to fix them again. You have some impressive holes in you too.’

Where is- He’s tried to ask the question so many times of phantoms and nightmares, but now it dies on his cracked lips. What will they tell him? If … How can he bear it? The woman draws a breath to speak, and panic seizes him, flipping him inside out; but now he can’t run, all he can do is turn his face away, squeezing his eyes shut because he won’t hear it, he won’t …

Lynch holds another glass to his lips, and says, ‘Drink this, Goodnight,’ and he does, tears running from his eyes as he gulps it down and curls back into the dreams and the dark, because he won’t live in a world without Billy.

Something jerks him to awareness and he opens his eyes. It’s still light, and there is Billy, gaunt and drawn, one arm cradling his gut, creeping painfully towards him with his other hand on the wall. Goodnight stares, unable to react: is this another phantom, a wish made illusion? If he moves, will he disappear? Billy lurches closer, one faltering step at a time, until Goodnight can see the lines cut deep in his face, the uneven rise and fall of his chest, and despite himself he stretches out his hand. ‘Billy,’ he breathes, and it’s real, he’s real: Billy manages a croak of ‘Goody’ as he collapses onto the bed beside him. Everything hurts: his chest, his gut, his leg, his arm, his head, and Goodnight can’t do anything more than touch the living warmth of him and close his brimming eyes in gratitude. The touch of Billy’s arm against his own is all he needs to be perfectly happy.

‘He’s bleeding again,’ says a voice, but Goodnight doesn’t think it’s him they’re talking about. He’s warm and comfortable, limbs so heavy he couldn’t move if he wanted to, and he feels a lapping comfort like being in his childhood bed. There’s a gentle tugging – has someone come to wake him? He’s about to protest, too early, when there’s a cry next to his ear, and a kick against his leg. He explodes with pain, sent spinning, sick with it; someone’s yelling, hands on his shoulders are holding him down as he fights for breath, but a voice he knows says, ‘Goody,’ in his ear and fingers twine tight with his.

He wakes again to a commotion of crashing and cursing, and over it Lynch’s amused voice declaring, ‘He’s the most cussed patient I ever saw, but I won’t have my achievements jeopardised by trying to keep him where he doesn’t want to be. In this case the mountain will come to Mohammed!’ Goodnight muses on this, drifting on the sounds of thump and squeak, the rustle and snap of cloth, and the heavy comforting weight beside him, the blessed familiar scent that draws him into a haven of warmth, Billy the only thing in his world outside pain and dream.

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When consciousness returns with slightly more clarity it’s dark and he’s alone in bed once more, but now there’s a second bed next to the window, and a figure sleeping in a familiar tangle of black hair. Goodnight lies and watches the regular rise and fall of his chest, and his own discomforts fade into the background. Billy lived. It’s all he needs. Even if what they have is damaged beyond repair, if Goodnight gets no more than he deserves, he wasn’t the cause of Billy’s death.

After an indefinite time the sleeping figure stirs, shifting position and stifling a groan. ‘Billy?’ whispers Goodnight, voice rough from disuse.

Billy turns over carefully. ‘Goody?’

‘I think I’m awake,’ says Goodnight, and a curtain moves to let a bar of moonlight across the beds. ‘How are you?’

‘Better.’ He actually takes a breath to laugh before it turns to a grunt of pain: final proof that it’s impossible to get Billy to admit to injury. ‘You?’

‘Alive.’ It’s all he can attest to.

‘How much do you remember?’ There’s an urgency to the question.

I left. He remembers that. I left. Before that? He remembers the week, all heightened emotion, hope and courage and companionship on the surface, below them fear and regret and anger; he remembers the dark panic, the drowning wave of despair and self-hatred as he turned his back on Billy, on Sam; he remembers riding out despising himself, not believing he was doing it. And he remembers that conversation with Billy, how could he not remember, every painful word of it bright in his mind. But after? Goodnight struggles to sort fragments of dream and of memory, shaken together like puzzle pieces in a box. Shooting. Always shooting. ‘The Gatling gun…’ he says suddenly, ‘they had a Gatling gun ….’

‘You fell,’ says Billy. ‘We were shooting from the belltower, and you got hit and fell. I was sure – don’t know how you didn’t – ‘

The gulf between their beds is suddenly as wide as the Pacific Ocean. ‘Billy,’ says Goodnight softly. He doesn’t know where to begin.

‘Wait,’ says Billy. He sits up and swings his legs slowly out of the bed; it takes him several tries to get to his feet, but eventually he lurches upright, breath hissing between his teeth, and takes the three steps across to lie down next to him. The jolt as he collapses down sends a sheet of pain through Goodnight, but Billy’s fingers wind with his, and he can turn his head to press their brows together, to breathe his breath, make them one person, Billy the only thing in the world to him.

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Night and day seem to have fallen back into their proper places, and Goodnight wakes in the light, in a small bedroom with a window looking out to the sunlit fields. He’s weak and aching, arm and leg in splints and bandages tight around his chest, but he can see Billy abed next to the window. He remembers Lynch, the doctor, and a woman, Harriet – Tillman? She’s not the woman who comes and goes, helping him move and turn, spooning broth into his mouth, assisting with the chamber pot, but he can’t raise much curiosity; instead he dozes, or contemplates the sunlight moving slowly across the wall, and listens to Billy’s light snores, half in dream. He’s alive. They both are.

Some time later he awakes to the sound of low voices: Billy and Sam are talking. He opens his eyes
to see Sam, calm as ever, sitting on a chair between the two beds, and Billy propped up against his pillows in a borrowed nightshirt.

‘Surrounded by my guardian angels.’ It comes out in a croak from his dry throat, and Sam creases into a smile, reaching for the water glass.

‘Been waiting to welcome you back.’ He holds the glass steady so Goodnight can drink, and the effort even of that leaves him sinking back down weakly. Nevertheless there’s relief in Sam’s face as he sets the glass back down and squeezes his good leg lightly. ‘Knew you were both too cussed to die.’

Goodnight remembers what they kept telling him: ‘We won?’ Sam doesn’t seem to be injured, though his face is sombre.

‘Paid a price for it. But yes, we won. Bogue’s dead. Not by my hand.’ He doesn’t say whose. ‘And the citizens of Rose Creek get to keep what’s theirs, though they paid a high price for it too.’

‘What happened to the others?’ asks Goodnight. ‘I don’t remember much of the fight.’

‘You and Billy came off pretty bad,’ says Sam. ‘Vasquez, Teddy, they were no more than scratched, and Red wasn’t hurt at all. Horne took more than a few arrows, but he’s always been a hard man to kill.’

‘Faraday,’ says Goodnight, remembering what Billy had said. ‘Went after the gun.’

‘Blew it right up,’ says Sam, shaking his head, ‘and himself too.’

‘Dead?’ asks Goodnight, cold at heart.

‘No, but not seeming set to recover either. Lynch’s worked miracles, but we won’t know for a while how he’ll do.’

‘So that’s our story,’ says Goodnight, ‘we won, at a cost.’

Sam nods, his face sad. ‘Didn’t ever say it was going to be cheap. But we get to see the end of the tale, and that ain’t nothing.’ He gets to his feet. ‘It’s a welcome sight, both of you awake and talking, but I shouldn’t stay – Lynch told me be quick, and he has a good voice for command.’

‘Come back,’ says Goodnight, smiling at him. ‘Come back soon.’

We won. But it isn’t much about celebration; how could it be? Some of the women who come with water or fresh bandages have lines cut deep in their faces, lips bitten raw for a child laid to rest or a husband gone. The cemetery full of freshly-dug graves and families left to mourn; miners buried with no one to attend or care, the cowards of the town slinking back to enjoy the spoils they didn’t earn, victory smelling like dirt and gunpowder and ashes. Corpses to bury, scores of them, the buildings burnt and damaged, all to make and do again. And he and Billy have slept through it all, and Goodnight is selfishly glad.

When the house falls silent at night they seem to be the only ones left awake. Goodnight turns back his covers one-handed in invitation and Billy shuffles over to climb carefully into the space beside him. His simple presence is still enough to move Goodnight to the tears that seem ever-present as he
lies there summoning the courage to say what he must. It’s been weighing on him, half-awake and
half-asleep, guilt for what he did and fear for what he’ll hear, and it can’t wait.

How to begin? He’s too weak to weigh his words. ‘I’m sorry,’ he starts, and there it is, flooding out.
‘I’m sorry I brought you here. I’m sorry you’re hurt. I’m sorry I left you. I’m sorry. Don’t leave me.’
Goodnight hears the stupidity of the plea as he says it – he left Billy. In panic, in despair, in
confusion and self-hatred, but he left and rode away. How can he possibly beg for loyalty, for
promises, for love? But what else is there for him to do? He’s too weak to stop the tears that fill his
eyes and run down his cheeks. ‘I know I don’t deserve it, don’t deserve you, but don’t leave me.’

‘Goody.’ A hand settles against his cheek and he turns his face into the touch. Billy’s voice is thick.
‘When I woke up and you weren’t there… What would I have done?’ The sentiment echoes his own
so precisely that Goodnight feels the wave of anguish as keenly as when he woke before. A face
presses against his. ‘You came back. I love you. You came back to me.’

‘I’m sorry,’ says Goodnight again. ‘I’m sorry.’ And Billy is there, holding him, his kisses like
salvation, the absolution he craves. Their faces are so close he doesn’t know if it’s Billy’s tears or his
own he feels, but the press of his body against him, his eyes close and tender, the black hair that
tickles his brow: his life is not over. It’s so much more than he deserves.

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Up in their sickroom they inhabit a simple here and now of daily routine, gradually piecing together
the new world in which they find themselves. Goodnight recognises Harriet Tillman when she
reappears, a plump and practical woman who checks their dressings and splints with gentle
efficiency, and he’s finally present enough to thank her for their care as she straightens his bedcovers
and helps him settle more comfortably. Mrs Tillman will have none of it.

‘Most who were injured have family to care for them; we were doubly lucky that none of our kin
were hurt, so it is the least we can do to help you and your friend while you recover. Dr Lynch found
no shortage of offers, believe me. Your friend Mr Horne is with Mrs Frankel, she was very firm
about that,’ she added with a twinkle in her eye. ‘And Mr Faraday is at Lynch’s infirmary, for the
present: he needs constant care, though Lynch says the signs are better.’ She shakes her head. ‘A
brave man.’ And Goodnight catches flashes of memory: Faraday cheerfully drunk in Volcano
Springs; edgy and needling in that fraught week; a lone figure galloping out towards the gun, a mob
of Blackstones in pursuit.

Lynch himself is there most days to attend to them, and when he lists his injuries for him – broken
leg, broken arm, broken ribs, concussion, bullet wounds, inches away from a punctured lung –
Goodnight feels his weakness fully accounted for. But he’s not the worst, not by a long way, and
though Billy is carrying some serious wounds too, gutshot, even so, it’s light compared to what could
have been.

Today Billy’s at Goody’s side, and Lynch plumps himself down on the other bed waving a hand
dismissively. ‘Don’t shift on my account: more chance you give your bones to knit the better, and
you can heal your chest while you’re at it. Got off lighter than some –’ he waits while Goodnight
attempts to laugh, then winces and settles. ‘I’m serious. That Gatling gun, it’s an unholy invention
and I hope never to see one or its effects again, but you can say this for it, they’re clean wounds. You
–’ he fixes Billy with a glare – ‘shouldn’t even be on your feet yet, and if you’d been shot in the
regular way you wouldn’t, but the force of the bullet cleans it out more than a ball from a rifle or
pistol.’
‘What about Horne?’ asks Billy. ‘Sam said he was shot.’

‘Arrows,’ says Lynch cheerfully, ‘not bullets, and a fat man wearing a thick hide vest stands a better chance against those than most. Patched him up and he’ll certainly live. And he has the Lord on his side, he tells me that every time I see him, and I think he’s right.’

‘Faraday?’ asks Goodnight.

Lynch’s face clouds. ‘I’ve been a doctor fifteen years, but I don’t think I’ve seen injuries so bad. Wasn’t in the war like some.’ He pauses, vision momentarily inturned, then regains what’s evidently a habitual optimism. ‘How he’s not dead I don’t know, but there’s something in him makes him cling to life. It’ll be a long road for him, makes your troubles look like cuts and grazes, and what he’ll be like if he mends I’m not so sure. But,’ – he slapped his hands on his knees and stood up – ‘all alive so far. Because I, John Julius Lynch, am a medical genius. And here you two are, doing well enough that one and all can come and see that you’ve lived.’

To Goodnight’s surprise, or such surprise as he can muster, their first visitor is Emma Cullen, oddly formal in a plain dress, her mane of red hair bound up. In the light from the window the lines of grief on her face stand out, and Goodnight’s reminded both that she was young, is still young, and that courageous though she is, victory for her was always going to be tempered with sorrow; she lost what mattered most to her before they even began.

‘It’s good to see you awake.’ She glances towards the other bed where Billy is lying; Goodnight is fairly sure he’s awake, but equally sure he won’t want to be drawn into this conversation. ‘We owe you more than we can repay for helping us take our town back again, and I’m sorry your injuries are so great.’

‘Part of the bargain,’ says Goodnight shortly; what he may or may not deserve is something he’s not willing to discuss. ‘I have much to be grateful for, as Lynch regularly assures me.’

She raises her chin. ‘We’ll do all we can to make your convalescence easy.’ Convalescence: it strikes him for the first time how long it’s going to be until he’s capable again. ‘The money will be there, when you’re well.’

Her manner is distant, strained; she’s a stark contrast to the iron-willed woman who rode out to recruit men for vengeance, careless of appearance, and to the flame-haired Valkyrie shooting a rifle in the dust and the blood. What price victory? he wonders again, and says gently, ‘I hope the outcome brings you some satisfaction, despite your loss.’

‘I killed Bogue.’ For the first time a spark of animation lights her face, though it’s as cold as her words. ‘I saw him dead, tumbled face-down into a grave, and now I can mourn my husband in peace.

A comfort, of a sort: he glances at his own love in the bed at the other wall. ‘If I had lost what you have, I would not have been as strong.’

His directness seems to surprise her. ‘We don’t know each other, Mr Robicheaux.’

‘Comrades in arms,’ says Goodnight, ‘and neither of us going to heal overnight, I think.’ This wins the first small smile from her.

‘I got what I set out for,’ she says, ‘even if others are going to live it more happily than me.’ She glances from Billy’s sleeping form back to Goodnight. ‘We must appreciate the good that we can.’
Goodnight still spends much of the time dozing, and there are episodes of pain when all he wants is laudanum and the thick blanket of dark, but mostly what he wants is Billy close by. It’s like being a child again, being fed, washed, helped to sit and lie, but Goodnight’s honestly too weak to care. Billy has always hated to be weak, but force of will alone won’t heal his wounds and he’s wise enough to conserve his strength. He says little directly to the respectable cousins and daughters-in-law who tend to them under Mrs Tillman’s instruction; there’s nothing in their manner save friendliness and concern, but such society is far outside his experience. Often he seems to Goodnight to go away inside himself, eyes shut, into some interior place. It’s best when they’re alone. They don’t have much energy for conversation, and there isn’t much to say; what they have are the press of hand or arm, a tiny hard-won smile, their small silent jokes.

When they’re both awake Billy’s in bed at his side more often than not, and that’s how Vasquez finds them, come to give them the once-over like a pair of prize steers. He’s strong and healthy, burnished from the sun, any injuries long since healed, and Goodnight feels white and exhausted just looking at him as he paces restlessly about. ‘Thought you might have headed out.’

Vasquez shrugs. ‘There is plenty of work to do. You have not seen from here,’ – the window of the room they’re occupying looks away from the town, over a gentle vista of newly-ploughed fields – ‘but we will be sawing and building through the winter to mend the stores and barns. And then, the church, the stores that burnt … it will be a long task, besides the harvest.’ And Goodnight thinks once more of the men lying in their graves, farmers and storekeepers and miners, and of those left behind without a provider, all the work still in front of them.

‘Your horses are out to grass with us,’ says Vasquez, ‘I can tend to them until you’re able.’ The horses. Goodnight hadn’t even thought of them, of the world outside.

Vasquez seems distracted, unable to settle, walking to the window and back, his conversation disjointed. Goodnight exchanges a look with Billy; he thinks he understands the reason why.

He expects to have to face this five times over: they all saw him mount up and ride out of town. They stayed, and he ran.

‘It’s between us,’ Billy had argued, leaning warm against his shoulder.

Goodnight had sighed, wishing it were true. ‘I ran out on them too, I’ll need to face it.’

‘I could kill them for you.’ It had always been his gift, to trip Goodnight over his love for him with a simple sentence. Right now his knifebelt is on top of the chest, as far from use as if it was in San Francisco.

‘No, cher, it has to be done.’

‘You upset because I left?’

Vasquez is surprised into concentration. ‘Upset? You are my friends. I would kill anyone who spoke ill of you.’ He sits down on Billy’s bed, shoulders dropping, fixing them with a direct gaze. ‘You saved him. When he rode off, the two of you picked them off, stopped him getting shot in the back before he ever got near that gun. And then,’ – he turns his face away - ‘the dynamite …’

So that’s it. Vasquez and Faraday’s budding friendship had been plain to see, and Vasquez had walked away from the battlefield barely harmed: of course he’d take it hard.
‘Lynch says the signs are he’ll pull through,’ says Goodnight experimentally. ‘He says he has a fierce will to live.’

Vasquez’ fists clench with unexpected emotion. ‘He is covered in bandages, but the burning – it is so painful. They give him drugs, but still he struggles and shouts.’ Goodnight is glad he hasn’t had to see.

‘He has to live,’ says Vasquez more quietly. ‘You can understand.’ He gestures vaguely, and Goodnight realises he means the way they’re leaning side by side. ‘He must.’

Billy’s sideways glance is as surprised as his own, and Goodnight feels a wrench of sympathy if that’s the way of it: every second of his waking life is filled with simple happiness at opening his eyes to Billy beside him; what must it be like, to live each moment weighted with such grinding anxiety? He’s too far away to reach out a hand in comfort, and what comfort could it give?

Vasquez bows his head. ‘I sit with him, I talk to him, but I do not even know if he hears me.’

‘He does,’ say Goodnight and Billy together, and Vasquez looks up with a dart of hope in his expression.

Billy says frankly, ‘In the beginning … Goody and I dragged each other back: if you are – he will try, for you. Talk to him.’

‘If any man can roll the dice and come up fortunate, it’s Faraday,’ says Goodnight.

Vasquez’ face is sad. ‘What everyone says: have faith. Be patient. But it is a long road.’

Goodnight feels for him: there’s so little he or anyone else can offer. ‘Come and speak about it whenever you like,’ he offers awkwardly. ‘We ain’t going anywhere.’

Going anywhere he certainly isn’t. To begin with Billy had been as enfeebled as he was, needing someone to wash him, change his dressings, help him sit and lie, hold a cup of broth to his lips. But as the days pass the difference becomes obvious: Goodnight, arm and leg splinted stiff, able to shift only slowly and gingerly, remains an invalid, while Billy begins to regain some measure of independence. His injuries are far from trivial, but while he heals Billy has the use of arms and legs, can feed himself, wash, make his way painfully out of bed to relieve himself; the effort leaves him shaking and exhausted, but his feet are set on the road to recovery. Goodnight feels keenly how he lags behind: he needs assistance to sit up, can’t feed himself one-handed, must rely on others for the simplest tasks. Vasquez is right: it’s going to be a long road.

Good as his word, Sam comes back to see them, more cheerful, and Goodnight knows that if he can let last time go for weakness and confusion, still, it was an evasion. Billy really is asleep this time, so Sam draws up a chair silently and they pitch their voices low. He has to get this over with.

‘Sam, I ran out on you.’ Maybe it’s only fair, Sam still hale and active, him so weak and ill. ‘When it came down to it, I let you down.’

‘Saw you in the fight,’ comments Sam mildly. ‘Saw some fancy shooting saved some lives.’ Goodnight’s about to protest, but Sam leans forward, fierce despite his quiet tone. ‘Goody, I know you, and you’ll torment yourself over this more than anyone else could, but I don’t see a man who ran away because he was selfish or didn’t care. I didn’t see anything doesn’t mean you’re not my
friend. I dragged you into a fight that wasn’t yours, and you came without hesitation, you planned and you trained the townsfolk, though you didn’t do much digging, that has to be said,’ – there’s a twitch to his lips under his mustache, and Goodnight can’t but smile in response – ‘and I should have seen …’

‘It was nothing to do with your actions,’ begins Goodnight, but Sam cuts him off.

‘You said, about my sister –‘ and his mouth twists with the memory of pain for a moment before his habitual self-discipline smooths it out – ‘and yes, I was thinking of myself and my concerns. So we can all blame ourselves, or we can all be thankful. You’re still alive, and Billy too, and we’ll all get to see what comes next.’

Sam’s understanding, the hand on his arm, the measureless depth of friendship: it threatens to overwhelm Goodnight into an embarrassing display of sentiment, and to distract himself, he asks, ‘What happened to Bogue? Ms Emma said something about it, but I didn’t like to press.’

‘Took him on, face to face. Said what needed to be said.’ Sam’s expression is dark. ‘Near made a misjudgement I shouldn’t have, but Ms Cullen was right behind me, and she shot him herself.’

‘So she had her revenge cold,’ says Goodnight, remembering her savage expression. ‘And you saw him dead.’

Sam nods, and Goodnight sees the old lines of sorrow in his face, ones which retribution isn’t going to smooth away. ‘We buried him, along with the others. What happened to his money and property I don’t know: be a passel of vultures flapping around in Sacramento, no doubt, when they know he’s not coming back to claim it.’

‘So that chapter is closed.’ And a long road you walked to come here. ‘What now? Off into the sunset? Or does the new chapter read differently?’

‘Justice never rests, you know that. Always work to be done.’

It’s not a real answer, and they both know it. Sam smiles. ‘But I’ll be sticking around for the present. How about you?’

And Goodnight wheezes his first real laugh since he woke up. It’s incredibly painful.
September

September brings the slow cold dawn. If he had the energy for amazement, Goodnight would be astonished that he survived the battle he’s heard described with only broken bones and a riddling of bullet holes. As it is, all he can do is lie cursing feebly at the itching in his splinted leg and arm. He should be grateful, he knows. Of course he should. But the euphoria of survival has passed, and what’s left is the beginning of the long haul. He and Billy should have been riding off with their share of the payout, rich enough to live the high life for a while, reputation as heroes preceding them. Now he’s stuck in bed in a room with faded wallpaper and a window looking at nothing but sky and fields, he can’t move his arm or leg, he eats what’s put in front of him and he won’t be walking about or riding a horse for weeks.

‘Here.’ Billy helps him sit up, then props the bowl carefully against his chest so Goodnight can spoon the broth awkwardly into his mouth.

‘I swear, Billy,’ he complains between spoonfuls, ‘they do this on purpose, the good ladies, cook up this thin slop so they can have the chance to feed us and flutter around.’

‘No one will be feeding you while I’m here,’ says Billy firmly, and Goodnight marvels once again at his will to protect him even as he suffers himself.

Billy can at least stagger to his feet and navigate the distance between their two beds; he can help Goodnight to wash and to eat, and he gravitates naturally to sit tucked close beside him, the two of them leaning together listening to the hammer of each other’s heart, occasionally managing a feeble argument to prove to themselves they’re still alive.

When they talk, it’s more about the past than the present: what is there to say in their here and now? It itches; pass the chamber pot; not more broth. Easier to talk about fights they won, towns they visited, scams they pulled; easier to sketch out the trails of a distant future: Louisiana, maybe, like he’s always promised, or back west to San Francisco, over the Sierras, matters of when and how left vague.

Outside their four walls summer is turning to fall, the grass drying and berries ripening, life in Rose Creek returning to its accustomed track. The townsfolk have their land back and the graves will be greening over; they’ll be felling trees for lumber to begin the work of rebuilding, bringing in the harvest and ploughing for winter. Goodnight has a keen sense of time slipping away from them.

There’s just so little to occupy the dragging days; as soon as he feels fit for it, Goodnight catches Harriet Tillman to ask her, ‘Mrs Tillman, do you have anything I could read?’ He has his own books, just two, but there’s nothing in them that he doesn’t know by heart; in the current circumstances he’ll accept a Bible for lack of anything else: he could at least read some of the more bloodthirsty sections of the Old Testament aloud to Billy.

‘Books?’ Mrs Tillman looks doubtful. ‘We’re not a great household for reading, but I have one book of poetry, and perhaps I can find an almanac.’

It’s about what he expected, and when she returns the haul is poor: a battered Old Farmer’s Almanac and a green-bound copy of Longfellow’s verses. Even so, it’s a help, and he thanks her with genuine enthusiasm.
The cover of the Longfellow is worn from reading, and as Mrs Tillman hands it over, she turns it over affectionately. ‘Treat it gently,’ she says, ‘it’s a little old.’ Goodnight picks it up curiously once she’s gone, and on the flyleaf he finds a handwritten dedication: To my dearest Harriet, friend of my heart, from your Hester.

‘Well now,’ he asks Billy, who’s looking at him with amused expectation, ‘what first? Instructions on how to drain a field and when to plant out beans, or a romantic poem of the Acadian countryside?’

‘Read me the poem,’ says Billy, making himself comfortable at Goodnight’s side: Goodnight knows perfectly well that he’s being indulged – poetry in English read aloud is almost impossible for Billy to follow first time, and he’s sure he’d actually prefer to hear about drainage and hoeing – but the possibility of half an hour’s escape to historical Nova Scotia, even in the company of Longfellow, is too tempting to pass up.

‘Beans next time,’ he promises, turning to the first page.

Reading goes some way to pass the hours, and visits too, though now that the novelty has worn off their regular visitors are fewer. Teddy comes by to see them, and the preacher, but conversation is halting and awkward: Goodnight has little to contribute and Billy less. Goodwill and gratitude there may be, but still, they barely know these people. Sam comes often, his growing humour and relief plain as he sees them begin to improve, but their most regular visitor is Vasquez, who comes creaking up the stairs most days after he’s left Faraday to spend a little time with them, the only place where he can wear his moods openly.

According to Lynch’s report Faraday is much improved, past the crisis and promising, at long last, to heal, but Vasquez clearly struggles to share his optimism. ‘Everyone says the same,’ he says sadly. ‘Improving, yes, no infection and he is calmer, he sleeps better, but he sleeps. All the time. Even when he is awake he is not really there.’ He’s sitting on Billy’s empty bed, his big frame hunched in on himself. ‘He is not Joshua.’

Goodnight presses infinitesimally closer to Billy’s side; how can he not feel for their friend, sitting at the bedside of an unresponsive companion day by day, waiting out an agonisingly slow recovery.

‘Does he hear you?’ asks Billy.

Vasquez brightens a little. ‘He does. He knows I am there, he tries to speak sometimes.’

Goodnight remembers his own confusion in the kaleidoscope of dark and light: the familiar steadying voice would help. ‘Must be odd to see him so quiet.’ The Faraday he met was annoying, bright-eyed, needling and restless; it’s impossible to imagine him lying bandaged and inert.

He also finds it difficult to see what Vasquez can speak to him about: at least he and Billy have their past, their improbable happiness together, and their future, indistinct though it is. But Vasquez says confidently, ‘I talk to him about what we will do when he is well again. When he can ride again. We will not stay here, I think.’

Billy nods his agreement. ‘Too small.’

‘Joshua is not a man who will settle, and there is so much more to see – I always wanted to go north, to the great mountains and the forests in the snow, and I tell him, we will go together.’

The similarity to their own conversations is striking, and Goodnight sees that he and Billy are not the
only ones chafing at being thrust into immobility. ‘Be some time before that, though: think you’re safe here?’

Vasquez shrugs. ‘Not many strangers in Rose Creek. And there is work to do. Always work to do. I cannot be idle.’

Being idle has never been something Goodnight has found difficult. He’s never laboured for his living, unlike Billy and the rest of them; Billy’s always teased him for his readiness to lie in the shade on a hot afternoon, to laze away a morning in bed, to let a night playing cards stretch out without thought of the morrow. Who would have thought that enforced idleness could be so hard?

Patience is the virtue he needs now, and he finds it in painfully short supply. He has nothing but time to consider gratitude, from both sides. There’s a lot of ought unspoken: he ought to be grateful to providence for being alive, grateful to Lynch for hauling them both back from the brink, grateful to Mrs Tillman and her daughters-in-law and cousins for the care. But Goodnight doesn’t feel a particle of gratitude. Instead he feels a growing resentment, burning low and continual in his gut, at his weakness, at being so badly hurt and so slow to mend, that he’s stuck here while Sam and Vasquez and Red Harvest get off unscathed; that his life has juddered to a halt.

Inevitably his simmering ill temper begins to spill over. Sam has been unfailing and welcome company for them both, happy to sit and spin tales of his and Goodnight’s early days together, bringing memories fresh to Goodnight’s mind and giving a new side to stories which Billy has heard, or recalling ones entirely new to him. Today, though, he comes with an energy that seems out of place in the quiet of their sickroom; instead of sitting he leans on the end of the bedstead and scrutinises them. ‘Looking better.’

Goodnight grimaces. His ribs hurt, his leg hurts, even sitting up fatigues him. ‘Billy is,’ he says, ‘not so sure I am.’

‘If you’ve the energy to complain,’ grins Sam, ‘you’re doing well.’ Goodnight tries to stifle a prickle of annoyance at the words, but Sam continues cheerfully, ‘I’ve come to take my leave of you, for the next while: I’m heading out soon, over to Edison. Should be able to pick up the trail of some likely bounties there.’

It’s logical: Rose Creek is too small as a base for Sam’s trade, too much of a backwater, the job of the sheriff little more than nominal. Edison, the nearest town of any substance, will at least have the information he needs. ‘Seeing all of you improved so, even Faraday out of danger, it seems the right time. Red’s coming with me: tracking skills like his are too good to waste.’

There’s nothing more than simple enthusiasm on his face, but Goodnight can’t prevent a furious stab of jealousy. It should be him riding out, him and Billy, off to see over the next hill, back to their old life. Not stuck in a town among strangers, stuck in someone else’s house, stuck in bed, nothing to look at but four walls and a ceiling, and a window on a world so far out of reach that it might as well be painted.

‘How long will you be gone?’ asks Billy.

Sam says easily, ‘Two-three weeks, maybe. Find one or two men to bring in.’ He raises an eyebrow. ‘See you up on your feet again by the time I get back.’

It’s true, and Goodnight knows he shouldn’t be jealous, but he is, and Billy’s barely noticeable glance in his direction, showing that he recognises it, instantly makes him feel the worst kind of heel.
'Don’t hurry back on our account,’ he says waspishly, ‘not like we’ll be going anywhere in the meantime.’

‘Give you the chance to heal up properly,’ says Sam, calm as ever, ‘they’ll look after you well here.’

Goodnight’s tired of sympathy: sympathy’s not going to get him on his feet or astride his horse. ‘Can see it must have been dull for you sitting round waiting on the rest of us. Have fun.’

Sam’s brow knits. ‘Goody, don’t. We’ve all got to work for a living; Red and I can’t just hang around eating. Times will be hard enough come winter.’

Irritation crawls across Goodnight’s skin. ‘And we’re an extra burden, I see that too.’

‘I know it ain’t easy…’ begins Sam, holding out a hand to placate him, and Goodnight’s patience snaps.

‘No you don’t.’ He’s as angry as he can be in his weakened state. ‘It was a high price we paid, you said, but we didn’t. Not all of us. Faraday, Billy and I, we’re the ones paid the price for you. You just get to ride away. You got what you wanted and paid nothing for it.’

Sam’s face hardens. ‘I led you into this fight, I’ll take responsibility for that, but it was your choice all through. Didn’t try to stop you when you left. Ain’t no one else can take the blame for what happened but you.’

‘You might as well go,’ says Goodnight tightly. ‘Don’t see there’s anything to keep you here.’ And he fixes him with a hostile stare until Sam squares his shoulders and leaves.

Goodnight softens, temper draining away. ‘What would I do without you?’

One side of Billy’s mouth ticks up. ‘Can we go on with the almanac? Might want to start my own homestead one day.’

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Days of physical inaction make for fitful nights, and with arm and leg splinted stiff and ribs still sore it’s impossible to get comfortable. Goodnight’s constantly wakeful unless he dopes himself into unconsciousness, and then half-formed ragged dreams tend to pursue him, images from before, of war and gunsmoke and guilt, newly wrapped around with the fall, the pain and the endless seeking.

He often dozes off during the day, sometimes mid-paragraph when he’s reading, coming awake again with a jerk to find Billy sitting silently at his side, watching the sunlight on the wall, or lying on his bed perusing the charts and diagrams in the almanac on his own.

The day after Sam has announced his departure, Goodnight blinks awake in the afternoon to see a figure squatting by the other bed, talking low to Billy; he lies watching them for a little while without moving. He hadn’t expected a visit from Red Harvest: loyal though he proved to be, as a native he
was at best uneasy in the town, and until Sam mentioned him Goodnight had supposed him to have left long since. But here he is, in his hide vest and laced boots. He’s the polar opposite of the neatly-dressed ladies who come and go to tend to them; he smells of outdoors, of the clay on his boots, of woodsmoke and crushed leaves, and Goodnight drinks it in eagerly, realising what he’s been missing.

What can they be talking about, he wonders, as Red gestures with his hands and Billy nods thoughtfully. After so many years Billy to him is just Billy, familiar and beloved, the differences between them meaningless to him, but seeing him with Red makes his foreignness noticeable again: there’s something similar in their watchful eyes, the same aura of difference as they speak together quietly in a language that’s neither of their own.

After a while Goodnight shifts and they both turn towards him: Billy makes to get up, but Red forestalls him and comes to help Goodnight sit up, his hands as quick and gentle as Billy’s.

‘It’s good of you to come see us,’ says Goodnight cautiously. They had so little time to forge an acquaintance, let alone a friendship: only Sam, with his calm affability, and unlikely though it seemed, Jack, had found a thread of connection with their unexpected ally.

Red’s dark stare is as serious as always. ‘I’m going tomorrow, with Sam. I came to see you both well.’

His words seem to carry such finality that Goodnight asks, ‘Will you go back to your own people, after?’

It’s no more than he’d expect; Red came to their band of misfits by chance, and now the fight is won there’s no reason for him to continue in their company. But Red says simply, ‘I can’t go back.’

‘Seems kinda harsh,’ says Goodnight. He’s so young. But then Goodnight was young, too, wasn’t he, when he went to war; how many of them have a past they can return to? Sam and Jack, families in their graves; Billy’s out of reach; his own, separated from him by an unbridgeable gulf.

Red shrugs, impassive. ‘White men came, and everything has changed. Better to be the grass that bows to the wind than the tree that stands against it to be torn up.’

Goodnight has nothing to say in reply to that, but Billy says easily, ‘So you’re going to work with Sam?’ and Goodnight’s conscience pricks at him.

‘Watch his back – he’s not as young as he thinks he is.’

Red actually smiles at that. ‘He says you yelled at him.’

‘He did,’ says Billy. ‘But look out for him all the same.’

Red considers, then reaches into his vest and pulls out a packet. ‘This is for both of you.’ He gestures. ‘Tea. To help you heal.’

‘What’s in it?’ asks Goodnight curiously. Red rattles off a list of unfamiliar names, then breaks off at Goodnight’s expression; Goodnight chuckles, ‘Sorry I asked.’

Red smiles again slightly. ‘For wounds. It knits flesh, it will make you strong again. Jack drinks it.’

‘You and he reached an – accommodation?’ He’s curious as to how that works, given Jack’s reputation as a tireless killer of Indians.
Red stands up, like a deer flickering from stillness into movement. ‘The past is done. He knows a lot, has seen a lot.’ And Goodnight sees a similarity there too, old man and young left adrift by a world that’s dying.

‘I will come back,’ says Red, then vanishes before either of them can say more.

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With Sam and Red Harvest riding out of town and Vasquez labouring cheerfully, Goodnight feels his and Billy’s dependence more acutely than ever. They’re a burden, he can’t but acknowledge it, two grown men eating three meals a day and requiring weeks of care; a succession of women, mainly young, cook their food and bring it upstairs, wash their linen and empty their slops, fetch and carry all day long. Despite Mrs Tillman’s reassurances he feels their indebtedness as an oppressive weight.

Of course there’s also the problem of privacy. Nursing leaves little opportunity to stand on dignity, but now Billy is on his feet, if weak, he can at least tend to their intimate functions, and he guards his care of Goodnight fiercely. But affection is also at issue. While they were both so ill from their injuries their desire to be together was understandable, and the comfort they drew from each other, Billy lying in bed beside him or sitting at his shoulder, no more than any invalid might seek, something a nurse or visitor could simply ignore. But now they’re stronger, their constant physical contact is more of a problem.

‘Sit up.’ Billy eases him forward in the bed, all movement slow and clumsy from the weight of the splints, and slides into place behind him, legs on either side of his hips. Goodnight sinks back against him with a sigh, and for a moment feels nothing but pure bliss, his aches and itches forgotten, boredom and resentment calmed by the enveloping touch and the brief tickle of Billy’s moustache on the back of his neck.

He leans back so Billy can rest his chin on his shoulder, two arms wrapping gently around his chest. ‘Take some looking after, crock that I am.’

Breath puffs warm on his ear. ‘Goody, you’re still here. That’s all that matters to me.’

They’ve not been settled long when one of Mrs Tillman’s innumerable relations – Abigail? Catherine? – comes in with hot water, and her lips thin in disapproval when she sees them. ‘Mr Rocks, you should be in your own bed,’ she says, plainly expecting to shoo him like a child.

Goodnight feels Billy tense, and closes his good hand on his wrist. ‘We’re well as we are,’ he tells her, a slight warning to his tone, and she doesn’t comment further, though she sniffs as she sets down the jug in silence. It’s compromising, he knows it, two men cuddling together like this, and he doesn’t care.

They’ve spent years hiding, dissembling their relationship, but there’s always been a release: the private room, the locked door; the desert camp and the freedom of being the only two humans in the landscape. And now this: the prospect of keeping up a careful façade, nothing but of fear and watchfulness. No. This is not how they are going to spend the next month. This is not what they deserve.

It’s a difference between them, not in temperament, but in their experience of the world: where Goodnight becomes angry, Billy is more often resigned. If they need to hide their relationship, Billy won’t like it, won’t think it right, will chafe and resent it as much as Goodnight does, but he’ll do it; he’ll clamp down on his irritation and present the same calm exterior to the world. Life has taught him to bear adversity in silence. Goodnight, more privileged, has no such resources: gratitude,
admiration, sympathy they may have earned, but what they need is accommodation.

It all comes to a head over the most trivial of events. They always hear Lynch’s booming laugh and cheerful exclamations from below well before they see him, and Goodnight wonders regularly whether a slightly less ebullient bedside manner might help his patients feel stronger. Lynch listens to their chests, checks and tightens Goodnight’s splints, then sniffs at the dregs of Red Harvest’s tea at the bottom of Goodnight’s cup. ‘Taste as bad as it smells?’

‘Grows on you,’ says Goodnight. The tea is strong and bitter, but has a warm aftertaste like ginger: the third and fourth gulps go down easier than the first.

‘Well, drink it down, that’s my advice,’ says Lynch cheerfully. ‘Can’t tell too much of what’s in it, though I know there’s chokeberry and something like snakeweed – would help if I could get him to say more than two words together to me – but it’s doing your friend Horne as much good than my physic. We’ve got a lot to learn about this land.’

‘Jack on the mend?’ asks Goodnight. News of one of their comrades doing better, making it back into the world, seems to hold the promise that they can all be well again one day.

‘Better every day,’ says Lynch, ‘and he’s an easy patient, not like some.’ His glower at Billy is humorous. ‘I’d say to you, don’t overtire yourself, but I’m aware my advice is lost on you.’ The hand he lays on Billy’s shoulder is gentle, and Goodnight can’t but warm to his easy generosity. ‘No, Horne’s wounds healed clean and he had considerable reserves to draw on.’ He pats his own sizeable paunch. ‘Always a sound precaution: you two could have done with more.’

‘Bear that in mind,’ says Goodnight dryly.

‘And of course he has plenty of distraction from Leni’s family, never see him without children crawling all over him, and the older ones can’t hear enough stories of bears and wolves and blizzards.’ Lynch pauses as he packed his kit away. ‘He has some tales to tell of narrow escapes, but damned if I don’t think this may be one predicament he won’t be getting out of.’

Laughing hurts Goodnight’s ribs and he presses his hand to his side, but Lynch seems unperturbed. ‘Good that something can tickle you: laughter’s the best exercise you’ll be getting for the present.’

‘Speaking of our friend Jack …’ After Lynch has gone Billy rubs Goodnight’s cheek thoughtfully. ‘You’re letting yourself go. You have a beard like a mountain man.’

Goodnight hasn’t thought for weeks what he must look like, and he’s relieved there’s no looking-glass to hand. ‘Shave me, cher?’

Billy pretends to consider, head on one side. ‘I don’t know: it has its attractions.’ He tugs at his whiskers. ‘You look like you could wrestle a bear.’

‘Don’t make me laugh,’ begs Goodnight, wheezing in pained delight.

It’s a slow business, but Billy gets a basin of water brought up, works up the foam from their soap, paints his cheeks and picks up the razor. And it’s like opening a treasure-box of memories, one crowding in on another – sitting in the soft grass by a creek in the evening, cross-legged on a desert morning rosy and chill, under a tent looking out among the trees as the rain dripped. And in each of them, Billy’s hands, deft and strong, turning his chin, his brown eyes close as he concentrates, the scent of the foam and the pull of the razor, the feel of clean smooth skin.
He closes his eyes and lets it fill his senses, humming his approval, and Billy concentrates, shaping round beard and moustache, up his neck and round his ears, unhurried and intent. When he’s finished he wipes off the traces of foam, strokes a thumb over the newly-shaven skin and follows it with his lips, soft and warm. Goodnight’s heart is full, as ever, at the thought of what he so nearly lost, and he runs his fingers into Billy’s hair to draw him in for the most chaste of kisses, no more than a touch of lips.

A gasp from the doorway makes them both jump. Mrs Tillman’s daughter-in-law is standing stock still, arms full of clean linen, her face burning. ‘Land’s sake,’ she says helplessly, ‘of all the—’ then turns on her heel and flees.

Goodnight turns back to Billy, taking his arms before he can straighten up, grim-faced, and tugs him back down so he can press his lips to his again, chasing the last remnants of their joyful moment as the stormclouds gather. The godfearing folk of Rose Creek, grateful as they are, clearly don’t approve of seeing two of their heroic saviours more intimate than many a husband or wife.

Goodnight rests their foreheads together. ‘This is why we don’t stay in town, cher.’ He wishes with all his heart they could just ride away.

Reaction isn’t long in coming, in the form of voices raised in argument, indistinct at first, but soon rising in volume to become clearly audible.

‘Catherine, no one is asking you to—’

Mrs Tillman is interrupted, Catherine’s voice sharp. ‘It’s there in the Good Book for all to read. I never expected to have to witness—’

Mrs Tillman seems to be having trouble keeping her temper. ‘There’s no call for you to be quoting holy writ at me, my girl; though there’s plenty you could take to heart there, beginning with what’s said about charity.’

The words only serve to fan Catherine’s temper further. ‘You can’t expect me to close my eyes to such ungodly behaviour.’

Ungodly? Goodnight could have laughed, Billy and he so far from any flicker of desire that they might as well have been babes in a cradle. He’s furiously angry, and though Billy’s outwardly calm he can see his jaw tight with tension. He closes his fingers on the warm skin of his wrist, over his ticking pulse. ‘I’d offer to suck your cock if I thought I was capable.’

‘I’d offer to fuck you if I didn’t think it would kill us both,’ spits Billy savagely.

Goodnight’s suddenly overwhelmed by exhaustion, crumpling against the pillows. ‘And Sam not even here to drag us off to the stables when they put us out on the street.’

‘You know we’ve seen worse,’ says Billy, imperturbable to the last. ‘Remember that time we slept in the goat shed?’

And Goodnight remembers a hundred difficult times, leavened by Billy’s patience, his competence, his humour: times of danger shared, pleasure doubled, hard times made easy, all woven together by the thread of companionship, and he’s filled with boundless gratitude. ‘Come back here,’ he says, folding over the covers, and Billy climbs in beside him without hesitation. We almost died for these people. We helped save their sorry town. Who are they to look askance at us?
They’re in the bed still talking low when Mrs Tillman comes in to collect the shaving basin; confrontation is the last thing that Goodnight feels ready for, but he won’t back down. Mrs Tillman, though, is as serene as ever as she faces them.

‘You won’t pretend you didn’t hear all that, and I’m sorry you had to.’ Goodnight’s determined not to apologise, but Mrs Tillman isn’t waiting for it. ‘I’ve told Catherine,’ she continues, ‘that her assistance to this point is appreciated, but we need not tax her generosity any further; Mr Tillman will take her home tomorrow.’

‘It will make more work for you,’ says Goodnight grudgingly.

She folds her arms. ‘This is my house, and I will say how it’s run,’ she says firmly. ‘You are my guests, and you’ll go a long time before you exhaust the goodwill you’ve laid up. And that’s an end to it.’ She twitches the curtain against the setting sun, gathers up the basin and towel and surveys the room with satisfaction. ‘Supper will be ready soon.’

It’s not until she’s gone that Goodnight catches sight of the green-bound book beside the bed, and remembers the dedication he read. Harriet Tillman is a respectable matriarch through and through, but once, perhaps …

The immediate consequences of the dispute are slight, given their isolation; one or two of the women who’ve ministered to them cease to appear, and Mrs Tillman and her daughter take on most of the fetching and carrying for them. But Goodnight tries not to imagine what’s being said of them outside the house; in a place as small as this, gossip will spread faster than brushfire. He came here a hired gun, a man of reputation, admired and feared; what will they be saying now?

Two days later, Billy’s helped him through the awkward ritual of washing and breakfast, and is on his feet sorting through their bags, Goodnight offering unnecessary directions, when a tap on the door alerts them to Emma Cullen standing there. She’s as buttoned-up and formal as before, and Goodnight’s suspicions are instantly roused. She was the one who brought them here and is responsible for their continued imposition on the town: is she being held accountable for the problem they’ve caused?

‘Good morning,’ she says; close to, she seems strained.

Goodnight gets straight to the point. ‘Come to tell us to behave with decorum?’

Emma looks confused. ‘What?’ She’s holding a basket. ‘I thought with Mr Chisolm gone away you might welcome company, and I brought you some nuts.’ The basket is indeed full of pecans, brown and glossy in their shells. ‘First of the year.’

‘Oh,’ says Goodnight, wind taken from his sails. ‘Thank you.’

Emma sits, setting the basket at her feet. ‘Why would I be here to lecture you?’

Goodnight looks at her narrowly as Billy finishes his repacking and comes to sit on the other bed. ‘Haven’t people been talking? About how we’ve offended their godly sensibilities?’

‘Of course they have,’ says Emma tartly, ‘it’s a town. Catherine Tillman had a great deal to say, and her husband standing right beside her.’ A look of pain flits across her face before she can control it. ‘Do you think I’d give a second’s thought for decorum if Matthew – ’

She can’t finish the sentence, and Goodnight feels a fool for his lack of understanding.
Emma takes a deep breath and steadies herself again. ‘In any case, when did I pay any attention to advice about how to behave?’

It’s true: this is a woman who buried her husband then buckled on his gunbelt and rode out on her task. ‘Put yourself at the head of an army,’ he says, remembering. ‘Though …’

‘Though?’ she prompts, eyebrows raised. ‘I thought we’d decided we knew each other well enough for honesty.’

So. ‘You didn’t look like this when we met,’ says Goodnight frankly, gesture taking in her tight sleeves and collar and neatly-bound hair. ‘And from what I recall, freedom agreed with you. Now you look like a respectable widow, and, if you’ll forgive the observation, miserable with it.’

He catches her flash of irritation. ‘It’s always easier to do what’s expected. Being true to yourself – it’s not just courage you need, but constant effort: isn’t that what you’re finding too?’ She sighs, and the stiffness drains out of her. ‘I needn’t be a widow: there’s more than one man thinks it might be a good bargain, the widow and the land together. And the farm would be easier with another pair of hands…’

‘I thought young Teddy stood ready to help,’ said Goodnight, unable to restrain his curiosity.

‘Yes, he does,’ says Emma, looking at him hard, ‘and no, I won’t.’ She looks from him to Billy and back again. ‘I envy you.’

‘What?’ Goodnight splutters in outrage: he can’t see a single thing about their situation that’s enviable. ‘Splints and bullet holes escaping your attention?’

Emma smiles without humour. ‘You’re men. In three months’ time you’ll be riding away from here, free to do whatever you want.’

‘You could leave,’ says Billy unexpectedly. ‘You did.’

Emma looks sad. ‘That was different. What would I do now, ride off on my own? How would I earn my way?’ She’s right, of course. ‘Go to a city and look for work? We all know how it would end.’

‘You can ride and shoot,’ says Goodnight, ‘you could be in a Wild West show.’ That brings a real laugh, and he can just picture it.

She’s momentarily distant, imagining. ‘No. It’s tempting to think that the answer’s leaving, but it isn’t. My future’s here, with the farm: I just have to find the way.’

‘In that case,’ says Goodnight resignedly, ‘it seems we’re all to take the same advice: give it time.’

The frankness is refreshing, and at least it's got them over the oddity of their situation; Emma proves good company, free with unconventional views and tart opinions on her neighbours; Goodnight’s drawn into recounting some of their wilder exploits, and by the time she leaves, she has more of the look of the self-willed and confident woman they met.

Afterwards, Billy stands at the window, watching her leave. ‘She’s right,’ he says, ‘We get to ride away.’

And Goodnight can see the dream of it in his eyes, can see what he sees, the open sky, the untracked plain, petty concerns and public opinion left far behind. ‘I’m – ’ he begins, but Billy puts two fingers on his lips.
‘No more apologies. Here, have some nuts.’ He perches on the edge of Goodnight’s bed, blade in hand, and grabs a handful of pecans.

‘Why my bed?’ complains Goodnight. ‘If I find bits of shell in my bedclothes …’

Billy smirks, and Goodnight laughs as their fingers tangle on a mess of nuts and shell.

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‘Over their heads the towering and tenebrous boughs of the cypress
Met in a dusky arch, and trailing mosses in mid-air
Waved like banners that hang on the walls of ancient cathedrals.
Deathlike the silence seemed, and unbroken …’

The next afternoon Goodnight’s well into the description of Evangeline’s adventures in Louisiana, Billy half-awake at his side, when an unfamiliar voice from the doorway interrupts with a chuckle.

‘Class after class of pupils chanting *The Wreck of the Hesperus* has killed any affection I might have had for Longfellow long since.’

Goodnight looks up and recognises the slight bearded figure of the schoolteacher - he remembers vaguely seeing him before the fight, clumsy with his rifle but pale and determined; Billy had said he’d been in the belltower too, though he has no memories of his own after his return. He lays the book down carefully on his lap. ‘Mr –’ The name won’t come to him: did he ever know it? ‘Schoolteacher,’ he amends.

Billy makes to move, but the man waves at him cheerfully. ‘Josiah Winthrop, Mr Rocks, Mr Robicheaux, if you recall. May I draw up a chair this side?’

‘Please do,’ says Goodnight, eyes drawn greedily to the small stack of volumes he’s holding in his hands.

Mr Winthrop sits down and ranges the books on the edge of the bed. ‘I hope you don’t mind my coming unannounced,’ he begins formally, ‘but Mrs Tillman mentioned to me a little while ago that you were short of reading matter, and said that she fancies you’re too polite to say that her family’s tastes are a little old-fashioned for you. So I found some more varied publications; I don’t know where your preferences lie, but …’

He hands the books to Goodnight one by one and Goodnight turns them over eagerly. ‘There’s *Waverley*, old but a fine story, a new tale from M. Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and in case you prefer something more philosophical, a volume of Emerson’s essays.’

His earnestness is touching, and Goodnight has no need to pretend to enthusiasm. ‘Mr Winthrop, you’re a lifesaver! I won’t fault Mrs Tillman, and we’ve been doing our best with *Evangeline* and the *Old Farmer*, but this is incomparably better, don’t you think, Billy?’

Billy mutters agreement; Goodnight didn’t really expect more – he’s always done the talking for both of them in such situations. ‘Something less educational will be a relief – after all this instruction for farmers I think we could drain, plough and plant a field single-handed.’

Mr Winthrop seems gratified by his eagerness. ‘I should have thought to come before, but we’ve been so occupied with the new schoolhouse … I owe you a great deal, we all do, but I more than –’

Goodnight waves his protestations to silence. ‘Makes the new books all the more welcome. Scott I’ve read some of when I was younger, but not Verne, and Billy’s heard neither; and I’m a great admirer of Emerson, poetry and prose.’
Mr Winthrop’s face lights up. ‘A man of modern taste in literature! A rare find in these parts. I spend my working days in the company of Tennyson and Longfellow, but my own preference is for the work of Emerson and his followers.’

Goodnight grins. ‘Travelling as we do, books are something of a luxury, but my copy of *Leaves of Grass* goes with me in my bag.’

‘I have some volumes of Emerson’s poetry which you’d be very welcome to borrow – I’ll bring them next time …’ He stops, suddenly self-conscious. ‘That is to say, if –’

‘Mr Winthrop,’ says Goodnight firmly, ‘you have no idea how grateful I’d be, though Billy may not thank you for more poetry. And we’re Goodnight and Billy.’

‘Josiah,’ says the schoolteacher, and Goodnight sees his smile mirror his own.

When he’s taken his leave the books scattered across the quilt feel to Goodnight like an embarrassment of riches, set to transport him from this small room with the unreachable world outside to the Indian Ocean or the wilds of Scotland. He catches Billy’s amused expression and ducks his head, slightly shamefaced. ‘Is my desperation for literature quite so transparent?’

‘You looked more pleased at seeing the books than anyone who’s walked through the door,’ says Billy affectionately.

‘All but one,’ says Goodnight quietly, reaching out for him; the memory is still too raw for it to be a joke. ‘Reckon you can put up with his company now and then?’

Billy shrugs. ‘I haven’t seen you so cheerful since we woke up.’ And Goodnight feels a little sad for Billy that people don’t find common ground with him as readily: one more unattractive facet of their situation is that it keeps throwing the differences between them, usually smoothed out by their normal life, into sharp relief.

Billy says, ‘Come on then; I can see you’re itching to start something new.’

‘Sit with me,’ he says, then, ‘no, wait, light the lamp first.’

Billy does, then slides in to sit behind him again and help him balance *Waverley* against his good knee. And just for a while the irritation and awkwardness, his impatience and jealousy, all melt away, leaning back against Billy, warm and alive, as Scott’s words dissolve the walls of the room and transport them to the misty wooded hills of the Scottish Borders, to ancient castles and medieval towns, where deeds of loyalty and daring and courage are performed, as the daylight fades around them.

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Three weeks into September Billy’s able to get up, passed fit by Lynch to begin his rehabilitation. It’s hard for Goodnight to watch – he still can’t walk on his broken leg, and couldn’t balance with a crutch because of the splint on his arm, so he just has to wait it out while Billy takes another stride ahead of him. But he’s determined not to share his discontent: the enforced inactivity has been even more trying for Billy than for himself, and though he’s patience incarnate Goodnight feels for the strain that ticks at the corner of his mouth and sets his fingernails tapping against the bedstead. All the way through he’s been trying to get better, willing himself, forcing himself, even when the effort leaves him white and shaking.
Goodnight watches as he struggles into his clothes, weakness plain in the fact that he sits on the side of the bed to put on his pants one careful leg at a time. Like Lynch, Goodnight suspects that going downstairs is too much too soon, but he wouldn’t dream of trying to dissuade him, even if he thought it would work. Billy winces as he pulls his boots on, but when he stands up, one hand on the bedstead, he’s as he wants to be again, no longer an invalid.

‘Those aren’t your pants.’ Goodnight looks suspiciously at the offending garments, a pair of stiff workman’s pants in an ugly brown.

Billy sighs. ‘Of course they’re not. Mine were what Mrs T called ‘beyond recovery’, and they went into the fire with my vest.’

‘And mine,’ said Goodnight sadly. He regrets the loss of vest and shirt, and even more so the coat that had carried so many memories, all consigned to the flames, too damaged and bloodstained to be worth saving. And here he is, wearing someone else’s nightshirt, obviously a man much larger than him, without his own clothes to put on even if he could have stood up out of bed.

‘My coat survived,’ said Billy, ‘and they gathered up our hats for us.’ Goodnight’s hat is indeed hanging on the back of the door beside Billy’s.

‘Shouldn’t complain,’ said Goodnight, reaching out a hand with a resigned smile, ‘what’s under the clothes is what’s important,’ but it isn’t what he feels.

In time they’ll replace what they lost; he’s determined to buy another soft leather vest for Billy and another coat for himself, but for the present it’s one more uncomfortable reminder of the cost of their victory, the clothes on their backs those of other men who won’t be returning to their families. Practicality dictates that usable garments be passed on, and no one could fault the generosity of the townsfolk, but in a place so small how can a widow avoid seeing the clothes her husband wore become cast-offs for a stranger?

Billy’s smile is bright underneath the strain of dressing, and Goodnight tried to set aside his gloomy thoughts: at least his cher can see beyond the walls of their room and breathe some fresh air. ‘Don’t overdo it,’ he smiles, and Billy lets go the bedstead and limps to the door.

He hears his steps recede, slow and shuffling, so heartbreakingly unlike the quick light step he’d learnt to recognise, and the slow thump-thump as he takes the stairs one by one. Goodnight wants to be there, holding him steady, guiding him, helping; he wants to be shuffling down alongside him, turning their weakness and clumsiness into a joke. He doesn’t want to be stuck in bed, leg and arm useless, muscles wasting, weak, slow, left behind.

His skin crawls with impatience, and suddenly a surge of resentment and anger comes rising up to consume him. Weeks of this, day upon tedious stretched-out day of broth and boredom, itching and no privacy. Months until he can walk properly, until he can ride again. He wants to be up, to be outside, he wants to be riding away, off to somewhere new, strong and quick, a hero, like Sam, like Red Harvest; he wants to be out in the sun, strong and cheerful, like Vasquez; he wants to be recovering, like Jack and Billy.

He can’t stand it a second longer, but there’s nothing he can do to ground his rage and frustration; he thumps his good leg pointlessly on the mattress, pounds his fist against the chest, making the pitcher rattle. And just as he thinks it, the door creaks open and an anxious face peers round, alerted by the noise. ‘Get out!’ he bellows, fury and shame mixing together, ‘out!’, his veneer of charm and manners peeling away like a scab to expose the raw surface beneath.

His breath catches in what sounds like a sob and he throws an arm across his face to stifle it, then
there’s a shuffle at his side and the mattress dips sharply; hands take hold of his face, a brow presses against his and a voice says, ‘Shh. Ssh, Goody, I’m here,’ as thumbs brush away the tears that anger and weakness make run from his eyes. He throws his good arm awkwardly around Billy’s back, clutches at his shirt and buries his face in his neck, teeth gritting to contain his emotions, and Billy rubs his back calmly, whispering comfort.

Eventually he pulls himself together and sits up shakily; he’d be ashamed if he felt there was anything left to hide between them. ‘Couldn’t even let you make it downstairs.’

A warm hand squeezes the back of his neck. ‘It’s hard. Harder for you. But we’ll get well.’ And Goodnight thinks, I ask so much of him. I always have.

‘Go, cher,’ he says, ‘I’m sorry.’

But Billy, astonishingly, leans against him. ‘I need to lie down.’ Is that a sentence he’s ever heard from Billy’s lips in all their years together?

There are beads of sweat on his brow and he’s cradling his gut again; Goodnight realises with another pang the effort it must have taken him to come back for him so quickly. ‘Here,’ he says, shifting, and Billy makes to stretch out on the bed beside him, then stops.

‘Boots,’ he says dully, and Goodnight plumbs the depth of despair: neither of them is even strong enough to pull his boots off.

‘Just lie down,’ he says, and Billy collapses against him, head heavy on his shoulder. Lessons in weakness, one on the next: recovery is going to be a second hard-fought battle.

Late in the day, at the usual time, they hear the tread of feet on the stair, quick and heavy, and Vasquez’ long stride along the corridor. Both their moods have been subdued all afternoon, a visit a welcome distraction, but today even Vasquez’ face is troubled: he comes in and sinks onto the edge of the bed where Billy is lying without a word.

Cheerful sunburnt Vasquez, so drawn and strained? Goodnight and Billy exchange glances. ‘He spoke to me.’ Vasquez’ voice is dull. ‘He was not clouded with the drugs. He knows, what has happened, and he said that he would rather he had died. That we should have left him to die.’

Is it a surprise? Waking up to their own reality had been hard enough: Faraday’s protracted unconsciousness had been a blessing, given the severity of his injuries.

‘The doctor, he doesn’t say it exactly, he says miracle, healing, recovery, but anyone with eyes can see. His fingers are gone from his hand, his ear is damaged, his leg – it will be hard for him to walk. He will not be as he was, and how will a man like Joshua take that?’ Vasquez looks down at the floor. ‘Perhaps he is right.’

‘No,’ says Billy instantly, but Goodnight’s words die on his lips. What if it had been me? Waking up to that; would I have struggled back for Billy, no matter what the cost?

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ says Billy fiercely. ‘Don’t say it.’

Vasquez bares his teeth. ‘Easy for you. You will be well again soon, life as it was before.’

They’re glaring at each other, but Goodnight wonders, is that really so? Billy so weak, breathless at the smallest exertion; his predator’s speed turned to painful slowness and his grace to awkward
limping. And himself: he can’t even hold his rifle – will his sharpshooter’s eye, the skill honed to become effortless, still be there when he can? Will any of us be as we were?

‘You know Joshua. He was …’ Vasquez stops, takes a breath. ‘He is,’ he says with fierce emphasis, ‘crazy. Stupid. So funny. Sometimes funny-clever, sometimes funny like a child. Greedy. Greedy for drink, for adventure, for life.’ He raises his face to stare at them stark. ‘And that man is gone.’

The despair behind his words fills Goodnight with shame for all his outbursts and impatience. Faraday saved them all, rode out alone and blew up the monstrous gun that had ripped the town apart; is this what his miracle is going to be?

One thing he does know is that words of comfort will ring hollow: what Vasquez needs, what they all need, is honesty. ‘You’re right,’ he says slowly, ‘right that no one wants to see it; everyone wants the fairytale ending. We saved them and now we all get to live. But the truth of it, it’s hard. Turns your life upside down. And that’s all you can say. Ain’t about fair or deserve: you play the hand you get, that’s all.’

He can see the raw pain in Vasquez’ face, but he knows what has to be said. ‘It’s going to be hard, for him and for you, if you stand by him.’

‘If?’ Vasquez sparks into genuine anger. ‘Is there if with you and Billy?’

‘Manuel, be reasonable. How long have you known him? Before, I mean. Two-three weeks?’

Vasquez leans closer, face dark. ‘There is no question … You think I would just leave him? Go?’

Goodnight stares him down: this has to be a real choice. ‘I’m not saying you’re not patient enough to see him through this, but you won’t do him or yourself any favours if you go into it blind.’

‘He needs me,’ says Vasquez stubbornly. Is that a good reason? Goodnight has to hope that it is.

‘Well, Billy and I will be here too,’ says Goodnight, catching Billy’s eye. ‘We won’t be going anywhere for a while.’ It’s the first time they’ve said it aloud.

Vasquez stays as long as they can persuade him, but after he’s gone they look at each other, and Billy speaks for both of them: ‘I never thought I’d say this, but we got off lightly, even you.’ It’s a sobering perspective.

‘Remind me when I need it,’ asks Goodnight apologetically.

Billy strokes his cheek, gentle and affectionate. ‘We’ll get through this.’

He tidies up the books, helps Goodnight sits up, cuts up his dinner so he can eat it one-handed, then produces their deck of cards and proceeds to win his saddle and horse from him at poker. And their sickroom feels a little less like a prison and a little more like a refuge, a peaceful shelter where they can be together and begin to heal.

Later, in the quiet of the night Goodnight lies drifting before sleep and reflects. How many of them will come out of this well? Emma Cullen has her revenge and her future, though not the one she wanted; Sam has won some peace of mind, but his sister and mother are long in their graves. If what they were saying of Jack is true, then perhaps he’s set to come out best, waking up to a new life, and Red, come from his lonely wanderings to a new kind of comradeship. Vasquez might have walked away from the battle, but his future promised to be difficult, and Faraday’s far more so.
And that leaves him and Billy. The very fact that he can still say it, him and Billy, Billy curled loosely against him, face soft in sleep, is all the future he needs, but rationally he knows this must count as a loss. Both injured, badly enough to need months’ recovery, and no guarantee at their age that strength and quickness will return as they had been; their share of the payout disappearing in exchange for a prolonged stay; the need to face the question of a future which before had remained comfortably vague.

He lies in the silence of the night, hearing the gentle creaks of the house and the skitter of an animal on the roof. *Never get exactly what you want,* says Sam's voice in his head. He settles himself as best he can, turning his head towards Billy, feeling his breath slow and regular against his neck. ‘I love you,’ he says, so quietly that not even he can hear it.
Goodnight’s sitting on the back porch of the Tillman farmhouse in the autumn evening, book in hand, watching the sun set among the cottonwoods in a burning sky. Birds are streaming in, cawing and squabbling, to their nightly roost, and in the distance comes a clatter and shout as the oxen are unyoked and the barns set up for the night. Such simple pleasures – the change of the seasons, the life of the farm – but he tastes them fresh and new.

He feels like himself again, no longer an invalid in a borrowed nightshirt, but properly dressed, with his boots on, able to wash and shave himself, to sit and eat at a table, to manoeuvre around the house. And here, out on the porch, in the scent of dry grass and dust and animals, it seems at last that life has stopped running away from him and settled back to its regular rhythm.

He’s currently alone: Billy’s taking his regular evening walk, down to the edge of the wheatfield and back, and Goodnight can see him leaning on the fence, watching the work at day’s end. He picks up the glass beside him and swirls it thoughtfully. Now they’re both back on their feet, he admires Billy’s determination more than ever.

When his splints came off and returned him to normality Goodnight had been full of enthusiasm, his captivity and forced idleness at an end, and the prospect of riding again and nights in the saloon seeming just a step away. But freed from the bandages his arm and leg were soft and weak from disuse, and the effort of getting up, of limping about, leaning heavily on a cane or on Billy’s willing shoulder, had proved draining and disheartening. More often than he should, he spends his time sitting, passing the time of day with Mrs Tillman and her visitors, reading one of the books Josiah’s lent him, or just idling in the fresh air.

Billy’s never been one to be idle, and though he doesn’t say so, this extended convalescence among strangers is a strain for him. Though there’s no sign that the Tillmans or their farmhands make any difference between them, Billy’s not accustomed to the close quarters of the busy yard and the crowded dinner-table, and it’s plain that the constant activity of the farmhouse wears on him. His diligence in exercising puts Goodnight to shame as he rebuilds his strength and vigour, but it also give him reason to spend time alone.

Goodnight watches as he straightens up from the fence and begins to make his way back to the house, slow but steady. An empty glass stands beside his: once Billy’s hauled himself up the steps he’ll drop into the other seat with a sigh he can’t suppress and Goodnight will pour him a whiskey; they’ll share a cigarette, stealing a moment of quiet together in the dusk. But Billy pauses on the path, raising a hand to someone out of sight, then waves to Goodnight, pointing up in the direction of the road. There’s the faint thud of hooves, and Goodnight reaches for his cane, pulls himself to his feet and limps to the corner of the farmhouse. A black horse, with a rider all in black: not what he expected to see, but here’s Sam Chisolm, cool as ever, back from his travels.

Before their quarrel Sam had said he’d be away two or three weeks, but it had been that and more with no sign of him: Goodnight had begun to suspect that he’d moved on, succumbing to the temptation to put Rose Creek behind him and start a fresh page. He’d pictured Sam and Red Harvest, two tiny figures moving across the plain on a plume of dust, disappearing into the landscape. But he’s been wrong, and Sam as good as his word; though that’s an old song.

‘I’ll fetch another glass,’ says Billy, stepping up onto the porch.
‘See if they’ve any humble pie in there too,’ says Goodnight; Billy looks at him penetratingly, but slips away before Goodnight’s reaching hand can detain him, leaving him to greet Sam alone.

Sam leaves his horse to graze beside the house, reins trailing, and comes striding over to where Goodnight is standing, one hand on the rail. It’s foolish to be nervous: Sam is his oldest friend. He’d been peevish and unreasonable, he knew, but surely he understood…

Sam’s face lights up in a grin, the same as ever, and the tension in Goodnight’s belly relaxes. ‘Come riding back into the storm!’ he asks, a little sheepishly.

‘No stormclouds I can see,’ says Sam cheerfully, ‘looks like a fine evening to me,’ and his face is warm. ‘On your feet, as I predicted,’ he adds, a touch of smugness in his tone, and Goodnight laughs, extending an arm.

‘Go easy on my ribs,’ he warns, and Sam envelops him in a careful embrace. As they pull back smiling it sparks memories of other quarrels and other peacemakings, and a little displaced piece settles back inside him. ‘You should see how Billy’s improved.’

‘I do,’ grins Sam, clapping him on the shoulder as he appears with another glass. ‘I hope you can both drink, because I brought some of the good stuff.’

‘In moderation,’ says Goodnight, leading the way back to his seat, ‘and the only way to find out what moderation is, is by trial and error.’

‘How was Edison?’ asks Billy.

Sam settles back comfortably. ‘Didn’t have to buy any of my own drinks, that’s certainly the case. Word had travelled – could have told the story ten times over. Think they thought I was lowering myself to go after regular lawbreakers, but we tracked down a pair of stock rustlers and delivered them to the sheriff.’

‘Red not with you now?’ asks Goodnight.

‘Oh, he’s about’ – Sam gestures vaguely – ‘came with me to see Jack, but I left him setting up camp just outside town. Tho’ I’m looking forward to sleeping in a bed.’

‘You have no idea how soon that can get old,’ says Goodnight dryly.

‘You seem to be well on the way to mending.’

‘Be a while before I’m riding again, but I’m on my feet, at least.’

‘When he’s not holding court out here,’ says Billy; Goodnight hears the slight barb in the comment, but Sam’s oblivious. ‘Holding court?’ he asks curiously.

Goodnight sighs. ‘I have attracted some unexpected female attention.’

He’s never thought of himself as an eligible man, that time from his youth far gone out of reach, and the recent business with him and Billy he assumed would have caused enough talk in the town to end any idea of himself as a potential husband. But to his surprise, now that he and Billy are in public again, Harriet Tillman has begun to find herself unusually popular among her female friends and neighbours, who call with new recipes for peach cobbler or offering to lend dress patterns and help in cutting them out, and show a distinct determination to improve their acquaintance with him.
He’s unsurprised to find himself the primary attraction: in his view Billy far eclipses him in both physical attraction and calm good nature, but perhaps fortunately for Goodnight, few others seem to see what he does; the ladies who persist in calling with gifts of freshly-baked pies and strengthening tonics are polite to Billy, but reserve their interest for him. Miss Wyatt, Miss Sorensen and Mrs Carter enquire solicitously after his health, and are enthusiastic to hear of his exploits in the war, or cleaned-up versions of their travels since. Billy, needless to say, finds the whole situation highly entertaining, doing everything in his power to foster Goodnight’s discomfort. He’ll suggest a story of emphasising Goodnight’s courage and prowess – ‘Don’t be so modest, Goody – I’m sure Miss Wyatt would enjoy hearing it!’ – then slide away, abandoning him mercilessly to tea and conversation.

‘I never thought courtship was so predatory,’ says Goodnight now in mock despair, but Sam seems uncharacteristically serious.

‘After all that’s happened you can’t blame the women for thinking of it: we dug enough graves to mean that more than one girl won’t be marrying, and it’s difficult for a widow to manage a farm or a business alone. You can see that they’d think an attractive able-bodied man might be worth furthering acquaintance with.’

‘Glad to know you think I’m attractive.’ Billy snickers silently, but behind the joke Goodnight is abashed. ‘Since when did you start taking thought for such things?’

Sam looks a little shifty. ‘Something like what we’ve been through: can’t help but change your ideas some.’

Goodnight remembers their conversation with Emma Cullen: he suspects no one will ever really know what happened in the shell of the burnt-out church to leave Bogue dead. ‘Thought you might be thinking of heading back to Kansas,’ he says gently. *Revenge may be sweet, but the hurt don’t die.*

Sam looks down at the glass in his hand. ‘Don’t think so. Been a long road, Goody, and I’m tired. Might be it’s time I stopped.’ It seems unusually final, for Sam, but he’s right, Goodnight should know: physical wounds aren’t the only ones that take time to heal.

They sit in silence for a moment, hearing clumping footsteps and muffled laughter as Tillman and his sons come home to wash at the pump in the twilight, then Goodnight says, ‘You were right about one thing, though.’

‘Only one?’ says Sam. ‘Been right about a lot of things. It’s my defining ability.’

Goodnight rolls his eyes. ‘About the war,’ he presses. ‘You said it was over, and I said it never is.’

‘You were right on that one,’ says Sam, suddenly grave. ‘We brought a little piece of it here. All those burials, that devil’s gun: it was a bad business.’

‘I don’t think we were the ones brought it,’ says Billy quietly, and Goodnight turns to give him a private smile, unfathomably grateful for his calm understanding.

He turns back to Sam. ‘You know what didn’t survive? My coat.’

‘Well, it was cut up and burnt,’ says Goodnight, ‘and I’ll be getting a new one once I have need to wear it. Don’t think I’ll be looking at another like it.’
'Well, maybe we’re both done with raking through those ashes.’ The light’s faded enough that it’s hard to see Sam’s expression, but he doesn’t sound sad.

When Sam reluctantly says, ‘I should be heading back,’ Goodnight levers himself up too and waits while he pays his respects to the Tillmans; Billy shakes his hand but stays at the house while the two of them go off into the dark.

‘Going to be staying for a while?’ asks Goodnight.

‘Sure,’ says Sam easily, ‘Work enough to keep me occupied for the present, and a few debts still to settle.’

‘Not with me,’ says Goodnight firmly.

‘I’m glad of it.’ Sam gives him another careful hug. ‘And to see you better.’

‘Still trying to catch up with him,’ says Goodnight, looking back at where Billy is sitting in the light.

‘Go easy on yourself,’ says Sam; Goodnight huffs ruefully. ‘I know, Rome wasn’t built in a day, that’s what Lynch says.’

It’s no exaggeration: Goodnight has to climb the stairs one by one, carrying his dragging exhaustion like a physical weight. But at the top Billy is waiting for him, his bright smile showing he knows how much better Goodnight feels.

‘Should see him back a bit sooner this time,’ he says as they head to the bedroom. Billy considers. ‘Get a sense there were things he wasn’t saying?’

‘You know,’ says Goodnight thoughtfully, sitting as Billy eases his boots off, ‘in all our time I never heard him muse on the topic of matrimony. Do you think …?’

‘Well, there is precedent,’ says Billy seriously. ‘Jack, you …’

Goodnight fixes him with a look between irritation and entertainment, and Billy shakes with more silent laughter, then with a careful glance at the door rolls him over gently on the bed. Neither of them is able for anything, the work of healing taking so much effort, but Goodnight thrills to the touch of warm hands under his shirt, the first real kisses, and the miracle that is this living man in his arms.

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At noon next day Lynch comes rattling over in his carriage to inspect them, though these days his visits are as much courtesy as medical care; he gives Goodnight’s leg and arm a cursory examination, asks how they’re sleeping, and pronounces himself satisfied. Although he’s never other than hearty, there are bags under his eyes and he seems unduly sober. ‘Patients keeping you up at night?’ asks Goodnight.

Lynch sighs gustily. ‘Lost young Matthew Abbott – gashed his arm sharpening a ploughshare, and it just wouldn’t heal, no matter what. And a baby born this morning that didn’t live. Can’t win every battle, it’s a reminder.’
‘Can see it goes hard,’ says Goodnight sympathetically. ‘Drink? Sam brought us some of the good stuff.’

‘Won’t say no,’ says Lynch, sitting down heavily. ‘Chisolm called on me yesterday looking to see your friend Faraday, though Faraday wouldn’t have it.’

‘Vasquez said he was taking things badly.’ It’s an understatement, but Goodnight doesn’t want to give too much away. ‘He turning the air blue around him?’

‘Oh, cursing’s part of the healing process, as I’m sure you can attest, but it’s deeper than that.’ Lynch takes the glass, looking troubled. ‘He’s come through the crisis and he’s getting to mend, but it’s plain he’s going to heal hard, and I’ve done some questioning of my own on that account.’

‘Will he walk?’ asks Billy. ‘Ride?’

‘He’ll walk,’ says Lynch, ‘though maybe with a cane; he’ll be stiff from the scars. Riding? Well … But now isn’t three months’ time, and three months isn’t six.’ Billy looks at Goodnight: neither of them know Faraday well, but anyone can see patience was never his strong suit. ‘But if you’ve spoken with Vasquez you’ll know how it is. He’s turning in on himself, that’s it – my Hannah, she nurses him, and Vasquez, couldn’t keep him away at gunpoint, but he won’t have anyone else see him.’

Goodnight can just imagine it, the scrutiny of strangers hard enough to bear in weakness and pain, and Faraday won’t help but read what he looks like in their faces.

Lynch straightens as the idea strikes him. ‘If you’re looking for occupation, you’d do me a good turn by paying him a visit yourselves. He’s least likely to say no to you, and any distraction would be helpful.’

‘I could go,’ offers Billy at once.

‘You’re not riding,’ says Goodnight immediately, but Lynch says brightly, ‘Wouldn’t have to: I can take you back with me now, and you can catch a ride back on the lumber wagon. It would be a favour to me, and more to him: he might take it from you that things look very different when you’re lying in bed and when you can put your boots on again.’

‘I’ll come,’ says Billy again, and Goodnight can see the itch in him, be better, be stronger. Be well.

Goodnight follows Billy upstairs again to watch as he gathers coat and hat. ‘Take care.’ He can’t refrain from saying it; it’s the first time they’ll have been apart since the fight.

‘Just an hour or two,’ says Billy absently, then more softly, ‘I’ll come back.’

Goodnight smiles, caught out in weakness. ‘And tell him …’ Tell him what? Tell him I yelled and cursed and cried for far less reason? Tell him you climb out of one slough and all you find is there’s another in front of you? ‘Tell him thank you,’ he says simply. ‘And I’ll visit as soon as I can.’

Billy sets his hand to the door, then pauses. ‘What will you do while I’m gone?’

‘Sit and read,’ says Goodnight easily, picking up a red-bound volume, ‘Josiah brought me some more of Emerson’s essays.’

A crease of annoyance appears between Billy’s brows and he crosses the room to twitch the book.
from Goodnight’s hand. ‘Sitting still isn’t what you need to be doing.’

Goodnight’s annoyed at the flush of guilt that creeps into his cheeks. ‘I’ll take some exercise. Dodge the visiting ladies.’

Billy refuses to be amused. ‘Be serious. You need to be working your leg, getting strong again, not sitting around.’

‘Don’t need to be nagged,’ says Goodnight shortly.

Billy leans over him, hands on the arms of the chair. ‘You do. You’re not trying.’

Goodnight faces him down. ‘So set me my devoir. Three times round the farmhouse? Down to the river and back?’

‘This isn’t a game. I shouldn’t have to drag you through it.’ Billy’s as close to losing his temper as he has been, and Goodnight succumbs to an answering wave of irritation.

‘Did you break your leg and your arm? Did you just spend eight weeks in splints? You’re almost cured; I’m sorry I’m holding you back.’

Billy narrows his eyes. ‘Don’t make this about me.’

Billy’s anger isn’t a surprise: he’s right. Goodnight could be, should be, following his example. And he’s not. He eases himself down the stairs in the morning on Billy’s heels; he walks around the farmhouse; he’s ventured as far as the barn once or twice, leaning on his cane, to stand by and watch the work. He longed to be on his feet again, itched for it, and he should be pushing himself like Billy, but instead he finds himself strangely passive, content to sit, putting off the moment when he has to heave himself up and tackle the steps or pick his way across the rough ground. Billy hasn’t nagged him or chivvied him before, but Goodnight hasn’t been blind to his assessing glances, to the tiny line that sits between his brows when he finds Goodnight just where he expects, leg propped up, cane forgotten at his side.

Billy straightens up, and though he’s all cool detachment again on the surface Goodnight recognises the signs of simmering anger underneath. ‘You come downstairs in the morning and go back up at night, and that’s all the effort you make. You haven’t gone further than the stables. You’ve got to try.’

‘What, just because you’re putting your hat on and going to town, you’re tired of waiting for me?’

Billy’s face hardens. ‘We need to be well, be on our way, get back to – ’

‘Fighting and shooting? Riding through storms? Facing down bandits?’ Goodnight’s clinging to his anger because the alternative is worse.

‘I was going to say, normal life,’ says Billy. His jaw tightens. ‘It’s …’

‘Spit it out,’ says Goodnight quietly. At least he can rely on Billy to speak the truth.

Billy looks him in the eye. ‘This half-life, sitting round, being weak, it’s enough for you. It’s like you don’t want to get well again.’

The silence that follows pools and settles: neither of them will drop their gaze. ‘Best take your sympathy to Faraday, then,’ says Goodnight at length.
'I will.’ Billy picks up his hat. ‘I can see it’s wasted here.’

Goodnight sinks back in the chair as Billy thumps downstairs, feeling as alone as he has since the terrible eve of the battle. He hates what’s in him, the thing he can’t say: he’s scared, scared that his leg will never be sound again, that he’ll never regain strength in his arm, that his vigour is gone for good. And if that’s so, how can he go back to their old life? Billy does the fighting for them, but Goodnight needs to be able to hit a target, to charm the crowd, to leap to Billy’s defence if it all turns sour. All they’ve known together has been drifting and violence, and Billy still wants it, would head off today if he could, nothing in the town for him. How can he tell him that he’s afraid to go back to the cold rainy nights, the days when their food runs low, the constant watchfulness and the times there’s no welcome?

And now Billy’s gone, rattling away with Lynch, feet up on the front board of the buggy, and no way any onlooker would tell he’d ever been hurt. Oh, Goodnight sees the lines in his face that weren’t there before, the slowness to his movements, the way he tires though he hates to admit it, but from the outside, Billy Rocks is well.

Right now he wants nothing more than to crawl back under the bedcovers. All those weeks he felt nothing but trapped here, but now it seems so seductive, the idea of sitting in bed reading aloud, Billy at his side, in a warm bubble of rest and intimacy with no need to consider the future. Weak as he is, at the core of it all is the fear that Billy, already outpacing him on the road to recovery, will in the end leave him here. Maybe not all at once, but he’ll get impatient, like Sam, start heading off on his own, gradually longer and longer away, the thread between them dwindling and fraying until it finally snaps, and Billy soars away like a bird, leaving him staring hopelessly after. He doesn’t want to stay here, to be beholden to the town, but the fear weighs heavy at the core of himself, and it feels like a betrayal of the man he loves with his whole inadequate heart.

As he calms he gradually becomes aware of the clatter and murmur of talk from the kitchen downstairs and the shouts from outside, and a pang of sympathy goes through him. He always thinks of Billy as fearless, his self-belief absolute, burning through the world like a living flame, but after six weeks in a busy household, he’s becoming a shadow, subdued and self-effacing. It’s easier for Goodnight himself with his surface of affability, but even so, it can’t be other than awkward after the strange intimacy of their weeks of illness. The family have seen them fevered and rambling, the women have fed and cleaned them, seen them childlike and dependent; now they’re men again, but it’s left a lingering embarrassment that no amount of daily amicability can dispel. Of course Billy yearns for the freedom of life on the road and their own company, counting the time until he can reclaim the hard shell of his public persona, the man underneath shared only with him.

Billy’s knifebelt hangs bright against the wall where he’s taken his hat from the hook. He’s already begun to oil and tend the blades again, while Goodnight’s own gunbelt hangs next to it untouched since the fight. Goodnight stands stiffly, takes it down and buckles it on, the familiar weight settling at his hip, then picks up the cane again to face the stairs. He can do this. He must.

He gathers what he needs downstairs, then stands in the yard, considering. The farm is busy at this time of day, young women tending the vegetable garden, farmhands coming and going with loads of hay. He could set up in the corral near the barn, but the last thing he wants is an audience. Instead he picks his way carefully along to a stand of trees in the hollow where he can line up his targets on a fallen treetrunk, with no one to observe him in the dancing shade.
Goodnight stands and takes his aim. He’s done this a thousand times, the memory of stance and sighting deep in muscle and bone: he empties his mind and squeezes the trigger. Five shots, five flying cans. It’s there, of course it’s still there, how could it not be? It knots in him as always, pride and guilt inextricably spliced, the skill that can put a bullet into a target at half a mile, and the misery he’s caused with it. But this is him, who he is; who he is with Billy, and he hears the words again, this half-life.

He sets the targets up again further away and further apart, and begins to lose himself in the old joy at the flowing connection between eye and hand, time running slow and perfect, until, as he lowers his gun, an unmistakeable voice snaps him back to reality: ‘Let me set those up for you, Goodnight.’

There, watching from a patch of filtered sun, serenely chewing on a stem of grass, is the bulky figure of Jack Horne.

‘Give it another twenty yards,’ says Goodnight, and waits while Jack carefully lines up the cans. He backs up to a safe distance and gives the signal; Goodnight takes a breath, sights, fires, sights, fires, eye to hand to bullet, and all five go scattering.

‘Mighty impressive,’ says Jack. ‘Your shooting saved the day, sure enough.’

‘When I came back,’ says Goodnight; it’s a bruise he can’t keep from prodding at.

‘The Lord alone knows the way of our hearts,’ says Jack seriously, ‘and we all came by way of saving each other: I wouldn’t be here but for Teddy, nor the others without you.’

Horne is not very much thinner after his recovery, though he is somewhat more civilised in appearance, his beard trimmed and his shirt clean, living proof that the most unlikely man can prove amenable to domestic life. He fixes Goodnight with an appraising eye as he clasps his hand and says solemnly, ‘It’s by the Lord’s grace that we stand here together again.’

‘That and good care,’ says Goodnight, a little awkwardly. ‘Hear Mrs Frankel has set you right.’

‘That’s so,’ says Jack earnestly. ‘Was a near thing, those arrows. Though nothing to your damage.’

‘We’re both mending,’ says Goodnight with more positivity than he feels.

Jack nods. ‘I thought to find you and Billy both, but I passed him riding into town with the doc.’

‘Lynch asked him to visit Faraday.’ Goodnight’s suddenly overcome with a wave of fatigue, and he casts about for somewhere to sit.

‘Here,’ says Jack, leading the way to the fallen tree and grasping him firmly by the arm to ease him down. ‘Well, if that young idiot will speak to him it’s more than he will me,’ he continues sadly; ‘I’ve tried to call on Joshua several times, but he won’t have it, no one but the outlaw. It’s a sore thing that he should be so scared to be seen when he should be proud of what he did.’

‘Goes hard for a man to show weakness,’ says Goodnight, but Jack shakes his head emphatically. ‘Aren’t we all weak before the Lord? Maybe Billy can find the way to reach him.’

He pulls up a canteen and offers it to Goodnight, who takes it gratefully. ‘Didn’t think to find you wearing a gunbelt again so soon.’

‘Got to practice,’ says Goodnight, ‘been abed long enough letting my skills rust.’

‘Can see that.’ Jack takes back the canteen, sloshing it thoughtfully. ‘Imagine you boys will be
moving on once you’re able.’

‘Think so,’ says Goodnight, with a sense of where this is leading, ‘though it’ll be some time yet. Man needs to be sound to face the world.’

‘Probably all should be thinking of it; Sam was restless, it was good for him to go, and young Red with him. Thought Vasquez would have lit out too, must be only a matter of time before someone catches up with him.’

‘Guess there’s not much call here for any of our talents,’ agrees Goodnight.

‘Well now,’ says Jack. ‘Well now.’ He draws a breath to speak, then seems to think better of it; Goodnight takes pity on him. ‘Maybe you’re fixing to stay in these parts for the foreseeable? Recuperate your strength?’

‘That’s it,’ says Jack thoughtfully. ‘That’s just it.’ He’s silent for a while, and Goodnight’s about to speak when he starts again. ‘It’s a great thing, you know, to see the land empty in front of you, just trees and plains and mountains right to the horizon, no living soul to hem you in. But that’s over, the way it was: the railroad’s come, and farms and mines and towns, the whole place filling up with civilisation. I could go off, try to find some little corner that’s still wild, but the days of hunting buffalo and beaver are past.’

‘Red Harvest said something of the same,’ says Goodnight carefully.

Jack nods again. ‘It’s good for him to go with Sam; his people, they have it hard. No, those were the best years, out there in the wilds.’ The memory of happiness is plain in his face. ‘But they’re over. Not just my family, that’s a thing I’ve carried a long time, but the way it all was.’

He looks at Goodnight earnestly. ‘Maybe you’ll understand it. Thought I’d died, expected it, and was considerable surprised to wake up as full of holes as a grating. One thing I’ve learnt, Goodnight, change comes whether you want it or not. You do things you think were right, and then see they weren’t, when it’s too late; you have what makes you happy and it’s gone in an instant.’

‘I think I do understand,’ says Goodnight gently, and Jack claps him on the shoulder.

‘Was a sore thing that happened here; tales of courage and daring are one thing, but when it’s finished there’s a whole heap of mending to be done, and I’m not going to shirk my part of that.’ He turns his face upwards. ‘God’s given me a second chance, and I intend to take what I’m offered.’

Sitting serene and placid in the dancing sunlight, he seems completely at home, as though he should be fishing for his dinner and broiling it over a campfire instead of living as a respectable townsman, but Goodnight’s glad for him if he’s found an unexpected end to his road. ‘Can offer you a drink other than water,’ he says, but Jack heaves to his feet.

‘Thanks you, but I’ll say no: I’m to go along to the Cullen farm to bring Mrs Frankel home.’ There’s an air of relief about him now he’s got his news off his chest, and without Goodnight having to ask, he pulls him to his feet with surprising gentleness.

‘Want the cans?’ he asks, but Goodnight says, ‘Leave them there,’ and picks up his cane; with a huff of impatience Jack plucks it from his hand and wraps an arm around his back. His bulk is oddly comforting, a guarantee that Goodnight won’t lose his footing if he stumbles, and though he thinks how odd they must look, Jack propping him along back up to the farmhouse, he lays an arm across his shoulders and says, ‘Thanks.’
After Jack’s left, Goodnight sits, book untouched in his lap, reflecting. Of all their company, he found Jack the most enigmatic, even more so than Red Harvest. Vasquez and Faraday were easily parsed, all-of-a-piece, the same underneath as on the surface; he knows well enough the complexities of Sam’s character and the burning desire for justice that motivates him. Red was strange, inevitably so, but dedicated and thoughtful in his silent way. But Jack, godfearing gentle Jack, who he first encountered beating the ill-advised Pigeon Brothers to death; Jack who walked through the gunsmoke and screaming horses like an avenging demon; a man whose hands are red with the blood of hundreds, compassionate and kind as the day is long… But perhaps, from what he said, he’s come through the fire and found a way to let go his past.

For a moment it seems so tempting: to wake up as newborn, slate wiped clean, no name to inspire unwanted admiration, no poisoned reputation to live up to? But if Goodnight left his past behind, he’d leave the only thing that matters to him. When he woke up, all he wished for was a world with Billy in it, and to know that he could forgive him rather than riding away. This is the gift he’s been given, unmerited and unearned; he has a lot to repay. Where I go, Billy goes, he’d said to Teddy, meaning it as a warning that Billy must be accepted; but the reverse must hold true too. Wherever Billy wants to go, he’ll follow.

It helps him discover his missing resolve, and as the sun starts to fall to the west he readies himself to make the walk up to the road to meet the wagon. The track he follows curves gently past fields green with new planting and stands of rustling corn; it’s odd, to walk it for the first time: he doesn’t remember coming here. It’s still warm, the fields around him busy with life, birds tweeting and fluttering in the stands of fireweed. Though he takes it slowly, soon his ribs and leg are aching, and he stands to catch his breath, like the old man Billy calls him, looking over to the distant storefronts and the belltower, still smokeblackened. One step at a time.

Before too long the cart comes into sight, toiling along with its load of lumber and a figure sitting behind on the tail; Goodnight straightens up. When Billy sees him up here with his pistol at his hip, will he find him looking a little more like the man he wants to see?

Billy’s always been able to make himself hard to read when he wants to, but as the cart draws to a halt his face lights up into a flashing smile, and relief pours over Goodnight as slow and sweet as molasses. Billy slides down from the tail, and Goodnight raises a hand to young Emmett Tillman as he slaps the reins and sets off down to the yard. Before Goodnight can say anything, Billy says, ‘Wait;’ a succession of tiny emotions flicker across his face: pleasure at seeing him making an effort, concern for his exertion that must be plain to read, and something harder to define which tenses in his jaw.

The creak of the wagon wheels dies away until there’s no sound left but the chirp of crickets among the grass. Goodnight reaches out his hand, but Billy steps close and wraps his arms round him, burying his face in his shoulder, hugging him so tight that he can’t suppress a grunt of pain. Billy instantly loosens his grip, but he doesn’t lift his face from Goodnight’s neck, fists closed in the material of his shirt; Goodnight strokes his back and waits it out.

At length Billy pulls back, kissing him quick and gentle, then strokes a thumb along his jaw, face full of emotion. ‘Bad?’ asks Goodnight.

‘Hard to see,’ says Billy, then, ‘You shouldn’t be standing. Here.’

There’s nowhere to sit but the grass at the edge of the field, dry and crackling: Billy drops down, then helps Goodnight settle beside him. He leans his weight against him, not bothering to hide the effort the trip has cost him. ‘He wasn’t pleased I’d come. He says it’s all shit, and I couldn’t gainsay it – you can tell how bad the injuries are, it hurts him to move, he can’t do anything on his own. He
hates to be seen like that, you can tell, and it all comes out in cursing like the doc said, at him and Mrs Lynch trying to tend to him, and at Sam and at the town …’

Goodnight can well imagine it, Faraday turning his despair and impatience outward; what must it be like for him, lying alone in the night?

Billy shifts closer. ‘I tried to tell him about you, and Sam and Red, but he wouldn’t hear it – said we should all go, and leave him till he can go too. That was all he’d say, about how he’d be off as soon as he could climb up on his horse, off to Texas, maybe –’

Goodnight shakes his head, hollow at the thought of what Faraday still has to face. ‘And no one’s going to tell him otherwise, are they?’

Billy sits up to look at him. ‘When I left …’ He gazes off over the field, voice quiet. ‘He did it for us, and I get to ride back out here in the sun, and see you walked up here and smiling…’

It’s rare to see him so openly upset; ‘Hush now,’ says Goodnight, stroking his cheek gently, and they sit in silence in the dusty afternoon among the buzzing crickets, a hawk calling high and thin overhead. It’s true, it isn’t fair, but wasn’t that what he said to Vasquez? Not about fair.

Billy lifts his head abruptly. ‘You know I would never leave you. No matter what.’

The urgency in his eyes, in the hands clutching Goodnight’s arms, pierces him. ‘You don’t have to…’

‘I do. I should be more patient. I know it’s hard with everyone else to watch.’

‘It’s not just that. I – ‘ Goodnight’s throat closes.

‘Tell me,’ says Billy. His eyes are brown in the sunlight, alive with concern, and at last Goodnight’s able to bring the fear out of himself, lay it bare in the sunshine.

‘I - what if I can’t mend? What if I fall and break my leg again? Two more months in bed would cripple me. Billy, what if I’m never the same?’

Billy hugs him close again, hand soothing over his leg and arm, strong and comforting. ‘What did Lynch say? “Now isn’t three months, and three months isn’t six”?’ His imitation of Lynch’s rolling phrases is uncannily good. His voice softens. ‘Maybe it won’t be the same,’ he says more slowly, and that’s unexpected, ‘but it doesn’t have to be. We can figure it out like we’ve always done. Make our own way.’

‘I don’t deserve you,’ murmurs Goodnight, resting his head on his shoulder, and Billy kisses his temple.

‘Come on,’ he says, ‘we should be down there on the porch with a drink, not hiding in the grass like a pair of prairie hens.’

It’s a business for both of them, getting to their feet; Goodnight’s stiffened up, stumbling on the rough path with his cane. ‘Lean on me,’ says Billy, tucking under his arm.

‘Do that too much,’ mumbles Goodnight with a pang of guilt. I always have.

‘Hush now,’ says Billy to him in turn, holding him steady, strong and patient as Jack. ‘We’ll do it
Hard enough with everyone to watch. Billy’s comment, carelessly made, sets Goodnight thinking. They’re able to walk, they can shift for themselves, and they’ve imposed long enough on the Tillman household: if they have to see out the winter here, far better if they can find a place by themselves. But the question of where is a difficult one: riding out isn’t an option yet, Goodnight too weak to travel, and neither of them up to earning a living.

‘We could move back to the hotel,’ suggests Billy.

‘At a price we can’t afford,’ says Goodnight wryly. ‘We’ve the money now, but it would be eaten up by spring: David isn’t grateful enough to hand out room and board for free.’

‘Could marry into it like Jack,’ teases Billy. Goodnight rolls his eyes. ‘Or if we found a shanty abandoned, we could take it on: all that reading about drainage and when to harvest might be worth something.’

‘Good to know you were paying attention,’ says Goodnight, straightfaced, but it’s fanciful, they both know; they’re neither cut out for the farming life.

‘I don’t think anyone in this town would stand to see you labouring for your living.’ Harriet Tillman pauses in the doorway carrying her empty washtub, her hands still red from scrubbing.

Goodnight feels a wash of guilt: she’s as calm and cheerful as ever, but it’s not the way he’d intended to raise the topic. ‘You mustn’t think that we’re ungrateful, Harriet,’ he assures her awkwardly, ‘you’ve been more than generous’ – ‘nonsense,’ she smiles, ‘it was what anyone would do’ – ‘but now we’re getting stronger we can’t impose on you all winter.’

Harriet nods sympathetically. ‘I can appreciate you’ll want your independence.’

‘We should be working,’ says Billy seriously, ‘we can build, or cut lumber; we’ve done drive work before.’

‘There’s work enough, that’s true,’ says Harriet, shrugging, ‘most farms are short-handed, but you won’t be up to heavy work for a while.’

Billy obviously wants to disagree, but Harriet knows better than all but Lynch the extent of their injuries. She smiles. ‘I don’t think you need be turning farmer just yet. Let me speak to Mr Tillman.’

As she departs with her tub, calling for her daughter, Billy looks at Goodnight enquiringly, but Goodnight gestures his ignorance; the townsfolk of Rose Creek seem determined to keep having a hand in their affairs.

At dinner the following night there’s a new face at the table, a tall fair man with a weathered face; has Goodnight met him before? His memories are so hazy – was he one of the inadequate riflemen he’d berated? Did he dig ditches beside Vasquez and Billy? Mr Tillman introduces him: ‘Our neighbour, Abner Grey - Abner has the farm along by the creekside, beyond the mine.’

‘Mr Robicheaux,’ says Abner, shaking his hand warmly, ‘That you survived such a fall was a remarkable thing.’
‘Lynch had a lot to do with it,’ says Goodnight loyally, ‘And Mrs Tillman’s care.’

‘And Mr Rocks. Pleased to have a chance to thank you directly.’

Billy ducks his head, embarrassed, and Goodnight says firmly, ‘Water under the bridge.’

‘Not as I see it,’ says Abner at once, ‘put in more years work on this land than I care to name, and I would have seen it swindled from me, so there’s no doubt but I’m in your debt.’

Tillman, handing round bread, adds, ‘Abner’s been here since before there was a town.’

‘That’s so,’ agrees Abner, ‘came out here with my partner Clancy Merritt twelve years back: course those days there was nothing to call by a name here – just a few folk trying to work their claims and raise some crops. You wouldn’t think it now, seeing it so prospering as it is, but those first years were God’s own struggle – first year clear Clancy and I spent digging out stumps and rocks and hauling water, and fighting to keep our seeds from gophers and grasshoppers, and many times we swore we’d give up and go back to Minnesota, that the stories about sun and rich land were just that, stories.’

He peers at Goodnight and laughs. ‘I can see from your face you’re wondering why you’re hearing me run on.’

‘Tale worth telling,’ says Goodnight politely, though it’s not often he meets someone as loquacious as himself.

‘Well, that’s how it went,’ continues Abner cheerfully, ‘took time to make the land pay, and those first few years Clancy and I spent batching together in a cabin near to town. Later on we built the farmhouse, and Sarah came out to join me, and my oldest boy Nat, and after Clancy married Martha – they’re the Merritts, on the spread next to mine – we built a house for them too. But our old cabin’s still there, near to the end of Main Street.’ Goodnight exchanges a glance with Billy.

‘I mentioned to Abner what you’d been saying,’ interposes Harriet, a trifle embarrassed. ‘I hope you don’t take offence by it.’ Goodnight isn’t sure that he appreciates having their affairs managed like this, but he has to admit the proposition’s intriguing.

‘It ain’t much, small enough and rough-built, but a bit of mending would make it weatherproof again, and if you boys would like it for the winter, it would help me to have it kept in repair.’ Abner’s so open and enthusiastic that Goodnight can’t be grudging.

‘That’s a considerably kind offer, Mr Grey; Billy and I are looking for a place to set up, though we’d need to agree a fair rent.’

Abner cuts across him. ‘No question of that. I worked hard for what I have, Mr Robicheaux, and that skunk I won’t name came close to taking it from me; that I still have a place to offer is all owed to you and your companions. Anyways, you could come and see it, and we’ll shake hands on it if it suits.’

‘We will,’ says Goodnight, glancing at Billy again, and knowing that whatever this cabin might be like, it’s too good a chance to refuse. ‘As soon as you’ve time.’

The dinner’s a cheerful one, and Abner good company, with tales to tell of his and Clancy’s travels before Rose Creek; he and Tillman are old friends, and Goodnight’s easily drawn in to trade stories of their past. Among the jokes and the laughter he’s pleased to see Billy unbend a little too; too often all he’ll show to people is a surly and distant exterior, and they never realise the sly humour and intelligence that he hides. Goodnight has restraint of his own to exercise, knowing that otherwise
he’d be gazing too long at the curl of that smile and the light on his face, and as Billy meets his eye he knows that they’re sensing the same first spark of liberation.

Later, when Abner’s left promising to fetch them the next day to inspect his cabin, Goodnight sits on the edge of the bed letting Billy fuss over him, helping with boots and buttons, his enthusiasm plain to see. A place of their own... ‘I know winter in a town’s not what you hoped for...’ he starts, but Billy leans over and kisses him to silence.

‘We can take the time,’ he says, ‘and see you properly well. I can help with the rebuilding, like Vasquez.’ He sheds his own clothes and slides into bed, making space for Goodnight at his side. ‘And we said we’d help him and Faraday out too.’

Goodnight relaxes into his embrace and Billy says more softly, ‘I remember another broken-down shack...’ Goodnight pulls him closer: it’s one of the memories they guard most fiercely, the first few days they spent as lovers, in an abandoned cabin where they’d hastily taken shelter. Though it was musty and with a leaking roof, long robbed of any comforts, for them it had been an idyll of newfound delight. Billy’s breath is warm against his ear as he mutters reminiscences mingled with inventive new suggestions, one hand pressed over his heart, and it’s a promise for the future, when they can count on privacy, when he’s not so weak, when they have all the time they need to be fully together again.

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True to his word, Abner collects them in his wagon and takes them back to town in the autumn sun. It’s Goodnight’s first time seeing it again, and as they pass the church where men are industriously sawing and planing, the preacher in his shirt-sleeves raising a hand in greeting, he might be Rip van Winkle, awoken from twenty years’ sleep. He’d arrived in a town grim and divided, stretched taut with anxiety and fear: now he sees it as it ought to be, busy and workaday, children at school, storekeepers passing the time of day, wagons unloading lumber or barrels: a small place, full of neighbours and friends. But for him too, it’s a far cry from the way he first came here, riding grim-faced and proud in a band of hired guns, scoffing at the farmers’ efforts to arm themselves, secure in his status. Now he’s wearing a hand-me-down vest, sitting in a wagon like a farmhand, and greeted as they pass with shouts of friendly recognition.

Abner’s place is set back a little way behind the store buildings at the end of the main street, a single-storey cabin of rough planks with tarpaper tacked on for weatherproofing. There’s a little patch of yard behind, but it’s dusty and bare, the chopping block standing alone: clearly no one’s lived here for some time. Abner lifts the latch and leads them inside. The windows are spiderwebbed over and the light inside dim, but it shows them one big room with a rusty-looking iron stove beneath the small front window, the bedroom no more than a partitioned-off corner.

Abner stands in the middle of the room, glancing around. ‘Like I said, ain’t much.’

Goodnight eases himself down onto one of the two dusty chairs that stand at a rough table, the only furniture. ‘We’re not looking for fancy, Mr Gray. What d’you think, Billy?’

Billy peers round the partition, then slips through the door at the side to inspect the little lean-to kitchen; Goodnight doesn’t need to see his face to know this is perfect. Bare and simple as it is, it’s the answer to their needs.

‘Takes me back,’ says Abner. He picks up a dusty green metal clock from its place on the shelf and grins. ‘I remember the day Clancy bought this from a salesman passing through: always was easily took in. Damn thing never told the time worth a cuss.’ He sets it down again and looks around, obviously seeing back into the past. ‘I know it don’t look like much, but we had some good times
‘How long did the two of you live here?’ asks Goodnight curiously. He hears the back door to the yard open and close, and Billy comes in again to lean against the table.

‘Saw four winters through, first getting the land to pay, then hauling lumber and doing the building. Some evenings we’d stagger back here, too tired to cook proper, and ask each other what we’d done taking it on. But we never quarrelled, Clancy’s always been the sweetest-tempered fellow you could hope to meet, and even when I was short with him, he’d just smile slow and say, “Abner, you’ll feel better in a while.”’ He polishes the edge of the stove absentely with his sleeve. ‘Those were good times right enough. Evenings playing cards or popping corn on the fire and drinking a glass or two. Fine voice for a tune Clancy has too, and though he sings the hymns in church, he knows all kinds of songs to make a man laugh or cry. He’d never let me join in, tho’, for I’m as hoarse as a crow myself.’ His expression has become distant with memory, then he shakes himself out of it. ‘Times change, so they do. Think it’ll suit you?’

Goodnight exchanges a smile with Billy, who says, ‘It’s just what we need. We can pay you.’

Abner snorts. ‘I’d be cheeseparing to ask any rent: truth is, place’s been standing empty these last years, and it would be good to see it have some life to it again. Keep it in repair, that’s all.’

‘We can do that,’ says Billy solemnly, and Abner claps him on the back. ‘I’ll send my sons over to get it habitable again, and you can move your gear over in a day or two.’

They’ve little enough to pack up, worldly belongings for both of them just sufficient to fit on the back of a horse. When their saddlebags are dropped into the back of Abner’s wagon and Billy climbs up on the box, Mrs Tillman hands Goodnight a covered basket: ‘Some supplies to get you started off, eggs and butter and so on.’

The gesture, unbounded in its simple kindness, brings to the surface all the gratitude that Goodnight’s struggled to access in the last weeks. After the destruction of the battle every farm and business must be suffering, the work of building the town and mine all to do again, yet these people have shared what they have unstintingly, with him and Billy, with Jack and Faraday, embracing Vasquez and Red Harvest, an outlaw and a native, in simple friendship. And Mrs Tillman has nursed them, protected them, helped them, the soul of patience and generosity: Goodnight bows over her hand, making her laugh. ‘Billy and I will always owe you a great deal for setting us back on our feet.’

‘Get on,’ she says, patting his hand, ‘you’ll come to dinner with us on a Sunday soon.’

From the Tillman farm to Main Street is no great distance, so perhaps it shouldn’t be such a surprise that when they reach town and step down from the wagon, their plans seem already to have been broadcast far and wide. Every passer-by seems to want to play a part: ‘Wintering in the old bachelor cabin?’ asks a matronly woman, ‘I’ll send my Laura over with a pie when you’re settled.’

‘Come along for a drink later,’ calls Davy from the doorway of the Imperial, ‘on the house.’

‘Need any household goods,’ says a skinny man in an apron, coming over to pump their hands, ‘just step along to the store and we can fill your requirements.’

Such lively interest is a little overwhelming, and Goodnight’s glad when they’ve run the gauntlet of thanks and promises and the cabin door closes behind them.
Since they were last here, someone’s been hard at work: one or two new boards stand out pale on the weatherworn roof, and inside the cabin’s been swept out and the floorboards scrubbed, the stove blacked to a shine and the windows cleaned. The green clock is still there on the shelf, but its layer of dust is gone; Mrs Grey has even supplied a rag rug for the floor, and in the kitchen a zinc basin stands on the counter and a bucket underneath.

Goodnight turns an appreciative face to Abner. ‘Shouldn’t have put you to so much trouble,’ but Abner just chuckles. ‘Wasn’t me had the trouble. Sarah had the boys hard at it – she’s a demon when she gets an idea in her head.’

Goodnight tramps over to drop his saddlebags behind the partition, then sinks down onto one of the chairs. ‘Help you with the rest,’ says Abner easily, and soon Billy and he have everything ferried in. Abner takes a final look around and nods in approval. ‘Wood’s outside and kindling in the back; took a birds’ nest out of the flue. Water you’ll get from the well in the square.’

‘Come and see us when we’re settled,’ says Goodnight, and Billy shakes his hand.

‘Don’t go counting on that clock, now,’ says Abner with a grin. ‘You have any difficulties, just let me know.’

They hear the wagon roll away outside, and Billy comes over to lean up against Goodnight. ‘So we’re householders.’

‘First things first,’ says Goodnight, and he puts an arm around him and buries his face in his side; Billy stands scratching his fingers gently through his hair. After so many long weeks, the ease of being alone and undisturbed is a gift.

‘Won’t take long to stow our stuff,’ says Goodnight, but he doesn’t make to move. ‘Should maybe get the stove going. Fetch water.’

‘Give me a minute,’ says Billy, pulling out the other chair. They stare at each other and Billy laughs harshly. ‘Look at us. Pitiful, aren’t we?’

Goodnight understands exactly what he means: it’s the same experience as getting out of bed. After all the expectation and enthusiasm, the reality is disappointingly hard. He tries to rally himself. ‘We’ll get there. At least there’s no one here to watch us shuffle around like old men.’

The basket of food from Mrs Tillman is on the table between them: ‘Don’t suppose we have anything to drink?’ he asks pessimistically. Billy rummages through it and breaks into a smile. ‘Suppose wrong.’

They sit for a while passing the bottle, Goodnight’s arm round Billy’s shoulders, but eventually Billy says, ‘Water. Wood,’ and gets up.

Goodnight stands up creakily too and crosses the room to look round the partition at the end. The space behind is clean but empty, just bare boards and a lone stool. He sighs, all energy gone. ‘Guess we’ll be bedding down on the floor tonight.’

Billy comes out from the kitchen, bucket in hand, and grimaces; Goodnight is amused despite himself. ‘Accustomed to soft living so soon?’

Billy looks troubled. ‘You need a bed: you’re not well enough to be lying on the boards.’
Goodnight closes his eyes, fighting despair. ‘We’ll work with what we have. I can’t haul water, but I can lay out the bedrolls at least.’

Billy strokes his back wordlessly, then makes for the door; as he opens it he curses in surprise, and so does Vasquez, standing on the threshold with his hand raised to knock.

He and Billy stare at each other, then Vasquez scoffs, ‘Give me that,’ grabs the bucket and vanishes again. Billy spreads his hands, amused.

‘First visitor,’ says Goodnight. ‘Lucky we have three chairs.’

‘How did you know we were here?’

Vasquez is wandering round the cabin, inspecting it with a critical eye. ‘How? It is the talk of town, that Mr Robicheaux and Mr Rocks are setting up to stay in Grey’s old place.’ There’s something envious in his tone as he peers into the kitchen. ‘What next to do? You have firewood?’

‘Whole stack of it – Abner’s been slavedriving his sons.’

‘Then what? You are sitting there like owls on a branch; tell me what to do.’

Goodnight and Billy look at each other, then Goodnight says hesitantly, ‘What we really need…’

Even after their mutual understanding, it seems too intimate an admission.

Vasquez raises his eyebrows. ‘What? A pair of rocking chairs? A piano?’

‘A mattress,’ says Goodnight.

‘A bed,’ says Billy.

Vasquez laughs, unworried. ‘Leave it to me. There must be an old bedstead needs restringing in someone’s hayloft.’

It doesn’t take long to arrange their belongings, hanging up gunbelts and clothes on pegs and stowing their scanty cooking gear in the lean-to; Goodnight props his precious books on the shelf next to the clock. By the time they hear a shout from outside the stove is hot, Goodnight’s sitting with coffee to hand, and Billy’s frying bacon.

Vasquez shoulders his way in through the door with an armful of planks and a coil of rope. ‘Found it in one of the barns,’ he announces triumphantly, dropping it with a clatter on the floor, ‘mended the frame and found new ropes for it.’ He goes out again, beckoning Billy to follow, and together they bring in a fat straw tick mattress, manhandling it through the door.

Vasquez squats down in the bedroom, laying out the pieces, and Goodnight takes over at the stove, turning the spitting bacon to the accompaniment of muttered instruction and the occasional burst of energetic Spanish swearing. In what seems no time the frame is hammered together and set up in place, and watching Vasquez thread the ropes and effortlessly pull them taut, Goodnight has depthless admiration for his sunny practicality in a situation so testing for him.

When Vasquez stands back to approve his handiwork, Goodnight’s at a loss for what to say; it’s the oddest gift he’s ever received. Billy nudges Vasquez’ elbow. ‘Thanks, amigo.’
‘Anytime,’ says Vasquez, nudging him back.

‘Stay and eat,’ offers Billy, going back to the stove.

Goodnight smiles a little awkwardly. ‘Much appreciated,’ he says quietly.

Vasquez takes him by the shoulder, face suddenly serious. ‘You saved his life, you and Billy,’ he says earnestly. ‘Bogue’s men would have cut him down before he got ten yards.’

Goodnight presses his arm, taken aback, and says, ‘Water under the bridge,’ as he had to Abner.

‘Never,’ says Vasquez simply.

‘In that case,’ says Goodnight, looking at him deadpan, ‘a rocking chair would be perfect: I could put it in front of the stove.’ Vasquez stares at him for a moment, then bursts out laughing.

Dinner’s a makeshift affair, Billy sprawled on the low stool, the room lit by a single candle-stub and plates in short supply, but as they share the bread and bacon with Mrs Tillman’s preserve a weight of expectation seems to have been lifted from them all. Goodnight watches Vasquez telling jokes and teasing in between shovelling in his food, Billy relaxed into open laughter, his face alive with humour again, and he seems to sense the ghosts of Abner and Clancy beside them, the cabin full of noise and good company once more.

Long after midnight Billy throws their blankets over the mattress, and in that one gesture their home is complete. Goodnight’s already stripping down, tossing his boots into the corner. ‘I feel I should offer to christen the bed,’ he says with a wink, ‘but truthfully, cher, I think I’d pass out.’

‘Get under the blankets, you idiot,’ says Billy affectionately. And with a sigh of satisfaction Goodnight stretches himself out in their new bed.

They’re both far too tired to do anything but sleep, curled into each other; the mattress rustles underneath them, Billy grows heavy against him, and as Goodnight drifts into sleep himself, the future seems full of possibility again, no longer mired in the eternal present of recovery.

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Waking up the next morning, pressed up against Billy’s back, he has a moment of disorientation. This isn’t like the boarding-houses they’ve stayed in their years of travelling, public rooms with framed texts on the walls and much-used furniture. This is a tiny space, clean and bare, and it’s quiet: no strangers thumping up and down stairs, no conversations in the corridor or maids rattling keys. It’s new. They’ve squatted in abandoned places many times, sheltering from bad weather or resting up from trouble, but there’s always been something forlorn about it, homes left empty by an owner dead or vanished, a family moved on, the roof beginning to leak, glass broken and belongings pillaged, animals finding their way in to scavenge or nest. They’ve never thought to clean a place out, mend it, spread out their possessions: it’s never been their way. But now here they are, rifle on the pegs over the door, dishes on the table, in their own bed.

And beside him, Billy. It’s nothing short of miraculous to know that they’re completely alone. He kisses Billy’s shoulder as he stirs against him. ‘Mornin’.

Billy turns to face him, hair tangled and face still soft from sleep. ‘Listen.’

They both listen: there’s a distant sound of activity from the street, the erratic tick of the clock, the
bark of a dog. ‘What?’ asks Goodnight.

‘Privacy. No well-meaning women barging in, no farmhands quarrelling, no gawking visitors.’ And he winds their legs together, pulling him closer with a look of naked desire.

They have all the time they want, for lazy swimming kisses and drifting hands, moving against each other still slow and dreamy, relearning each other’s bodies, their sweet spots and familiar responses; but after a while Billy draws back, touching his cheek, and says, ‘Goody?’

‘Let me give you what you want, sweetheart,’ says Goodnight, and it’s good, nothing but good, to feel Billy hot and hard against him, to stroke and mouth him to groaning abandon, to make a soft smooth space for him between his thighs and feel him thrust and strain, to hear his gasps as he spills into his release.

Goodnight eases him through the ebbing waves of pleasure until his breathing calms, but when Billy begins to return his gentle kisses more ardently, Goodnight reaches to still his caressing hand. Billy wraps his arms around him, close as can be. ‘What can I do?’

Goodnight circles his thumb on his back steady and slow. ‘Just takes time, we know that.’

They lie together in the morning’s stillness, Goodnight winding strands of Billy’s hair through his fingers; Billy draws a breath, hesitates and then says, ‘If-’ and Goodnight says firmly, ‘We’ll not go there now.’

Chapter End Notes

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November

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

By November they’re more settled than they’ve ever been. For years, ever since they met, they’ve always been on the way to somewhere else, their days following the easy rhythm of setting camp – finding water and shelter, cooking, talking over the fire – and moving on again, punctuated by the small luxuries afforded by a few days in town – a hot bath, some gambling, and a night or two in a bed. But now they have a place of their own and between them the new rhythm comes easier than Goodnight expected: cleaning and laying the stove for breakfast, keeping the woodpile stacked and the waterbucket full, washing out clothes and slinging up a rope to dry them, gradually settling into the space around them.

It’s a simple kind of domesticity: they have no sheets or linen, no chests for clothes or fancy dishes; their blackened campfire pots stand on the stove, and their saddles are mounded up in one corner. Nevertheless it’s surprising how quickly objects have begun to accumulate, one by one: an axe and wedge for splitting wood, a lamp that Goodnight bought from the enthusiastic clerk at the hardware store, empty tin piedishes waiting to be returned to friendly neighbours. Borrowed books stack up on the shelf beside Lynch’s jar of salve for aching muscles, and in the lean-to a side of bacon hangs next to jars of preserves.

Their new privacy is the spur to recovery that Goodnight needed. Without strangers to watch he’s free to stumble his way across the room in the mornings, working his leg, to test himself with household tasks, to accede goodnaturedly to Billy’s gentle cajoling into activity. He’s spent hours watching Billy train, honing his reflexes and balance; he’s always admired his discipline, and now he follows him through his exercises in their tiny bedroom every morning; at first he’s clumsy, muscles seizing and reactions slow, but Billy’s encouragement, his teasing, his clever hands on cramping leg or shoulder see him through it, until they’re both warm and flushed with exertion, grinning at each other. He still needs to lean on his cane when he goes out, still tires too easily, but Goodnight limps less heavily, walks with more confidence and day by day Billy’s returning strength is mirrored in his own body.

First on his list of obligations now they’re back in town is to make the short walk to Lynch’s surgery to see Faraday. It’s not a visit he’s keen to pay: he didn’t warm to Faraday even before they reached Rose Creek – too boastful, too conceited, desperate to make himself the centre of attention – and after, his own cowardice proven twice over, he would have been well pleased not to see him again. But by one courageous act Faraday’s put them all in his debt and bought a world of trouble for himself; Goodnight owes it to him and to Vasquez to see if he can turn his own recent experience of weakness and frustration to practical use.

Mrs Lynch, as energetic and cheerful as her husband, opens the door and waves him through the house to a small bedroom at one side of the consulting-room. It’s pleasant enough, with a low bed and a chest holding an array of instruments and bottles; the window gives a view of the road in and out of the valley. Still, Goodnight has a sharp memory of confinement, and he’s not surprised to see Faraday sitting up in an uncomfortable tangle of blankets, greeting him with a hostile stare.

‘Goodnight. Come to reckon up the damage for yourself?’ His prickly defensiveness is all too understandable: the handsome face that he traded on is patchworked with fading burns, his ear a knot of torn flesh, still pink from healing, and more scarring runs down his neck to disappear under his
bedshirt. His hair has grown in patchy, like his stubble, and Goodnight tries unsuccessfully not to let his gaze settle on his missing fingers. Faraday holds up his hand defiantly. ‘Take a good look and have done with it.’

It’s just as Billy said, and Goodnight tries to brush aside the pity and guilt that swell within him, knowing they’re of no use to either of them. ‘So you’re to be a one-eared Jack?’

The approach proves the right one as Faraday coughs out a laugh of surprise. ‘Guess I should be grateful I’m not one-legged too.’

‘Gratitude,’ says Goodnight, pulling up a chair and sitting down carefully, ‘is a commodity I found to be in considerably shorter supply than everyone seemed to expect. That and patience.’

‘Don’t seem to be doing so bad now,’ says Faraday, eyes still sharp, and Goodnight has to admit how he must appear: in his new coat, boots polished, gunbelt on his hip again, who’s to say he’s not just the same as ever?

‘Heard you sent Sam away when he came visiting.’

‘Yeah, well…’ Unusually, Faraday seems a little shamefaced. ‘Ain’t what I want to hear, how everyone else is waltzin’ off to see to their business and me stuck here.’

Goodnight grins. ‘I told him he should go and not come back,’ and Faraday relaxes just a little. Testing the water, Goodnight says, ‘Felt neverending to me when I was in those splints, specially when Billy was mending so much faster. But soon as you’re up and dressed it feels different.’

‘Can get up,’ snaps Faraday irritably, though he doesn’t offer to demonstrate.

Goodnight ploughs on. ‘You could let folk visit, though. Pass the time.’

Faraday scowls again. ‘Ain’t having it. Whole goddam town’d be paradin’ though here if I gave ‘em the chance, come to gawk at me and tell me the Lord saved me.’

Goodnight sighs inwardly; Faraday’s mood is as black as reported, and how could it be otherwise, lying alone contemplating his injuries? I had Billy. For the thousandth time Goodnight reflects how little he deserves the endless gift of Billy’s steady presence, his company, his jokes and encouragement. Still, platitudes aren’t all he’s brought with him.

Faraday’s following his own train of thought. ‘Be on my feet again soon, Lynch says, and I tell you, first thing I’ll be seeing is the inside of a saloon.’

‘Enforced temperance is a burden that few godfearing folks seem to recognise,’ says Goodnight, reaching into his pocket, ‘that’s one thing I did remember.’

Faraday’s fingers are clumsy with the flask, but he works at it, and when he gets it undone he takes a long pull, throat working, sighs in pleasure and then takes another. ‘Now you’re an entertaining visitor right enough,’ he deadpans, ‘please do think of calling again,’ and for the first time there’s a flash of something like truce between them.

Goodnight accepts the flask back, shakes it in mock dismay, then leaves it on the blanket. ‘Not the only thing I brought.’

He reaches into his pocket to produce Josiah’s copy of Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, earning a contemptuous snort from Faraday. ‘Don’t need storybooks, I’m not a kid.’
‘When I was still abed,’ says Goodnight, ignoring him, ‘I’d have gone out of my mind without
something to read, and Billy appreciated hearing this one too. So I’ve got a tale we both like, and
frankly’ - he opens the book with a bland smile - ‘how do you suppose you’re going to stop me?’

He makes himself comfortable and begins: ‘The year 1866 was signalised by a remarkable incident,
a mysterious and puzzling phenomenon, which doubtless no one has yet forgotten.’

He’s careful to pitch his voice clearly; Faraday fidgets at first, muttering insulting comments, but as
Goodnight reads, his face gradually alters from resentment to curiosity to open concentration,
transported from the confines of a small California mining town to the deck of the frigate Abraham
Lincoln in the company of Professor Aronnax.

They’re both too absorbed in their tale of cetaceans and submarine sailing vessels to notice a creak at
the door, and the apple which flies past Goodnight’s ear to land with a thump on the bed makes them
both jump. ‘Still lying down, güero?’

Vasquez has his shirtsleeves pushed up, his hair and skin dusted with chaff; his inexhaustible vigour
always makes Goodnight feel tired, but the contrast between him and Faraday as they exchange grins
is stark. Vasquez’ tan shows how weeks inside have left Faraday pallid, while the bronzed muscles
of his neck and forearms emphasise how much bulk his companion has lost, thin under his shirt. But
some of the old brash enthusiasm is back as Faraday gestures: ‘Goody’s fault – he’s been readin’.

Vasquez looks sceptical. ‘Otherwise you’d have been hard at it, eh?’

‘Course,’ says Faraday, biting into the apple. ‘How are you here anyway? Thought you were doing
an honest day’s work.’

Goodnight would admit he’s been curious to see them together since Vasquez’ hints of what’s
developed between them; before, no one could have mistaken their sharp-edged sparring and the
sparking challenge that fell just this side of dangerous, but he’s wondered what it would look like
now, after they’ve been through the fire. He knows how hard he finds it to school his face when he
looks at Billy, and how he treasures the soft affection he catches in his lover’s eyes; but the
brightness in the two faces he sees now is enough to light up the room, so naked as to make him cast
his eyes back down to the page.

‘What would you know about that?’ scoffs Vasquez, sweeping clothes from the chest. ‘Ms Cullen,
she came with us into town to McLane’s for feed, and once we are loaded she said she would be half
an hour. Lyle is gone to the bar, and I would rather be there too, but I thought I would make up for
my sins and come and see you.’

‘Rather be there myself than with some damn Texican bossing me round,’ growls Faraday, the
undercurrent of entertainment plain to hear.

‘I should go,’ says Goodnight, closing the book, ‘though don’t imagine you’ll escape another chapter
tomorrow,’ and Faraday shares his new-found grin with him.

‘Could stand to hear some more.’

‘Come on, Joshua,’ orders Vasquez, ‘on your feet to see him off.’ There’s a fine line to tread with
any invalid between care and condescension, and more so with a man as touchy as Faraday, yet
Vasquez seems to have his measure; Faraday grumbles, but he flips the covers aside and hauls
himself to the edge of the bed with a string of profanities.
Goodnight feels a twinge of sympathy for Mrs Lynch. ‘Don’t think I cursed Billy as creatively when he dragged my sorry ass out of bed.’

‘Lot of things in short supply round here,’ says Faraday curtly, ‘but cursing ain’t one of ‘em,’ and Goodnight laughs, busying himself with his flask, book and cane while Vasquez helps Faraday with his boots. ‘Don’t tie ‘em like that, you savage,’ he grumbles, but he doesn’t flinch from the hands that touch his injured skin.

Vasquez sighs theatrically. ‘Cabrón, when were you so fussy? You’d been wearing the same shirt for a month when I met you.’

‘Still didn’t smell as bad as you.’

Goodnight recognises it, the way the world falls away around them in each other’s company, and it warms him despite himself to see Faraday standing up, hiding a wince as he puts his weight on his leg, Vasquez steadying him unobtrusively. ‘We’ll be getting an honest day’s work out of you before you know it.’

Faraday snorts again. ‘Can’t say I’ve ever made the acquaintance of one of those, dishonest day’s work havin’ always been more in my line.’

‘Well,’ says Goodnight, suddenly taken with an idea, ‘you’ll no doubt need to be getting in some practice again at parting fools and their money, and if the inside of the saloon is what you want to see, why not start as you mean to go on? Sam’s still here, and I’ll pass the word to Jack, we can all sit round the table again.’

Seeing the way Faraday’s mood has altered with company and interest, he’s optimistic, and it strikes him as appropriate: not a victory celebration, too much happened for that, but a way to declare themselves all finally recovered after the long slow months.

‘Smart thinking, Goody,’ says Faraday, and Vasquez claps him on the shoulder.

Goodnight pauses at the door. ‘When Lynch passes you fit, we can make it soon as you like – just let me know.’

He bows over Mrs Lynch’s hand, then pauses outside, considering. Reading’s dry work, and the idea of a drink or two is tempting, but Billy’s up at the church, helping out with the monumental labour of rebuilding; a full day’s work is still beyond him, but he can put in an hour or two planing boards or replacing window frames. Goodnight’s useless for any such tasks yet, and, Billy would say, hardly better even when fit, but he can keep him company, passing nails, sharing his cigarettes and criticising his technique, and make sure he doesn’t try to do too much. The church, then, not the saloon, and he sets off up the street.

Still a little stiff from sitting down so long, he has to take it slowly, and he’s leaning against the cemetery railing when he sees Emma Cullen coming towards him, brushing dust from her skirt. It’s not unexpected – he’d had a suspicion why she’d taken the time alone – and he doesn’t wish to intrude on a private moment, but Emma calls out to him, ‘Goodnight.’

He takes her hand. ‘Vasquez said you were taking a little time from your business.’ Her eyes are red, naturally, but dressed for work, her hair a cloud of russet, she looks a little more like the woman he knows.

Emma attempts a smile. ‘It seems wrong somehow, to come into town and not visit with him.’
whole side of her life, unknown to any of them: she’d met them already a widow.

‘I’m sorry that none of us knew him,’ he says formally. ‘Matthew was a brave man.’

‘He was,’ says Emma, bitterly. ‘And now he’s gone and many worth less than him survived to enjoy what he won’t.’ She jerks her head, and Goodnight follows her gaze to see Gavin, speaking to two of his girls on the balcony of the Elysium.

‘Matthew would be proud of you, for what you did,’ says Goodnight gently.

Her face closes. ‘How would you know?’

Of course she’s raw: he can see the grief held in check below her surface calm. ‘I don’t think Matthew could have married you if he wanted a woman who’d wait to be told what to do,’ he says, and it’s the right thing, because she laughs despite herself.

‘That’s true. He could have had any girl in town for snapping his fingers, he was a handsome man, but he asked me, though I’d pushed him into the pigpen when we were nine years old.’ The smile conjured up by the memory is genuine. ‘Always thought he could do with taking down a peg or two.’

She raises her face towards him, and in it he sees the ghost of the well-matched bride she once was. ‘He never wanted me to admire him and agree with him like the rest of them; he had a way of listening to what I said, and he was always kind…’

Goodnight doesn’t know what to say, afraid to pull her from the happiness of the past to the sad present, but she looks up towards the newly-sawn skeleton of the church and the light goes out in her again. ‘But that’s past.’ She’s young to despair, Goodnight thinks, but then, some loves can’t be replaced and who is he to say if it’s that way for her?

‘Heading back to the feed store?’ he prompts, and she shakes herself determinedly back to the here and now, taking the arm he offers. ‘If you spoke to Vasquez you must have been with Faraday.’

‘Reading to him,’ says Goodnight. ‘Length of time he’s spent abed is dull enough for any man. Though he’s promising to be on his feet again soon.’

‘Did Vasquez say, he’ll be coming to the farm to live for the next while?’

‘He didn’t get the chance,’ says Goodnight, ‘and it’s good of you.’ It’s true: it’ll be a long time before Faraday will be earning his keep.

Emma shakes her head dismissively. ‘I imagine Vasquez is the one who’s going to need the patience, not me.’ She hesitates, then adds quietly, ‘It’s a way forward. For me, I mean. I know what I don’t want, but I think I’m a little closer to finding out what I do.’

‘I think Matthew would be proud of that too, says Goodnight quietly.

Emma looks around her, at the women out with their baskets, the children running along the street. ‘Hardly the only one with a future that looks different.’ They’ve reached the wagon with its load of sacks; she looks at him closely for a moment, her expression hard to read, then asks, ‘You and Billy settled in?’

‘Surprised you need to ask: everyone seems to know our business, and the number of pies we’ve eaten – you’d think they’d never seen two men manage alone.’
Emma laughs, and it clearly does her good because she squares her shoulders, businesslike again. ‘That’s town life for you - can’t hide a single thing: now for instance, there’s Lyle thinking I don’t see him sneaking out of the bar in broad daylight.’

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Goodnight would be lying if he said that the overwhelming interest of the town in his and Billy’s affairs doesn’t grate on him sometimes – the cheerful conversational overtures as soon as he sets foot outside, the sense that everyone in the town knows where he goes and what he does. But now at least they’re not constantly in public view or hearing as they are in boarding-house or saloon; now they have their own space. They can spend an afternoon on the repair work or an evening drinking, but when the cabin door closes behind them, flimsy though it is, what they do behind it is private, their sleeping arrangements nobody’s concern but their own.

Their new situation is visibly doing Billy good. He’s more relaxed, tending to household chores in shirtsleeves, hair loose, able to drop the wary mask he wears in front of all but Goodnight. They’ll never be good sleepers, either of them, and many nights they still see out sitting and smoking, talking quietly in the silent hours, but life is calm enough that it helps a little, and as men of leisure they can doze into the morning in a sleepy embrace. And they eat better: they’re used to going hungry when their supplies run low between towns, or faced with thin pickings at a cheeseparing hotel, but there’s no need of that here; they don’t lack for provisions, their neighbours as good as their word with pies and baskets of fruit or vegetables, and Goodnight’s glad to see Billy eat his fill. For his part Billy begins to take interest in cooking, drawing on skills long disused to bake their bread, and he goes out now and then to hunt and bring back a rabbit or a bird for their pot, expanding their menu beyond bacon and beans.

The new ease shows in his actions too. Goodnight comes back one day from speaking to Josiah at the schoolhouse, a borrowed volume of poems in hand, to hear a strange clanking from the back yard. Outside he finds Billy scrubbing energetically at a battered tin bathtub. He looks up with a triumphant grin. ‘Found it just hanging around: won’t take much to get it clean.’

‘We can bath every Saturday, like respectable folks,’ says Goodnight, delighted by his enthusiasm.

‘Be good for your leg too,’ says Billy more seriously.

‘Says the man who soaks like a salamander,’ teases Goodnight. ‘Want to give it a try right away? I’ll fire up the stove.’

When the tub is scoured and set in front of the stove, and Goodnight’s heated enough water to fill it up, ‘After you, cher,’ he offers. Billy takes his shirt off, always a rewarding sight, but to Goodnight’s surprise he drapes it carefully over the window. ‘Protecting the sensibilities of the townsfolk?’ he jokes.

‘Who knows what they might see,’ agrees Billy, stepping closer to start on Goodnight’s vest buttons. ‘Thought we could find out whether two men will fit in it together.’

Goodnight pretends to survey the tub dubiously. ‘They’d have to be very closely acquainted. And they’d be more so after they were done.’

‘Perhaps a bit intimate,’ agrees Billy, suppressing his laughter more effectively than Goodnight, ‘but it would make the hot water go further.’

‘Now that’s different,’ says Goodnight, bending to tug off his boots, ‘if it’s in the interests of household economy it would be profligate of me-.’
Billy puts a finger to his lips to cut him off. ‘We won’t fit all your fancy talk in there as well.’

Goodnight lets Billy finish stripping them off, pours in a fresh pail of hot water, and they try the tub for size. It’s a challenge, too many limbs and water splashing everywhere: chest to back proves too much of a squeeze, and Goodnight’s leg cramps when he kneels down. ‘Not convinced this is going to work,’ he pants, but ‘Where’s your scientific curiosity?’ demands Billy, pulling him down into his lap.

They end up face to face in a tangle of legs, helpless with laughter at their own ridiculousness, and Goodnight just loves him, Billy who can be so taciturn and threatening in public and so playful in private. ‘You reckon this is what respectable people do?’ he wonders, winding a hand into black hair damp from sweat and steam.

Billy grabs the soap, face alight with mischief. ‘They wash. That’s what baths are about.’

There’s some washing achieved, certainly, though there’s more water on the floor, a lot of low-pitched chuckling and a certain amount of kissing, until Goodnight decides they’re clean enough, stands them both up to sluice down with a final pail of clean water and takes them to tumble onto the bed in a haze of heated skin, soap scent and wet hair.

They both know that desire is still not there for him, and there’s a moment, just a moment, when Billy meets his eyes, face troubled, ready to stop, but Goodnight rolls him over determinedly and sets to with hands and mouth. He won’t let this change their way: he can make it good, share what he can without asking Billy to hold back, and soon he has him as loud as he could wish, fingers tight in his hair as he teases him, drawing it out long and slow.

After, when Goodnight’s lying with his head against Billy’s thigh, stroking gentle circles on his shin, Billy asks quietly, ‘Is there anything…’ but Goodnight deflects the question with a last gentle nip of his teeth. Takes time, that’s all.

He slides back up the bed to lie with his head on Billy’s shoulder, and Billy puts his arms around him, sure and comforting.

‘So, bath every Saturday?’ murmurs Goodnight against his neck.

‘Whether we need it or not,’ says Billy firmly.

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‘Forgotten something?’

Goodnight’s already standing by the door, spruce in clean shirt and new coat; at Billy’s impatient look he checks his pockets for watch and cigarette case with an innocent air. ‘All in order, cher.’

Billy raises his eyebrows and glances significantly towards the cane propped against the table, but Goodnight lifts his chin. ‘Not hobbling into the saloon like an old man.’

Billy seems distinctly unimpressed by such vanity. ‘You think anyone will be looking at you with Faraday there?’ He picks up his hat.

‘Probably not,’ concedes Goodnight, opening the door for them, ‘but I don’t need reminding what a crock I am.’

‘Just don’t expect me to carry you home,’ warns Billy darkly, but he’s ready beside him when they step off the boardwalk so Goodnight can rest a hand on his shoulder.
‘Anyway, more attention he attracts the better; help us achieve our objective.’

‘Our?’ Billy gives him a look of pure exasperation. ‘Prising secrets out of Sam isn’t my concern.’

‘Don’t tell me you’re not curious – the way he’s back and forth to Edison every fortnight, his sudden sympathy for widows?’

‘And you’re going to hound him till he tells you?’ asks Billy, lips twitching.

‘What friends are for,’ agrees Goodnight cheerfully.

Inside the Elysium it’s both like and unlike the last time they were all here: then the seven of them sat in solitary splendour, the townsfolk observing them with mixed admiration and suspicion, and their own camaraderie was still hesitant, Faraday and Vasquez’ clowning the glue to hold them together. Now when Goodnight and Billy walk through the doors they find Jack and Sam in conversation with Hinz and his clerk from the hardware store; Emmett Tillman, drinking with two of the farmhands, raises his glass in greeting.

‘Goodnight, Billy,’ Davy says cheerfully, ‘what’ll it be?’ Even Red Harvest is there, though he’s sitting alone with his back to a pillar and a watchful expression; Billy touches Goodnight’s arm and crosses the room to join him.

He’d half expected to find Vasquez and Faraday already there, but after some time with no sign of them the five of them find themselves a table. Goodnight’s just considering how best to tackle Sam when Jack gives him a perfect opening. ‘Will you be staying with us for long?’

‘No,’ says Sam, ‘be off again soon, back to Edison to scare up some more work.

‘Sheriff there must be glad of your assistance,’ observes Goodnight blandly.

Sam nods. ‘Truth of it is, he does welcome it. Hancock, his name is, and he’s an honest man, and that’s rare enough in a public official, but he isn’t young, and he says himself his days of chasing round the countryside are done. So he’s happy for me and Red to bring in wrongdoers for him.’

Goodnight cocks his head. ‘Got an eye on his job?’

It’s half a joke, but to his surprise Sam takes it seriously. ‘I’ve been approached. Not so much work to do in the town as to justify it, even somewhere sizeable as that, but maybe as a Ranger across the territory...’

Goodnight raises his glass to toast him. ‘Well I’ll be damned, Sam Chisolm putting down roots at last.’

‘Now don’t go jumping the gun, Goody,’ says Sam mildly, ‘roots is saying a lot. But staying round here, well, I can see some advantages.’

‘Good place, good people,’ agrees Jack. He’s never going to look much like a townsman, even with his beard trimmed and without his hide vest, but he seems to have become part of the community more easily than any of them.

‘Made any particular acquaintance over there?’ asks Goodnight. ‘Man of your reputation won’t want for company, I don’t suppose.’ Teasing Sam is so enjoyable.

‘Don’t rightly see what you’re driving at,’ says Sam, eyeing him suspiciously, and Billy stifles a laugh.
‘Be pleased to see you back, is all,’ says Goodnight, draining his glass. It’s never very often that he can fluster him, but he relishes it on the rare occasions he can. ‘Whoever she is.’ The way Sam chokes on his drink is so satisfying.

Sam’s expression makes plain that he’s unwilling to be drawn further, so Goodnight proposes a game of cards; Jack declines, but Hinz and his clerk are more than willing to join them; Goodnight looks for Billy as he shuffles the deck, used to having him at his side though he’s no more than an indifferent poker player, but he and Red Harvest are absorbed in discussion, heads together over a piece of paper – from what he can see Red is drawing a map of some kind, tracing out different features.

It’s easy company, and playing his hands and telling tales, a little expansive with drink, Goodnight feels more like himself than for a long while. The time passes unheeded, and it’s not until Hinz declares himself cleaned out that a glance at the clock shows it past eleven. He raises his eyebrows at Sam: no show, then.

None of them seems ready to say it aloud, but the evident failure of his plan casts a pall on the evening, and he’s not sorry to call it a night. When he gets to his feet he’s stiffened up more than he expected, despite the whiskey, and he staggers on his weak leg, clutching at the back of the chair; the flash of irritation at revealing his weakness confirms his growing suspicion.

‘Gentlemen, it’s been a pleasure,’ he says, gathering his winnings and picking up his hat. He winks at one of the girls who’ve been keeping them half-hearted company, but when Billy materialises at his side he smiles at him warm and private. ‘Home, cher?’

*Home.* It’s strange to say it, and strange to lift the latch of their own door. Goodnight takes in the possessions spreading to fill the space, the cabin beginning to settle to their form like a well-worn coat. He’s never looked for this, never thought of it: home for him has long been a place past and out of reach. Yet here it is, a temporary shelter patchworked together out of other people’s lives, effortlessly knitting itself around them. He shucks off coat and vest while Billy clatters in the lean-to, returning with plate and knives, and they share the last of the bread and cheese, stripped down to their shirtsleeves, Billy recounting with quiet enthusiasm what Red Harvest told him, about caves and an underground river. Neither of them shows surprise when after a while there’s a soft knock at the door.

Standing in the middle of the room, Vasquez makes the cabin seem suddenly small. He runs a hand through his hair. ‘He would not…’ He’s dressed up in patterned waistcoat and red sash, and in that and his miserable expression Goodnight reads the whole story of the evening.

‘Couldn’t face it after all?’ he asks gently. He vacates his chair and Vasquez slumps into it with a gusty sigh.

‘It was – like that.’ He clicks his fingers. ‘We were at the door, he was saying he should have his guns, it was not right without them, but then, to go outside … He would not.’

Goodnight can imagine the argument: he looks at Billy. ‘My fault. Should have guessed it might not be so easy.’ Though what alternative does Faraday have? *Has to face it sooner or later, and not as though he won’t be the hero of the hour.*

‘It is not just the saloon, just people. He hates it all. He must walk, Lynch tells him so, to make the muscles stretch and work, but I must drag him to do it, every day. He must learn to use his hands again, but he cannot bear to look.’ The despair in his tone is uncharacteristic, the cost of the evening
Goodnight opens his mouth to commiserate, but Billy cuts across him unexpectedly. ‘Three weeks ago,’ he says evenly, ‘you were swearing to stay forever. This is just the beginning. Now’s the time to leave, if you can’t take it.’ The words are harsh, but spoken with a dispassionate calm; better than anything he could say.

Vasquez stiffens. ‘I am not leaving. But…’

‘But?’ prompts Goodnight. Vasquez hunches forward, staring at the table. ‘It was going to be different. We said, if it all worked and Bogue was dead, when we earned our money, we would take off together, the two of us, to play cards and make money, to find trouble. But now? Nothing is going to be as it was, and he is starting to see.’

‘You get what you take,’ says Billy at once, sharp as one of his own blades. They both look at him; Billy spreads his hands. ‘Future’s there for the shaping: make him a new one.’

When men look at Billy they see the coiled readiness, the arrogance and the self-belief; only Goodnight sees his gentleness, his boyish humour, his loving concern. But deeper down, below everything, at the heart is the core of steel that even Goodnight rarely glimpses. Billy’s never waited for his future to happen: he’s self-made, a man who carved out his life from raw earth and bare rock, hacking it into being one painful day after another. Why would he offer sympathy?

Vasquez seems to be about to argue, but Goodnight leans forward across the table. ‘Be honest. The card-sharping and chasing women and being run out of town; how long would he have lasted like that? How long would you? Plenty of folk aren’t going to get the future they counted on, Emma Cullen told me that, but you still have a chance at something, together.’

Vasquez’ shoulders are still slumped. ‘Not if he will not let himself be seen.’ He looks around, and says suddenly, ‘This is what we need, somewhere like this. Not the farmhouse. You are so much easier here, I see it.’

Goodnight casts a glance at Billy, remembering the coming and going of the Tillman house that they had found so oppressive. ‘You’re right,’ he says, ‘Give him a chance to get back to himself.’ But where? ‘Don’t know of another old place like this in town, but maybe there’s a bunkhouse or such near the farm? Wouldn’t have to be more than a roof and four walls, you could fix up a hole in the ground.’

Vasquez seems re-energised by the idea, unfolding himself from the chair. ‘I will find somewhere. There must be – I will ask.’

‘And we – it was too much, I misjudged it. We can try again, smaller, once he’s used to himself. Get the pair of you over here for a night, maybe, play some cards.’

After he’s left and they turn in to sleep, Billy’s unusually silent. ‘What is it, cher?’ asks Goodnight to his turned back.

Billy’s voice is muffled as he pulls his shirt over his head. ‘Their choice. It’s here, isn’t it? Giving up all their plans and staying here. Becoming farmhands.’

Goodnight sighs inwardly; this isn’t about Faraday and Vasquez, he knows. He sits on the edge of the mattress. ‘Anyone can see Faraday’s never going to be the same. He won’t admit it – probably the idea of getting on his horse and riding away is the only thing that’s pulled him through – but the
sooner Vasquez comes to terms with it, the sooner he can be sure of his decision.

Billy comes to stand in front of him, tilting up his chin so Goodnight looks at him. ‘Not us, though.’ After all this time, their bond can still seem a delicate construction, the more fragile for being so recently shattered and rebuilt.

Goodnight takes Billy’s hands. ‘We’ll not be turning farmhand, cher. I’m grateful for the chance to recover, but a few months and we’ll be on the road again.’ Billy turns out the lamp, then comes to sit down, no more than a shape in the dark; Goodnight strokes gently over his back. ‘Is it so bad here?’ He feels the shrug. ‘Of course not; we’ve seen bad.’ Goodnight lays himself down carefully and holds the blanket up in invitation; Billy stretches out beside him. ‘It just gets – too crowded. People, all the time. I like it better on our own.’ It’s those statements, simple and unembarrassed, which touch him more profoundly than any flowery declaration could.

‘I know,’ says Goodnight gently. This time, the answer isn’t far to seek. ‘If you’re too shut in here, you could ride out a bit. Give the horses some proper exercise. Maybe go with Red and see what he was talking about.’

Billy rolls over to face him, pulling the blankets so they can lie close. ‘I could. I will. I’ll speak to him.’ Relaxation and warmth are already threatening to claim him, but against his shoulder Goodnight can feel that his smile is back.

He settles into Billy’s embrace and closes his eyes. Let him fly like the hawk, as long as he comes circling back to me.

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A few days later, early in the morning, it’s past time for Billy to leave, his horse saddled and waiting, but instead he paces about restlessly. ‘There’s wood chopped out back; you’ll need to get water, but make two trips if you have to, don’t overfill the bucket. Plenty you can call on if you need help.’

It’s touching, but also exasperating: ‘I’m not going to need help for one day,’ says Goodnight patiently. ‘Unless…’

Billy tenses. ‘Unless?’

‘Unless the chimney catches fire, or a gang of bandits turns up to rob the town, or Teddy challenges me to a fight.’ Billy simply stares at him until Goodnight puts his arms round him repentantly.

‘You’ll be back tonight. I can manage.’

‘Can’t blame me for fussing,’ says Billy quietly, and in his hug, still habitually careful of his healed ribs, Goodnight feels the reproach. ‘I’m mending,’ he says firmly, and Billy kisses him hard.

‘I know. Just don’t go near the belltower again.’

‘Won’t see me anywhere in the vicinity, you can count on that. Go and stretch your legs, cher.’

He stands in the doorway to watch as Billy rides off, his horse as eager as he for the open spaces; at the edge of town his tiny figure meets that of Red Harvest, and the two of them spur into a gallop, up the rise and over the hill. An unexpected pang of jealousy wakes in him at their uninhibited joy in the freedom: he’s always loved the feeling when civilisation drops away behind to leave just emptiness around them, clean and wild, the days of riding for the pleasure of seeing over the next hill, the simplicity of the evening camp. Of course Billy wants it: he wants it too, if only it could always be like that, if they could have the good without the bad, the snappish rainy days and hungry nights, the
unfriendly towns and contests that turn ugly. His leg twinges as he turns away. We gave a lot for Rose Creek.

Back indoors he sets more coffee to brew, then sits to consider their affairs. A small pile of coins lies on the table, the remnant of his winnings from Sam and Hinz at the saloon: some ready money has been a welcome thing. He’s certain they could see out the winter on Rose Creek’s goodwill, their horses at grass on the Cullen farm, the storekeepers happy to chalk up their purchases indefinitely and neighbours vying to stand them drinks, and they’re owed it, no doubt of that, but still, he hates to be so beholden, gratitude only a few steps from condescension. They need coins in their pockets, and he stacks and rearranges the quarters and dimes absently as he gives it thought.

They’ve hired out their labour in the past as drive hands or guides to travellers; they’ve gambled, fought, brought in the odd lawbreaker for a reward. But what can he do now, still walking with a cane? He’s in no state to ride out with Sam, and he can hardly sit in the saloon every evening attempting to part the citizens of Rose Creek from their cash. And Billy, a labourer? As well set a tiger to pull a cart. It’s a conundrum to which there seems no immediate answer. Well, if he’s not working for his living like Sam or Vasquez, he can at least enjoy it while it lasts. He pours the coffee, props his feet on the other chair and opens his copy of the Sacramento Herald.

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At four o’clock he’s waiting outside the schoolhouse, Herald under his arm, as eager as the pupils inside to hear the clock chime. The chant of grammar ends, there’s a moment’s pregnant silence, then door flies open and the children come streaming out, the older ones decorously, leading younger brothers or sisters by the hand, the younger shoving and chasing, shouts of excitement filling the street. Josiah comes out last, Anthony by his side, surveying his charges: he breaks into a smile as Goodnight brandishes the newspaper, clearly guessing why he’s come.

But before he can cross the road Goodnight feels a tug at his coat; he looks down to see a semi-circle of wide-eyed boys. ‘Say, sir, you’re Mr Robicheaux, ain’t you?’ asks one.

‘I am,’ says Goodnight seriously.

‘Mr Horne says you can hit a target at half a mile,’ says the boy admiringly.

‘You shot all those Blackstones,’ adds his friend eagerly, ‘one after another, from the belltower.’

‘And Mr Rocks,’ chimes in a third, looking about optimistically. ‘Is he here too with all his knives?’

‘I’m afraid not,’ says Goodnight, taken aback by such enthusiasm.

The third boy turns to the others. ‘He killed a man just over there: I saw. Stabbed him right through. Like this.’ He pantomimes stabbing his friend, who collapses dramatically, gurgling: it’s funny, but at the same time it sets Goodnight’s stomach churning.

The boy makes to stab another of them, but this one mimics drawing a gun. ‘Knife won’t work on me: I draw quick as Sam Chisolm and fill you full of lead!’

Goodnight’s beginning to break out in a sweat; he doesn’t know why a harmless game should take him like this.

‘You go on home and stop bothering Mr Robicheaux.’ Josiah’s not loud, but he’s firm and the boys scatter, though the play-fight’s not over; they dodge down the street, aiming at each other round the corners of buildings.
Josiah seems to divine his mood. ‘Can’t blame them for taking it lightly: most exciting thing that’s ever happened to them.’

‘Not something I care to relive,’ says Goodnight a little hoarsely.

‘They’re young,’ says Josiah mildly, leading the way back to the schoolhouse. ‘At that age it just seems an adventure. And you’re the heroes, after all. Their fathers are farmers or clerks.’ He smiles down at Anthony, still waiting in the doorway. ‘Or schoolteachers. They admire you.’

‘Then they’re fools,’ says Goodnight with more asperity than he intends. ‘Killing, nobody should take pride in that.’ They pass through the empty schoolroom, slates neatly arranged on the desks, to the small living room behind; Goodnight’s calming, breath coming more easily again. ‘Do better to want to be like you.’

Josiah’s never anything but soft-spoken, but there’s an unexpected edge of bitterness to his tone. ‘Most of the boys are going to be farmers, and beyond ciphering their fathers see no virtue in schooling: once they’re half-grown the boys can’t get out of the door fast enough.’

‘Never was my way,’ says Goodnight. "Though it didn’t change where I ended up, did it?"

‘Anyway,’ says Josiah, shaking out his jacket and draping it on the back of his chair, ‘I don’t expect you came just to commiserate with the schoolteacher’s lot. See if your mother will bring us tea,’ he adds to Anthony, who ducks away obediently.

‘I came,’ says Goodnight, unfolding the Herald, ‘because of this idiotic article. Some hidebound fool making an “appraisal” of Whitman. Have you read it?’

‘I thought it would set your teeth on edge,’ smiles Josiah.

Goodnight snorts. ‘Man who wrote it obviously has a cloth ear and a heart of granite: it’s like asking a Methodist preacher to review a Tennessee whisky! He says the only poem worth reading is that dreadful doggerel about Lincoln’s death. Just listen to this—’ and he reads aloud the most egregious passages while Clara sets teacups in front of them.

‘You put it very eloquently,’ says Josiah, amused, when Goodnight finally runs out of steam. ‘You know, you should write a rebuttal, explain the fellow’s errors.’

‘Someone should,’ agrees Goodnight. ‘Or at least tell them to employ a reviewer who belongs in this century.’

‘I’m serious,’ insists Josiah. ‘You’d do the work better justice, that’s plain, and they’d print it under your name, no doubt of that.’

The idea brings Goodnight up short. He can’t imagine any editor taking his views seriously, but perhaps he does have a reason to try. He’s dragged his reputation behind him, for good or ill, for so long: might this be a way to redeem some small measure of value from it? ‘I might, at that,’ he says thoughtfully.

‘It would be a boon to all right-thinking men,’ says Josiah, straight-faced.

Back home, after setting dinner to cook, he can’t banish Josiah’s suggestion. Words flow easily for him, they always have and the reviewer is wrong, flat wrong: if no one else is likely to protest, then perhaps he should. He’s rehearsed his opinions to Billy often enough; hell, Billy could probably
write the article himself. If the reading public get to hear his views this time rather than his impossibly patient partner, maybe everyone can benefit.

He draws a sheet of paper towards him, folds the *Herald* to the offending columns and props it up, then dips his pen in the ink. Faced with a blank sheet, the presumption of what he’s proposing to do paralyses his hand: who is he to pass judgement on poetry? He’s had more education than many, for what that’s worth, but he’s no man of letters; what makes him think that anyone should care for his opinion? But he casts an eye over the sneering dismissal of Whitman’s work once more and irritation hardens his resolve. If this horseshit can bear printing, so can his own views. He dips his pen afresh and begins.

It takes a few false starts, but once he finds his way the writing absorbs him and the evening passes unnoticed, book open in front of him, written sheets piling up next to his neglected glass. By the time he sets down his pen and sits back with satisfaction, stretching out his fingers, six sheets covered in his florid handwriting lie complete, and the cloth-eared reviewer’s arguments lie scattered in the dust. Will it see print? *Who knows?* But it feels a job well done, and he folds the sheets and addresses the envelope before he can change his mind; it can go with the mail in the morning.

The pot of stew is simmering temptingly on the stove, and he sets out a bottle and glasses in preparation for Billy’s return: it’s only been a day, but it feels like a tiny reunion nonetheless. It’s not long before he hears him: Billy’s footstep is quiet, though Goodnight would recognise it in a hurricane, but Red Harvest is so soundless that it’s a surprise to see him at Billy’s shoulder. He holds up a jackrabbit in silent offering, hesitant as always at the prospect of entering a building.

‘Dinner’s ready,’ smiles Goodnight, ‘c’mon in.’

‘It was just like Red said, the river runs right underground!’ A day away from the town seems to have breathed life into Billy; he radiates enthusiasm. ‘You could hear it rushing – we followed the sound, through the caves, and it opens out into a cavern, biggest I’ve been in. You have to see it, Goody.’

‘You can show me,’ says Goodnight, grinning at him fondly: Billy’s unlikely love of rock formations and caves has always delighted him.

‘And rock chimneys too, you could look up and see the light, way overhead.’ Billy breaks off and smiles at him, open and warm. ‘You’re OK.’

‘No bandits,’ says Goodnight with an answering smile.

Billy’s eagerness is so infectious that he realises he’s been ignoring their guest, but Red is moving around the cabin with frank curiosity: he looks round the bedroom partition, watches as Goodnight feeds the stove and peers into the lean-to where Billy is washing face and hands. They’ve been careful about who steps inside the cabin: Rose Creek is accommodating, no doubt of that, but even so many might look askance at a shared bed and tumbled blankets. Their only visitors have been Abner Grey, who seems to see the place as much in the past as in the present, reliving his and Clancy’s bachelor days, and Vasquez, sunnily practical. But Red Harvest: Goodnight has no idea what he makes of it, the whole business of houses and stoves and furniture so alien to him.

‘You must be hungry.’ Goodnight says to him, putting plates on the table. ‘I know you don’t set much store by cooking, but you’re welcome to try it.’

At first Red pokes warily at his plate, but he seems to decide it’s acceptable; Billy falls to
immediately with appetite. ‘We followed the river a way. And we hunted – Red was showing me how to shoot with his bow.’

Red snickers. ‘You missed. A child would do better than you.’

Billy looks outraged for a moment, then bursts out laughing. ‘You couldn’t hit a treestump with a knife.’

They’re easy in each other’s company, and it’s a reminder that Red knows considerably more English than he lets on.

Goodnight refills his glass. ‘Sam said you’re partnering with him in the bounty-hunting business long term. That mean he’ll be persuading you to settle under a roof?’

Red looks suitably horrified by the idea. ‘A house, a town, shut in with walls – it is not a way to live.’

‘Would have said Jack felt the same,’ says Goodnight thoughtfully, ‘but now look at him.’

Red smirks again. ‘His woman, he does what she says.’

‘Knows her own mind, that’s the case,’ agrees Goodnight.

‘But you are the same, all of you.’

‘Huh?’ says Billy around mouthful of chicken. Red gestures silently around them.

‘Well, we won’t be staying,’ says Goodnight. ‘Tho’ Faraday will be, for the foreseeable, and Vasquez with him.’

‘And Sam too,’ says Red, digging into his plate again.

‘Sam?’ says Goodnight, intrigued.

‘With his woman. In the next town,’ says Red, raising his head. Is there a glint in those dark eyes?

‘Now that,’ says Goodnight delightedly, with a glance at Billy, ‘is a tale I’d appreciate hearing more of.’

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The first storm of the autumn comes roaring in across the plain, driving the rain before it to hammer against the barns and houses that huddle in the valley. Abner’s son’s handiwork proves good, their roof sound against the rain, but the rough plank and tarpaper walls are no match for the wind, letting draughts come whistling through. They can block up the worst of the chinks and stoke up the stove, and there’s a small pleasure to be found in sitting by its heat while the windows rattles and the rain gusts outside, but the bedroom is chilly, and at night fingers of cold inch their way under the blankets to tickle the small of Goodnight’s back. It’s no real hardship compared to the past – they’ve camped out in worse weather than this, and only an invalid would complain when there’s a sound roof and a proper mattress – but it shows Goodnight again how much ground he has still to make up.

One evening in the worst of the weather he’s reading aloud to Billy while a pan of corn pops in the grate when the hoofbeats of a passing rider suddenly halt outside. Goodnight lays down his book and they both listen: quick steps come hurrying up and there’s a knock at the door.

To Goodnight’s surprise he finds Emma Cullen on the doorstep, wrapped up in a heavy coat and
holding a roll of oilcloth in her arms. She’s soaked through, hair curling around her damp face. ‘Emma! Come in out of the rain.’

He steps back in invitation, but she says brusquely, ‘I’m not here to visit.’ He looks at her, confused; she takes a deep breath. ‘I know you don’t have possessions for a house, and this place will be draughty in the winter. So I brought you this.’ She presses the soft bulky roll into his arms. ‘Better keeping you two warm than sitting in a chest with the moths at it.’

Her throat catches and before he can say anything she turns and hurries back to the horse standing patiently in the rain. ‘Emma!’ he calls after her, but she mounts up and disappears into the dark.

Disturbed, he takes the bundle back inside where Billy is rescuing the popcorn. ‘What was all that?’ he asks.

‘Not entirely sure,’ says Goodnight. He brings his armful over to the table and unwraps the oilcloth: the folded layers spring open to reveal a quilt, blocks of green and red carefully patchworked into stars in on a white background.

One of the quilts from her marriage chest. Pieced together with sisters or aunts, when she already knew Matthew Cullen was her husband-to-be, each stitch a happy anticipation of the bed it would cover and the life they’d have together. ‘She gave us this. She would have made it for her wedding.’

He can understand now why she wouldn’t want to come in: how painful must it be to part with it and let it cover another bed, a bed whose owners were lucky enough that their story didn’t end like hers? It’s the most eloquent of gestures, and all he can hope is that perhaps it’s a sign of the healing she talked about.

He takes it through to the chilly bedroom and spreads it out over the bed; it’s big enough to cover it fully, lapping over at sides and foot, and when he’s done he stands looking at it for a while, deeply moved by such generosity, and such courage.

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Later on Goodnight strips briskly out of his clothes and slides into bed; he’s still creaky at the end of the day, and softer than he’s been for years. The quilt lies heavy and wide and warm on top of him; it smells faintly of the sweet herbs it’s been stored with, and it feels like approval. It conjures up an image of the life he might have had – a quilt atop a marriage bed, a family house, a place in society – and the contrast – a tarpapered cabin, a borrowed bedstead and Billy to share it with him – strikes him as so funny that Billy comes in to find him quaking with amusement. ‘What?’ he asks, amused himself, and Goodnight says, ‘Come under here and I’ll tell you.’

Billy shucks off his clothes and slides in next to him, and they lie, legs twined together, soft hair tickling Goodnight’s cheek, sharing the warmth that slowly gathers between them. Billy rolls over to face him, questioning; Goodnight strokes his cheek and asks, ‘How did we get here, Billy? You and me, in this bed, in Rose Creek?’

‘Well,’ says Billy, ‘we came from Volcano Springs with Teddy and Faraday to Junction City, where we met up with Sam-’

Goodnight’s sadly left with no choice but to find the ticklish spot on his belly and make him squirm until he begs for mercy. ‘You know what I mean,’ he says when they settle again. ‘I was supposed to be a pillar of Baton Rouge society, marry one of the local belles and lead a life of complacent respectability. And now I’m sharing a man called Abner Gray’s old cabin with a dangerous knife-fighting Asian type.’
'Call that a strange story?' asks Billy dismissively. ‘I crossed the ocean to be a railroad labourer, turned outlaw gunfighter, hunted across two states, and now I’m in bed with an ex-Confederate soldier.’

‘Under a respectable woman’s marriage quilt,’ says Goodnight. ‘D’you like it?’

‘Quilt’s good,’ says Billy, ‘stops the draughts.’

‘And the bed?’

‘Comfortable,’ says Billy, quivering a little with suppressed laughter. ‘We’ve slept much worse.’

‘And the soldier?’

‘Stop fishing for compliments,’ says Billy sternly, though he snakes an arm under Goodnight’s neck to draw him close, with a brush of lips on his brow.

‘Yes, Billy,’ says Goodnight meekly, filled with contentment.

Chapter End Notes

Speak to me: fontainebleau22.tumblr.com
December

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With a shout and the crack of a whip the mail coach rolls away up the street, a few boys chasing behind it in the churned mud, and calm descends on Rose Creek once more. After a little while Goodnight stretches and reaches for his coat. ‘Think I’ll take a walk up to the hardware store,’ he announces casually, ‘we really do need a skillet, if Hinz has one.’

‘A skillet,’ says Billy, not looking up from the dough he’s mixing. ‘Maybe they brought one with the mail.’

‘Well, maybe they did, cher.’ Goodnight takes advantage of the fact that Billy’s hands are occupied to lean over and tickle the back of his neck; Billy shakes him off with an impatient huff, but Goodnight winks at him as he plucks his hat from the back of the chair. ‘We’re low on tobacco, too, and I’ll see if I can get some candy to keep you sweet.’ He neatly evades the floury hands that threaten his vest and heads for the door.

Outside Goodnight dusts down his coat: he has his dignity to maintain. He’s not a man to join the usual crowd of rubbernecking onlookers outside the freight office as crates, packages and mail are unloaded; no, Goodnight Robicheaux has errands to run, so he’ll stroll gravely up to the hardware store to spend some time enquiring about kitchenware with Hinz’s friendly clerk, then he’ll stop in at the dry goods store for tobacco and a bag of striped candy, because he’s a man of his word, and then, as he just happens to be passing by, he might as well step into Garrett’s Freight and Mail.

Garrett shouts a greeting over the crates of rattling bottles he’s sorting, and Trent, the new banker, looks up from a pouch of official-looking documents and nods affably. ‘Herald come in?’ asks Garrett. Goodnight extricates one and sets down his coins.

‘And an eloquent contribution in it from yourself,’ says Trent genially.

‘They printed it?’ It would take a stronger man than him to resist: he holds up the paper and leafs through the pages until he finds it: Whitman: a Poet for a New Nation, and below it, his own name. Seeing it on the page fills him with mingled pride and terror.

‘I believe it came with a letter for you as well,’ says Garrett, passing it across.

‘Never been much for poetry myself,’ says Trent, ‘but it’s impressive to have a man of literature among us.’

‘Not sure I’d claim that for myself,’ begins Goodnight, but Trent taps the sheet. ‘Can’t argue with the fourth estate. Perhaps you might think of opening an account with us.’

Such endorsement from a pillar of the community is unexpected: ‘I’ll – give it consideration, certainly,’ he says, somewhat disconcerted; he tucks the letter into his coat and the paper under his arm.

Back in the cabin Billy is industriously kneading a lump of dough. ‘For you, sugar,’ says Goodnight, putting tobacco and bag of candy down in front of him.
Billy squints at him. ‘You seem surprisingly cheerful for a man without a skillet.’ Goodnight silently unfolds the paper and lays it out on the table.

While Billy wipes his hands and leans over it he opens the letter, catching the bank draft that flutters from the sheet. ‘The editor’ – he scans the signature – ‘Wentworth, says he found my letter a most valuable contribution, and if I would like to offer further reviews, he can pay his standard rate.’

Billy runs a finger under his printed name. ‘And to think I’ve been listening to you for free all these years.’ He straightens up from the table. ‘Let me just wash up.’

‘What about the bread?’ asks Goodnight.

Billy looks grave. ‘No time to waste; we need to go out. I know you’re itching to parade up and down the street with the paper under your arm.’

How can someone simultaneously make him feel so understood and puncture his pride so efficiently? Goodnight strikes what he hopes is a writerly pose. ‘I suppose I do owe it to my public to show myself.’

‘You’re ridiculous,’ says Billy affectionately, going to fetch his vest.

While Billy’s dressing Goodnight shakes out the paper and tries to read his article as though for the first time. They can’t be oversupplied with content, he’s sure, to accept it so readily, though privately he thinks that it stands up well against the other columns. But here, in black and white, is an answer to his dilemma: if there’s no income to be earned here with a gun, perhaps after all he can do so with a pen. If the Herald is so eager for contributions, perhaps other publications will be equally keen – the Denver Record, perhaps? He folds the draft into his vest pocket: as soon as he’s been to the bank he knows exactly what he’ll be ordering.

In the hotel, unusually, they find Lynch sitting with a cup of coffee in front of him, two of the crates from the mail office stacked beside him. He looks up from his own copy of the Herald and immediately booms, ‘Fine contribution of yours in here!’

Billy nudges Goodnight as he goes to the bar: the honest enthusiasm with which his venture is meeting is something he couldn’t have predicted. ‘Just testing the water,’ he says self-deprecatingly, but, ‘Nonsense,’ declares Lynch. ‘You will make us like Concord, or Providence, a community of philosophers and poets.’

Goodnight can’t contain his laughter. ‘Hardly. And it’s as much Josiah’s doing as mine, he’s the one I should be standing a drink, though I can’t right now as he’s working. And not to be overly inquisitive, shouldn’t you be plying your trade at this time of day too?’

‘I’m reliving my bachelor days,’ says Lynch, lapsing into comic gloom, ‘my Hannah’s gone away to visit her cousin Mariah in Santa Clara, and I’ve no comfort or support at home, so sitting in the bar before noon is my only recourse.’

‘Is that how you spent your bachelor days?’ A glass lands in front of Goodnight and Billy pulls up a chair. ‘Are you hiding a disreputable past?’

Lynch smiles complacently. ‘You’d be surprised what medical students get up to, Goodnight.’

‘Grave-robbing,’ says Billy seriously; Goodnight glances at him in consternation, but Lynch just nods. ‘Had a friend who was arrested for that. Six times. Always did wonder where he ended up.’
'I think I’m glad I don’t know,’ says Goodnight.

Billy tilts the bottle silently and Lynch sighs theatrically. ‘Might as well. It’s a sorry thing to be left to shift for myself: rattling round the house on my own, it’s almost enough to make me miss Faraday’s cursing. Almost.’ He looks closely at them. ‘Seen him since he went out to Ms Cullen’s? He made it clear enough my attentions weren’t welcome any more.’

‘Not since,’ says Billy, ‘Goody saw him last.’

Faraday had been alight with enthusiasm at the prospect of leaving the infirmary after so long: ‘Vas’s cleared out the old bunkhouse, put in what we’ll need: plenty of space for Jack outside, and Lord, Goody, to get away from all this attention and starin’. I’ll be able to get ridin’ again, see something that ain’t fields and barns, do some serious drinking.’

‘And play some cards, I hope,’ Goodnight had said: he’d given his plan careful consideration. ‘You and Vas should come and give me and Billy a run for our money, at our place.’ He might not have been able to face the saloon, but a game among friends must be a different prospect.

Faraday had grinned like a shark. ‘Always glad to relieve a friend of their cash.’

You couldn’t have told from his reaction that there had ever been a problem, and Goodnight was pleased to see him so eager, though a little bead of worry had rattled away at him. ‘Lynch set you up with one of these?’ he’d asked as he picked up his cane.

‘Tried,’ snorted Faraday. ‘Asshole said I might need two. Like I’m going to haul myself around all crippled up.’

‘Can’t tell you how much I hate mine,’ Goodnight had said carefully, ‘but it’s had its use, I will admit.’

‘Naw,’ Faraday was dismissive. ‘Be walking out of here on my own two feet.’

‘But we’ll see him Thursday,’ continues Billy, ‘him and Vasquez.’

‘Well, a report would be welcome,’ says Lynch. His face brightens again. ‘I’ve no need to ask about you two – you’re the picture of health these days.’ Lynch’s rather proprietorial attitude towards them as ‘living testimonials to my extraordinary medical skills’ is something they’ve had to learn to live with. ‘You could do me a good turn by walking up and down Main Street some, give me a little advertising.’ He peers at Goodnight under his eyebrows. ‘No ill effects from the weather?’

‘My leg aches a little when it’s cold,’ says Goodnight, ‘and I get the odd twinge in the ribs still. But like you say, back to health and strength.’ He deliberately avoids Billy’s eye.

Back to health and strength. It’s true, he is: able to ride again, to walk out to see Emma at the farm, some of his old vitality finally returning. He’s fine, except for the one thing he’s not willing to talk about.

Desire’s always been there for him, unquestioned, flaring high in the first heady months of discovery, then settling to a slow-burning familiar pleasure, for comfort, for lust, for love. Now Goodnight does all the things they promised each other: pulls Billy down for a lazy morning in bed while the rest of the world’s at work, latches the door with a speculative look in the middle of the afternoon, combs
out Billy’s hair as he soaks in the bath and puts his hands and mouth on him in the steam. But for himself there’s just a dull lack, a hammer that clicks on an empty chamber, a once fastflowing creek skimmed over with ice, and it’s a loss that subtly colours everything else.

It shouldn’t be a big deal—when he speaks of it, all Goodnight says is, ‘Give it time, cher,’ and Billy says it too, ‘Can’t expect it all to come back at once’; it’s not a big deal, they agree, but still, he feels it, the little frozen core at his heart where the fire should be.

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In deference to Lynch and in spite of Billy’s continued teasing, after Goodnight’s visited the bank and deposited his draft with a gratified Trent, he strolls up the street, passing the time of day on a quiet afternoon.

Across the square the newly-restored church dominates the town once more. This was the last of Rose Creek’s buildings to be repaired, both because practicality dictated that commercial premises take priority – stables and stores hastily reroofed or reglazed, their splintered walls patched – and because the church had suffered such damage from fire and the raking bullets of the Gatling gun that its whole structure had to be torn down and rebuilt from the foundations. Since summer the preacher’s been holding services in one of the barns at the other end of town, no doubt discoursing on humility and thankfulness: Goodnight wouldn’t know.

Its door stands open to the slanting sun, and Goodnight wanders over, curious to see: he’s been here occasionally during the rebuilding, when it was a worksite crammed with planks and shavings, loud with hammering, but now, finally, with the turn of the year, the bell hangs in the tower again to call farmers in their distant steads to prayer, the floor and walls shine with clean wood panelling, and rows of pews line up in front of the lectern.

As he stands at the entrance scent-memory envelops him: this place should smell of wet wood and smoke, gunpowder and blood, sweat and panic, but now he smells new-cut timber and fresh paint; he saw it dark inside, lit by candles on the night he left, but now sun pours through the high windows onto a pale and pristine interior. ‘Come in, Mr Robicheaux,’ says a friendly voice behind him, and Goodnight recognises the preacher.

*Fitzgerald? Everyone just calls him Preacher.* They’ve had little conversation since his illness; Goodnight says awkwardly, ‘I’m not much for churches.’

‘I had hoped that you and Mr Rocks avoid us from principle,’ says the preacher. He waits until it sinks in and Goodnight looks at him quizzically, then smiles. ‘And not because you think you won’t find a welcome among us.’

They’ve had more to think about than Clara Tillman’s disapproval, but if people in town are going to make trouble for them, it’ll be led from here, among the good folks who heed the Bible. But there’s been precious little sign of that; truth to tell, Goodnight’s reasons for avoiding the church are more selfish.

Billy’s worked as hard on the repairs as anyone, putting in whole days at carpentering or painting, and Goodnight’s been half glad to see him part of the town’s effort, for once appreciated and accepted, and half sad to see his proud Billy turned labourer. But for himself, he’s kept at arms’ length. His memories of the battle may be hazy, but those of the evening before will always be sharp and clear: he can still see the townsfolk praying in the flickering torchlight as he mounted up and turned his horse’s head out of town. Heads had been bowed in fervent battle’s-eve prayer, but they’d all seen him, he knew, watched as he skulked away into the night like a rat. Of course he’d been too weak to labour alongside Billy on the repairs, but if he had been fit, would he have done so?
The preacher’s thoughtful gaze gives him the uncomfortable feeling that his thoughts are written on his face, and he shrugs defensively. ‘What I saw in wartime convinced me that if God ever came to America, he left long since.’ It comes out harsher than he intended, but he’s not going to pretend to ideas he doesn’t hold just because he’s living in a town.

‘You did the Lord’s work here,’ says the preacher mildly, ‘fought on the side of right, defending justice for your fellow man.’

Goodnight narrows his eyes: he’s not going to take an easy out just because it’s offered. ‘Me and Billy, we’re hired guns, that’s all. I fought because Sam asked me to, and because I was paid: I wouldn’t hold us up as examples of righteousness.’

Fitzgerald beckons him to the steps at the doorway from where they can survey Rose Creek as it goes about its leisurely afternoon. ‘This is a good town, a peaceable and friendly town, and its folk are good people.’ Goodnight’s about to interrupt, impatient, but the preacher’s gaze sweeps over the busy street and his tone, still conversational, hardens slightly. ‘Lynch and I, we do the same job. He looks to men’s bodies, and I to their souls.’

Perplexed by this sudden turn to the conversation, Goodnight glances at him enquiringly. ‘Lynch sees the injuries: wives with cracked heads and children with broken arms, the fights that turn ugly, the beatings no one heard or saw. And I – I see the petty spitefulness and jealousy, the grudges that divide families, the cold scraps of charity from those who have most.’ Goodnight wonders how many ever see the seriousness that underlies this man’s usual earnest optimism.

‘I spend my life telling men to love one another: it’s the simplest lesson in the Bible, yet it seems to be the hardest to learn.’ He relaxes into a smile again. ‘But among you and your friends? Look how Senor Vasquez cares for Mr Faraday. Look at Mr Chisolm’s concern for his Indian friend.’

This is coming a little close to home for Goodnight’s comfort, and he cuts in abruptly, ‘Town’s done right by us while we recover.’

Fitzgerald lays a tentative hand on his arm. ‘It’s not my business to hope you’ll stay here, but I’ll say that our community would be richer in example of generosity and loving-kindness if you did.’

It’s the last thing Goodnight was expecting to hear, and he’s at a loss how to respond. The preacher claps his shoulder with a guileless smile, though the glint in his eye suggests to Goodnight that he’s been outmanoeuvred. ‘And I imagine you’ll be seeing the inside of our church at least once, when Mr Horne is married next month.’

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On Thursday evening they hear the quarrelling before the sound of hoofbeats, two voices echoing down the evening street. Billy raises his eyebrows silently and opens the door to Vasquez’ shout of, ‘Joshua, per dios,’ and Faraday bellowing, ‘… treating me like a kid!’

The source of his rage is obvious, the two of them riding double on Vasquez’ big grey horse, and they can see how it must have gone: Faraday struggling to mount and control his fractious stallion, the scale of his injuries laid starkly bare; Vasquez’ assistance and Faraday’s self-hating acceptance.

‘Nice you could make it,’ says Billy as they come to a halt, unperturbed by the twin scowls which turn in his direction.

‘Would not have been my fault if we had not,’ says Vasquez darkly, earning himself a ‘Fuck you,’ from Faraday, red-faced with rage.
Vasquez swings down from the saddle and offers his hand, but Faraday tenses. 'Here,' says Billy without emotion, stepping forward to make a rest for his foot.

It takes hands on both their shoulders to bring Faraday slithering gracelessly down to his feet; 'Didn’t come to town to make a show of myself in the thoroughfare,’ he mutters, but, ‘Few enough to see at this time of day: good folks are at prayer meeting,’ says Goodnight. ‘C’mon in.’

Riding hasn’t helped Faraday’s ease of movement: he stumbles and has to lean hard on Billy’s shoulder until he can slump into a chair. But he’s at least distracted from his ill-temper by seeing the cabin for the first time, staring around him with frank curiosity. ‘Vas said you were well set up here.’ And it does look homelike with the table cleared and set up with glasses and chairs, a lamp on the shelf and the stove glowing warm.

‘Got him to thank for it,’ says Goodnight; Faraday’s never mentioned the bed outright, but he’s sure he knows. ‘He’s handy, got to give him that.’

‘Yeah, that’s right: nothing he can’t do – everyone’s grateful.’ Goodnight curses himself for not noticing the conversational tripwire, but Vasquez catches his eye with a tiny shrug; in this mood there’s probably no topic that can’t be cause for resentment.

‘Even got our own bathtub,’ volunteers Billy as he pulls his chair up to the table.

Faraday wrinkles his nose. ‘Had enough of that at the doc’s – clean clothes and washing and mindin’ my mouth.’

‘Don’t know that you were wholly successful on that score,’ says Goodnight, smiling up at Billy as he reaches to fill the glasses. ‘But I know what you mean. Nothing like resuming my godless habits to make me feel myself again.’

‘Don’t I know it,’ sighs Faraday. ‘Spitting and cursing and drinking and gambling; feel like I’m wearing my right clothes again.’

‘Yes, and finding fault with my cooking,’ says Vasquez but he’s looking more relaxed; sitting down with cards and glass to hand, Faraday’s temper seems to be improving rapidly.

‘Mexican shit,’ says Faraday round a gulp of whisky.

‘Better than you can do, I’ll wager,’ says Goodnight; ‘No prize there,’ smirks Vasquez.

Faraday isn’t the same, there’s no hiding it: he can’t deal the deck, and because he needs his good hand to hold the cards he constantly fumbles his drink, cursing when he knocks it over. Even so, some of his gambler’s pride returns as the game warms up: he plays with concentration, alert to their tells, and over time wins more than he loses, crowing in triumph as though the pot of small change was notes and dollars. ‘Do you take all the pay from Emma’s farmhands too?’ asks Goodnight ruefully when Faraday scoops a third pot in a row.

‘Sapheads, all of them, grumbles Faraday, ‘too godfearin’ to gamble, like young Teddy. No offence to present company, but I’ll be glad when spring come so I can hit the road again and see some proper play. Guess we all will be.’

‘With the exception of Jack,’ says Goodnight, throwing in his hand. ‘Preacher told me he’ll be standing up to marry Leni Frankel next month.’

Faraday snorts. ‘Woman had her hooks in him the moment he rode into town: he was never going to get out of that one.’
‘Don’t think he ever wanted to,’ says Goodnight, ‘and I’ll lay six to a dollar that we’ll be hearing the same of Sam before too long.’

Faraday looks genuinely alarmed. ‘Rather them than me: matrimony’s something I’ve always made certain to avoid.’ He eyes them over his cards. ‘Get a girl blushing and giggling in the hayloft, and ‘fore you know it there’s her pa or her brothers with a shotgun to make you get hitched, and then it’s just kids and work and clean shirts and church on a Sunday, and her and her ma all vinegar-faced and disapproving…’ The consternation is so clear on his face that they can’t but laugh.

‘For a man so opposed to the institution of marriage you seem to have given it close consideration,’ observes Goodnight.

‘Ain’t no laughing matter,’ replies Faraday darkly.

‘Quite a few respectable ladies thought Goody would be a catch,’ teases Billy.

‘Well, so I would,’ says Goodnight with a wink at his beloved.

‘Not as good as me,’ announces Vasquez, leaning back in his chair. ‘I am a handsome man: any girl would be pleased to have me as a husband.’

The three of him stare at him, then burst out laughing in unison, but Vasquez is undismayed. ‘I will dance with every one of them at the wedding, and make them all sigh after me.’

‘See about that,’ scoffs Faraday, and Goodnight realises just how completely Vasquez has his measure.

When Faraday takes himself off to the outhouse Billy gathers the cards and asks Vasquez directly, ‘You doing OK? Can’t be easy.’

Vasquez smiles small. ‘Joshua is never going to be easy. But it is better, so much better, with our own place. And this is good for him, to see it can be a little the same.’

Billy looks troubled. ‘He talk a lot about riding off in spring?’

Vasquez returns his gaze silently for a moment, then says simply, ‘He needs hope. It is slow, to learn again, with his hands; and Jack, that is difficult for him. That horse needs a strong rider.’

Billy draws breath to speak, but Goodnight cuts in, more confident than he feels. ‘We all know it: three months isn’t six – who’s to predict how he’ll recover?’

Billy’s face sets stubbornly. ‘Won’t help if he refuses Lynch’s advice.’

‘Doctors don’t know everything,’ begins Vasquez, but before he can say more the door thuds and Faraday comes clumping back.

‘Just ‘cause I don’t hear so good don’t mean I don’t know you were talkin’ ‘bout me,’ he says sourly.

‘Not that interesting, güero.’ Vasquez is back to his usual sunny self, the transformation sharp enough to disturb.

Faraday sits back down awkwardly, easing his leg. ‘Now I can clean out a table, I got to work on firing a gun again – can’t let guys get the drop on me when I’m showing a clean pair of heels with
my winnings.’ He grins across at his partner. ‘Few months practising and I’ll be back to normal.’

By any standards the evening’s a success. There’s no shortage of conversation as the cards flip out and money changes hands; they’ve all got a hundred tales to tell of past exploits, getting taller as the night goes on. Sam’s always been Goodnight’s friend, and he and Billy have had the time to get to know Vasquez well, but when the whiskey and the money have run out and Faraday and Vasquez get up to leave, the four of them feel more like friends than they have. Billy takes a chair outside to set up as a mounting-block, and the street’s deserted enough that Faraday doesn’t object; he and Goodnight stand side by side to watch them ride away, Faraday’s voice raised in drunken song.

When the song has faded Billy asks abruptly, ‘So we’re just going to go along with him, pretend that in a few months he’ll be riding out again?’

Goodnight closes his eyes: he finds it difficult to make sense of his emotions, guilt, sympathy and regret combining into an uneasy whole. He’s watched Faraday struggle through the long days abed, the frustrating weeks of everything, but everything, to be learnt over again; of course he’s still clinging to the dream of a return to normality. He’s slow to answer, picking his words. ‘You saw how the cards worked on him: if he can go from lying in bed listening to me read to sitting up to a table and ragging on us for our tells, anyone should be glad.’

Billy turns to face him, as obstinate as before. ‘So we play along and humour him until the day he’s prepared to face it? He’s not a coward.’

The words bring a stab of hurt: of course Billy can’t understand, when his own recovery was so easy. Goodnight says quietly, ‘You think he doesn’t know? What are you going to say to him – those days are over and it’s never going to be the same? You think spelling it out is going to help?’

Billy lets the silence of the night-time town spread around them for a while, then says, ‘Yes. I think talking about it would help.’

Goodnight looks at him levelly. ‘I don’t.’

He turns and goes back inside; the sight of the evening’s remnants, dirty glasses, scattered cards, a plate with stubbed cigars, leaves him drained. It can wait till tomorrow. He picks up the lamp and takes it behind the partition to give himself light to undress.

He’s unclipped his watch and started on his vest, back to the room, when he hears the door shut and Billy’s steps behind him. Two hands come to rest on his shoulder, stilling his arms. ‘Let me.’

Billy keeps his eyes downcast as he helps Goodnight undress with careful tenderness, and seeing his face in concentration brings back the memories of all the times before, Billy frowning over his buttons when he was falling-down drunk, injured, deathly tired.

He sinks onto the side of the bed to let Billy see to his boots, but instead of a narrow rattling frame in a hotel or a bedroll among the rocks there’s a wide bedstead with quilt and blankets. ‘Getting too used to this,’ he says vaguely, but he stretches out under the covers, head already dreamy from whisky and tiredness, as Billy strips out of his own clothes and blows out the lamp.

The bed creaks as he lies down, and Goodnight rolls into his embrace. He can find no way to put any of his feelings into words: ‘I…,’ he says into Billy’s neck, but Billy hushes him, tips his head up to kiss him gentle and undemanding.

‘I shouldn’t have…’ He presses a kiss to Goodnight’s temple. ‘We’re here to see out the winter, and
that’s what we’ll do.’

He winds himself around Goodnight and settles to sleep; it’s soothing, lying there warm, listening as Billy’s breath evens out and deepens, but still, Goodnight lies awake a little longer looking up into the dark, the tiny lump of ice at his core still stubbornly frozen.

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The rain sets in again; it’s welcome, turning the hills green and growing the winter crops, but it brings an ache to healed injuries that’s hard to shake off, and even Billy finds the early-morning chill grinding. It’s a dull time of year, and the entertainment in a small town limited: nights in the saloon with the same old faces, damp days riding out; Vasquez and Faraday come again to play cards, as glad of the distraction as they are, and then again, until the invitation gradually becomes an institution.

It’s not the first time they’ve spent Christmas in a town, but it’s the first time they’ve spent it among neighbours. They have no shortage of invitations to visit, to eat dinner and join in the singing or games, from Josiah, from Emma, from the Tillmans; Goodnight’s warmed by the generosity even though he politely declines each one. The season has never been very meaningful to either of them: for Billy it’s completely alien, of course, the customs new and inexplicable, while Goodnight remembers too clearly the Christmases of the war, celebration harnessed to patriotism and sentiment, to feel much enthusiasm for it now. In the past they’ve exchanged small gifts, or afforded themselves a few days’ easy living, but Christmas is for families, for churchgoers and children, and its expanding traditions have passed them by.

They don’t bring decorations into the cabin or cook and bake, but Goodnight does produce a package on Christmas morning which he presents to Billy with a flourish. ‘Long overdue, cher,’ he says, and watches with satisfaction as he unwraps a supple black leather vest to replace the one he lost. Billy’s never demonstrative about such things, but he puts it on immediately, buttons it up and sets the collar, and though they have no glass for him to see himself his face lights up at what he finds in Goodnight’s expression.

Goodnight’s not expecting Billy to have bought anything for him and he doesn’t make any sign of it, though there’s a spark of amusement in his eyes when they emerge into the main room. ‘I’ll cut bacon if you get the stove up,’ he offers, and against a background of clattering from the kitchen Goodnight coaxes the embers to life and feeds the fire.

It’s not until he closes the door and steps back in satisfaction that it registers: there’s a new chair at the table. It’s bigger than the others, wider and with arms; looking closely he can see where it’s been mended, rescued from an attic as a gift for a man who sits to write.

He’s on the verge of becoming sentimental when Billy emerges with a plate of sliced bacon and says sternly, ‘Not a rocking chair; we need to retain some self-respect.’

‘It’s perfect,’ says Goodnight, settling himself into it. ‘Like the bathtub.’

‘Hmm?’ says Billy, putting the plate on the table.

‘Big enough for two,’ grins Goodnight, catching him off guard and pulling him down into his lap, so he can express his gratitude in a fashion far too undignified for a man of letters.

It’s an unremarkable day, and late in the afternoon, when Goodnight lays aside his book, Billy looks
up, solicitous as he always is these days, and says, ‘We could have gone out, if you’d wanted.’

‘Why don’t we?’ smiles Goodnight. ‘We could ride a little – some exercise won’t do the horses any harm, or me.’

‘Means going out to Emma’s,’ objects Billy, though he’s already fetching his coat, but Goodnight raises his eyebrows. ‘Think they’re in the stables here.’

Billy eyes him suspiciously as he leads the way to the livery. ‘You’ve been planning this.’

‘Christmas is about tradition, so they say,’ replies Goodnight as they mount up, ‘and I don’t think ours is listening to sermons or singing round the fire.’

They take the road out of the valley, the town slipping out of sight at their backs, and ride out as the light begins to fade. At first they pass occasional farmsteads with windows lit up, but gradually all sign of settlement drifts behind and it’s just the two of them alone in the gathering dark. Goodnight sets a steady pace along the road, enjoying the puzzlement he senses under Billy’s silence, until they reach a place where the road curves around a dry gully and he reins up. ‘Shall we stop a while?’

‘We’ll need a fire,’ says Billy, swinging down from the saddle; and they fall easily into their familiar routine, collecting wood and building the fire; when it’s beginning to burn up Goodnight unrolls the blanket from behind his saddle and makes himself comfortable against a rock, and Billy takes the corner of the blanket he’s offered, leaning in against his side.

Silence. He hasn’t heard it for months, not the true silence of the open landscape unfurling around them as deep and broad as the night sky. All noise of work, of carts, of neighbours and dogs, the whole restless tide of urban life runs out to leave a clean shore, and the crackle of the flames, the shift of collapsing ash, the plaintive cry of a bird or the stamp of one of their horses, serve only to magnify the ringing emptiness around them, and Goodnight lets it soak deep into his bones.

This was how they began, empty desert nights like this, him spinning stories to hold back the dark, Billy watching wordlessly across the fire, until instead of two suspicious men brought together by chance and self-interest they became themselves, Billy-and-Goodnight. And now he looks up to see Billy patient and affectionate, firelight touching his face with gentle fingers, and his heart swells with love. ‘If we’ve a Christmas tradition,’ he says, ‘then I think this is it.’

Billy tugs at the collar of his new vest and laughs suddenly. ‘Like Faraday said, feel like I’m wearing my right clothes again.’

‘Spitting, cursing, drinking and gambling,’ recalls Goodnight, then, more seriously, ‘wonder what his Christmas tradition’s going to look like now.’

Billy turns to him. ‘You’re not Faraday, Goody. It’ll all come around.’

It’s an invitation to talk, he knows, to say the thing that’s weighing on him, but it sits too heavy on his tongue. He can’t find the words for it, doesn’t want to bring it out even into the firelight, as though saying it would make it final, irretrievable. ‘If I were Faraday,’ he says instead, ‘I’d have Vasquez,’ and Billy flips a pebble at him in exasperation.

They sit smoking for a while, the air cold and still, and the sky darkening to an intense inky blue. Billy won’t press, he never does: his silent understanding is what Goodnight’s always valued the most, but now it’s no help.

Eventually Billy says, ‘Tell me a story,’ and in his mind's eye Goodnight sees a trail of fires running back into the past like jewels on a necklace, and a line of stories to thread them together.
He considers. ‘I ever tell you about the time I got mistaken for a counterfeiter in Missouri?’

‘Yes,’ says Billy, with a smile.

‘Well, how about the time me and Remy tried to join the travelling theatre?’

‘That too’ says Billy.

‘Maybe the time’s come,’ says Goodnight, half-serious, ‘maybe you’ve heard all the tales I have to tell.’

‘Don’t believe that.’ Billy leans into him. ‘You’ve enough to last a lifetime.’ The words wreath upwards with the smoke into the evening sky, and Goodnight feels them as the gift they are.

‘Well then,’ he says, ‘what about the time Sam tried to break into a jail, but fell through the outhouse roof…’

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‘Goodnight! Come in out of the rain!’ Jack throws open the door in welcome. ‘Billy not with you?’ he adds as Goodnight sheds his damp coat and hat.

‘Not this time,’ says Goodnight: Billy had declined to visit with him, though he’s not entirely sure why.

‘I’m alone too,’ announces Jack, ‘Leni’s out most of the time these days – what with all the sewing parties and cooking for the wedding supper and fuss, it’s enough to make me want to disappear back into the wild.’ He leads the way back to the fire.

Alone is clearly a relative term: Jack’s been sitting by the fireside with Leni’s grandchildren, plainly broken off in the middle of a story. ‘Pull up a chair,’ he says, and Goodnight’s glad to join them.

‘Mr Horne is telling us how he spent Christmas with a bear,’ says the girl, round-eyed.

‘Now that’s a tale I’d like to hear myself,’ says Goodnight, making himself comfortable, and Jack creases up into a smile. ‘Where was I?’ he asks.

‘You were out in the blizzard and you’d found a crack in the rock,’ prompts the older boy, in an agony of expectation.

‘So I had.’ Jack settles back again. ‘Well, I squeezed myself through and there I was, snug in a little cave and out of the driving snow. I gave thanks for my salvation and sat down by the wall: it was all dark, but as my breath quieted I began to notice a kind of a strong smell, and I heard something move, and when I put my hand out where I thought the wall was, what I touched was warm living fur – I’d stumbled into a bear’s den!’

Goodnight feels a grin creep across his face at the tall tale, the children rapt with attention, and the sight of Jack, so murderous in a fight, sitting in his suspenders with a girl on his knee and two little boys leaning on the arm of his chair, drawing them into his world of bears and mountains and adventure.

‘Didn’t she try to eat you?’ pipes up the younger boy.

‘Oh, she tried,’ says Jack, ‘but I gave her some of the meat from my pack, just one piece, and she ate it up, and when she went back to sleep I snuggled up warm against her, though she was smelly and
full of fleas, and all the time the wind howling like a banshee outside.’

The story reminds him of what Jack said before, about the old times passing, all those wild years of trapping and exploring and fighting the Crow, receding into legend, and these children growing up prim and well-fed in a real town, thrilling to tales of danger no more real to them than if they were in the pages of a book. He supposes it’s a good thing: bringing civilisation was the aim of it all, wasn’t it? Though I seem to have spent my own life running from it...

‘...and I saw the light of the lantern in the window, set to guide me home’ – Jack’s voice catches a little, though the children don’t notice – ‘so I ploughed on through the snow, and I came in through the door giving thanks to the Good Lord. So we had our Christmas after all, but it was a better one for the bear than for us: she’d eaten all the meat that I had in my pack, but she didn’t eat me.’ And he tickles the little girl’s ribs to make her squeal.

The children scatter away to play at being bears, and Jack sits back, watching in amusement as he reaches for his mug.

‘A fine tale,’ says Goodnight, ‘and every word of it true.’

‘Never spun a story that wasn’t,’ asserts Jack solemnly. He refills their mugs thoughtfully. ‘Feel it strange sometimes, then and now…’ He falls silent and Goodnight can see he has one eye in the past with the family he lost.

‘The new don’t take away from the old, for good or bad,’ he offers, and Jack comes back from his reverie to look at him keenly.

‘Should have reckoned you’d understand that. You don’t ever get over the loss of what you had, and I can’t but think on it, but I’ve lived with it for a long time.’

‘Same is true of Sam,’ says Goodnight reflectively, ‘don’t think he’ll ever truly lay the past to rest, but I think he may see a future too.’

‘Glad to hear it,’ says Jack, ‘very glad. And you’re turning honest too, writing for the newspaper. Who would have thought there were such respectable men inside us all waiting to get out?’

‘Don’t think there’s much of a one in Billy, or Faraday. He was declaring he’ll resist civilising to the end.’

Jack snorts gently. ‘Used to think that myself; I guess he has some road to travel yet.’

With the children’s aid Goodnight coaxes more tall tales from Jack, and then they talk of the places they’ve seen; Jack was born further north than Goodnight’s travelled, but he’s never been east of Illinois and is curious to hear of the grand houses and riverboats of old New Orleans. It’s cosy, the shutters closed against the rain outside, and when Leni comes back, all cheerful energy, Goodnight realises he’s stayed longer than he intended.

As he takes his leave Jack claps him on the back, and asks, ‘You’ll both be at the wedding, now?’ He still seems slightly embarrassed by it though the affectionate look he casts towards Leni would warm a harder-hearted man than him.

‘Wouldn’t miss it.’

Jack squeezes his shoulder. ‘Don’t always come easy; sometimes still I do hanker for the old life, but I know how it is – I’m not getting any younger, and one winter there wouldn’t be a bear to keep me from the cold.’
As Goodnight sets out home there’s a piercing wind blowing, and the walk takes him longer than it should, the damp bringing out the ache in his leg once more. The slight hitch in his step does nothing for his spirits: healing has been so slow, and he still hears himself limping along like an old man. Thoughts of change and the passing of time stay with him, a sorry reflection for a winter’s evening: Jack’s older than they are, long past time he found a place to stay, but everyone gets old, and one day he and Billy will be too old for fighting and drifting. They’ve never given it serious thought: all too easy to just go on as you are, one year to the next, until one day you look in the glass and see you’re white and grizzled. And what then? Fetch up in whatever town you’ve drifted into and scratch for work? Head back to test his family’s charity in Baton Rouge?

And underneath, his deeper concern, the one he won’t voice, still gnawing at him: what if? He’s well again, strong again, back to normal, but what if that part of him is gone for good? There’s more to him and Billy than sex, much more; there’s trust, hard-won, affection, companionship and comfort. But what if that part of their love is past? A life without desire, flesh unresponsive, intimacy lost – what can it be but a slow withering for both of them?

When he sees the light in the cabin window he squares his shoulders, trying to hitch his mood back up. It’s difficult enough for Billy without his sharing such gloomy speculations; he can’t let himself bring his black mood home with him.

A gust of rain and wind accompanies him through the door, but inside the cabin is welcomingly warm. The stove is roaring hot, open to show the flames and the table has been pushed back to make room for the bath in front of it; Billy’s even rigged up a sheet over two chairs to protect himself from the draught as he basks in the tub. More water is heating on top of the stove beside a bubbling pot which fills the room with a tempting aroma.

It’s a sight to raise any man’s spirits, and at the thud of Goodnight’s boots Billy hauls himself up, water cascading off him, but, ‘You carry on, cher,’ says Goodnight appreciatively, ‘and I’ll spectate.’

‘Just keeping it warm for you,’ says Billy, wrapping a towel round his waist, ‘thought you might appreciate it on a night like this.’

The thought of sinking into a hot bath is irresistible: ‘Won’t say no,’ says Goodnight, ‘though what I’ve done to deserve it I’m not sure.’

Billy just smiles. ‘We can eat while the rest of the water heats.’ He dishes out two bowls of spicy stew and Goodnight stretches his legs by the fire.

When they’re done eating Billy tops up the tub with fresh steaming water as Goodnight strips off and lowers himself into it with a groan of pleasure. The heat of the water and the flames of the stove combine to drive the cold from his bones and flush his skin pink, and when Billy produces a bottle and glasses the burn of the whiskey is all it takes to reduce him to boneless relaxation, head thrown back and limbs loose.

Billy disappears for a moment, then comes back with his arms full of quilt and pillows, which he spreads out on the floor in the heat. ‘Evening’s entertainment all planned out?’ asks Goodnight lazily, then, frowning slightly, ‘Y’know, for a half-naked man with expectations you look awfully serious.’

‘I’ll explain,’ says Billy, though all he does is prop himself against the pillows and refill Goodnight’s glass.

Goodnight luxuriates for as long as he can, but when the water cools and his skin is starting to
wrinkle he steps out of the bath and stands in the stove’s heat to dry off. Billy heaves the bath tub outside to empty, but as Goodnight goes to dress he takes the shirt from his hand and pulls him gently to lie down instead. ‘Last of Lynch’s salve,’ he says, showing him the jar. Goodnight lies down on the blankets, warm and relaxed, while Billy massages the salve into his leg and then his ribs with deft fingers. It’s quiet, just the crackle of the flames and the occasional distant sound of a passerby; Billy hums low under his breath.

When he’s done Billy sets the jar aside and slides down to face him; Goodnight holds out his arms. ‘Don’t think I need an explanation: whatever you want, cher. I’m all yours.’

Billy lays his palms flat against Goodnight’s chest before he can pull him close. ‘I don’t want just to take from you.’ His expression is troubled as it was before, and Goodnight raises a hand to touch the tiny creases at his eye. ‘It’s all one-sided, and it shouldn’t be. I want this to be us together.’

Goodnight sighs and turns his head away, a weight of disappointment and self-reproach heavy in his chest again. ‘Trying’s not the answer. If it were…’

Billy lays a hand on his cheek, gentle but insistent, until he turns to face him again. ‘I know that. But let me love you anyway.’ Billy’s eyes search his. ‘Please, Goody,’ and when could he ever say no to that?

The room’s gone dark around them, and the light of the flames tints Billy’s skin to copper as he sits up to strip naked again. Goodnight could lose himself in admiration: the inky black of his eyes and hair, the delicate structure of his bones, the planes of flat muscle; he opens his mouth to breathe words of praise as he has so often before, but Billy takes the hand he reaches out and sets a finger to his lips. Instead he bends down, taking Goodnight’s face between his hands and kisses him long and slow; Goodnight tenses, painfully conscious of his lack of response, but Billy just eases him into it, patient and tender, until Goodnight relaxes against him and begins to lose himself once more in the lazy warmth. When Billy lifts his head, all he says is, ‘Close your eyes,’ and Goodnight buries his face in Billy’s hair, breathes him in while he kisses down his neck.

Black hair trails silky over his chest as Billy’s lips brush over his collarbone; gentle fingers and the tip of a teasing tongue map out the contours of his body, pausing over the newly-healed injuries; and Goodnight’s skin comes alive under the touch, tingling at the tickle of hair, the gentle nip of teeth, the press of clever fingers. Billy rolls him onto his back, hands firm on his stomach, and Goodnight keeps his eyes shut as Billy smooths from his flanks to the muscle of his thighs, lift his knee and gently massages his calf, circles the bones of his ankle and kisses the instep of his foot, taking time over every part of him.

His body – how he’s cursed it as slow to heal, weak and unresponsive, in rebellion against him; he’s despaired at his loss of endurance, chafing at his limitations and feeling himself aged and pitiful. But now Billy draws him back into himself, showing him that as well as pain and effort and weakness he can feel relaxation, contentment, pleasure. And Goodnight lays himself open again, lets sensation come flooding in, his skin stirring under Billy’s caresses until his whole being is overflowing with sparkling awareness.

He tenses again when Billy kisses the inside of his knee, moustache rough against the smooth skin as he moves higher, teasing with tiny nips of his teeth; he can’t help it, aware that he’s still limp and soft, but Billy lays his cheek against the flat of his stomach. ‘Let me touch you,’ he murmurs, ‘all of you,’ and Goodnight feels lips brush gently against sensitive skin, fingers winding in the wiry hair, stroking between his legs, undemanding and tender; desire might be out of reach, but in Billy’s touch he recognises the language they’ve struggled to find, an expression of appreciation and love more eloquent than any words.
Billy caresses every inch of him until he feels alive from head to toe, and Goodnight lies, eyes closed, feeling as though he’s floating, warm outside and in. Eventually they settle pressed chest to back in the rosy glow of the stove, Billy’s chin tucked onto his shoulder and one hand over his heart; and the heat of the fire, of water-warmed skin and of Billy’s wordless love reaches to his very centre.

It’s enough. It’s more than enough. Goodnight knows how fathomlessly lucky he’s been: that in among his confusion and damage and self-reproach he had the wit to recognise what he’d found in Billy and the terrified courage to act on it; what he has is beyond price, and he’s been rewarded over and over, beyond measure.

He presses his hand over Billy’s, eyes still closed, and asks, ‘Will you dance with me at the wedding?’

Chapter End Notes

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It’s a cold wet morning, wind sweeping in gusts across the plain and barrelling into the town to rattle windowframes and dash the rain against the glass. Goodnight wakes up warm in bed, Billy a sleeping mound beside him, and hears the whistle through the shingles and the sharp spatter on the window. Maybe he’s getting soft, but knowing he can stay abed on a morning like this is a pleasure to be savoured. He rolls over against Billy with a sigh of contentment, buries his face in his hair and lets himself drift back to sleep.

An hour later he wakes again, this time because Billy is stirring and stretching. Goodnight settles onto his back and listens. ‘Raining. Poor day for a wedding.’

Billy scratches his neck sleepily. ‘Time for it to change yet.’

He starts to sit up, but Goodnight pulls him down again, reluctant to abandon the lazy comfort. ‘What’s the hurry?’

‘Stove to feed,’ says Billy. ‘Breakfast to make,’ but he lies back down again.

‘Ten minutes,’ says Goodnight in what he hopes is a persuasive tone; ‘I won’t enjoy it,’ warns Billy, relaxing into his embrace. ‘And I said I’d go over to help set up the barn for the dancing later.’

‘A wedding supper in the barn?’ Goodnight laughs a little. ‘“Better a dinner of herbs where love is than a stalled ox and hatred therewith.”’

Billy wrinkles his nose. ‘What does than even mean?’

Goodnight strokes his shoulder in little circles. ‘Means it’s not like the weddings I used to see when I was growing up: the parties would go on for a week, and the women would have a new dress for every day.’ He gazes up at the ceiling, memories flickering bright. ‘Remy’s wedding was like that – my cousin, you remember – we stayed with them, parties at night, riding out to hunt in the day’ – waited on hand and foot, he doesn’t add – ‘and all the time my daddy and my uncle were telling me I should be paying attention to the Dupré girls, because their land bordered with ours. All the talk about love and devotion, but at bottom it was business, pure and simple.’

Billy hitches himself onto one elbow. ‘My parents’ marriage was arranged by a broker, but they were happy together.’ Goodnight treasures these tiny glimpses of Billy’s past, so rarely given. ‘Maybe one of the Dupré girls would have made you a good wife.’

‘That I doubt,’ says Goodnight with a secret smile, ‘their brother was the one had the looks.’

Momentarily distracted, he jumps when Billy pokes his ribs. ‘Didn’t stay in bed with you so you could reminisce about old flames.’

Goodnight’s grin is unrepentant. ‘No one holds a candle to you, cher.’

The clock chimes tinnily four times and they both laugh. ‘Time to get up,’ orders Billy. ‘Come on, exercise.’

‘Rather lie here and spectate,’ protests Goodnight, but Billy chivvies him out of bed and through the
training routine they both know so well, and at the end he’s better for it, muscles stretched and warmed through.

As he dresses Goodnight reflects: is that all marriage is, a business arrangement? Some marriages are fond – it’s plain that Lynch would be lost without his Hannah, for instance, and Emma’s mourned the husband she clearly loved. But they’re the exception: what about Harriet Tillman? She’s a good wife to Tillman, a good woman, but her heart, he suspects, long given elsewhere; and in a small town like this there’s no hiding that Trent at the bank has a softer spot for the pretty girl who’d travelled to join Gavin’s establishment soon after his arrival than for his well-dressed wife.

The husbands and wives he saw growing up hadn’t spent much time in each other’s company once the honeymoon was done, and it could have been that way for him, husband to a woman he respected, father to a family, the right connections made, and all the time his heart yearning for something else. And there is Billy combing out his hair, inexplicable, complex, unlikely Billy; Goodnight’s astonished once again at just how lucky he is.

‘You’re soft today,’ Billy says affectionately as Goodnight wraps his arms around him from behind.

‘Won’t be the biggest romantic fool in town, though,’ says Goodnight promptly, ‘not if Sam Chisolm is here.’

After breakfast Goodnight settles to write a little while Billy chops wood and then drapes his tailcoat over the back of a chair to clean for the afternoon. For a while there’s just the scrape of the pen and swish and drip as Billy wrings out his cloth; they both raise their heads as swift footsteps outside are followed by a knock on the door.

When Billy opens it, Sam himself comes bounding in out of the rain, grinning in satisfaction at what he sees. ‘I knew it!’

‘Knew what?’ asks Goodnight in alarm.

Sam’s already shedding his wet coat and hat. ‘The pandemonium at Leni’s: you have no idea. The house is full of women fussing – all lace collars and rushing to and from the kitchen and twenty little girls and boys pulling each others’ hair. Even Jack was trying to find somewhere to hide.’

Sam does indeed show signs of a hasty retreat: he’s in need of a shave, missing his vest and his boots still muddy. ‘I was just underfoot there, and I don’t want to be a barfly, so I asked myself, who has the right of things? Who do I know who’ll be having a good morning?’ He spreads his arms wide, taking in the papers on the table, coffeepot on the stove and Goodnight still in his socks.

Goodnight chuckles. ‘Pull up a chair.’

Sam accepts a cup of coffee and stretches his legs to the stove. ‘Don’t think Jack’s exactly regretting it, but he’s a little dizzied by the fuss.’

‘Good thing he has you to support him.’

Sam grins. ‘Me and Red.’

‘Red? As bridegroom’s supporter?’ Goodnight exchanges a disbelieving glance with Billy, but Sam nods.

‘It’s true. Took some persuading, but Jack insisted.’ His face grows serious again. ‘Think it’s for his
family, before – his wife who died, she was a Pawnee woman, and he married her by their custom; having Red be part of this, well, it shows he don’t forget.’ He swirls his cup thoughtfully. ‘All those years ago we first met, and who would have said that one day I’d stand in a church as his supporter and see him marry again?’

‘Turning philosophical?’ asks Goodnight teasingly. ‘Preacher would say there’s a design to it all, but if you don’t think that then it is unsettling, because what can you say but chance? Chance it was you Ms Emma came across, chance that you knew Jack was close by, chance that we all decided to throw in with you and come to Rose Creek.’

‘Chance we all met in the first place,’ adds Billy.

‘Unsettling,’ agrees Sam, ‘man likes to think he’s in charge of his own fate.’

‘Unexpected outcomes can be the best.’ Goodnight winks at Billy. ‘Long as a man has the wit to recognise something good when it’s under his nose.’ He fixes Sam with a meaningful stare.

Sam sighs exaggeratedly. ‘Yes, Mrs Barratt will be coming over for the wedding, and yes, you will meet her.’ He’s trying manfully not to look embarrassed. ‘I’ve warned her about you.’

‘I’d have thought you’d be pleased to introduce me,’ says Goodnight, in feigned hurt. ‘I’m sure I have many tales of your courage and resourcefulness she’d be only too delighted to hear.’

‘Do I deserve this?’ asks Sam to the air.

‘It’ll be my pleasure,’ continues Goodnight, as though he hasn’t spoken, ‘and please tell her I hope she’ll keep me a dance.’

Billy shakes his head. ‘The two of you.’

‘I have your best interests at heart,’ Goodnight assures Sam, who rolls his eyes.

‘Guess I’ll be making amends for years to come, won’t I?’

‘Making amends?’ asks Goodnight, puzzled.

Sam grimaces. ‘For being the cause of your staying here so long. I know you said what you did while you were laid up at the Tillmans’ so long, but wintering here – I know it wasn’t your intention.’

Goodnight is genuinely surprised: it brings home to him once more just how well set-up they’ve become here: his new big chair at the table to write in, the bed piled with quilt and blankets, pots and preserves in the kitchen – for two men scratching a bachelor existence, their place has come to look pretty homelike.

He catches Billy’s eye. ‘You hear us complaining? Now we’re both back on our feet, a little money coming in, we’re OK.’ It seems as though they’ve been there years rather than months, and he feels a stab of sadness to think of how they’ll scatter the objects back to their owners, give things away and pack up, until the cabin is bare again, left to the spiders and the birds while they ride away.

Billy smiles silently as he takes his basin out to the kitchen and comes back with an extra cup; Sam nods towards Goodnight’s papers. ‘Saw you’ve been taken up by the journals, name in big print.’

‘Been more of a success than I’d have thought,’ admits Goodnight, ‘seems there are plenty of editors out there with columns to fill, and opinions are what they want, the more pronounced the better.'
Then their readers will take issue and write in to set things straight, and that’s half the paper written for them.’ His fledgling career does seem to be going from strength to strength; Billy teases him unmercifully. ‘Wentworth’s keen for me to try my hand on the topic of politics.’

‘Everyone’s impressed,’ says Billy dryly, ‘I’d no idea. Trent crosses the street these days to shake his hand.’ He smirks. ‘Though you’re still cleaning the boots for us. Both pairs.’

Goodnight pours more coffee for them all. ‘Don’t imagine these transparent attempts to distract me are going to work: got yourself a new job, taking your place in civil society: ain’t it time you thought of marrying? Sheriff should be a respectable married man with a couple of sons to bring up to the law.’

‘Sons?’ The scale of Goodnight’s vision seems to take Sam completely aback.

Goodnight stretches out his legs again. ‘Or are you of Faraday’s persuasion, that you don’t need any vinegar-faced woman making you wear a clean shirt and not spit on the floor?’

Sam cracks up. ‘What he’s like to live with I wouldn’t want to know.’

Goodnight laughs too, but feels bound to add, ‘Seems to be working out for them – they’re both doing better out at Emma’s.’

Billy looks as though he’s about to speak, but before he can Sam says, ‘Didn’t expect Vasquez to settle in the town like everyone’s favourite brother either. But no, to answer your uncalled-for and impertinent question, what I’m seeing here in Rose Creek is beginning to make matrimony seem the line of least resistance.’

He heaves reluctantly to his feet. ‘Can’t hide out here all morning, much as I’d like to: the bridegroom may need me.’ Goodnight can’t imagine imperturbable Jack suffering from nerves. ‘And make sure you get those boots shining.’

Goodnight looks him up and down. ‘Could do with sprucing up yourself. See if Jack can convince you of the virtues of married life.’

‘Wasn’t Jack who was doing that,’ says Sam dryly, and he glances pointedly around the cabin as he pulls his coat on again.

‘Us?’ says Goodnight, bemused.

Sam looks at him pityingly. ‘I’ll see you at the church.’

As the door closes behind him Goodnight looks to Billy in consternation, but there’s no help there; his expression’s absolutely serious as he warns, ‘I won’t have any spitting on the floor, it’s unhealthy.’

Goodnight can only laugh. ‘You’ve made the man I am today, Billy.’

Joking apart, he’ll own that Sam has a point. For all they sometimes chafe at town life – the constant well-meaning scrutiny, the same faces and the trivial gossip – he can’t deny that it’s done them good to stop moving for a while, to sleep at night without fear of interruption or danger, eat three meals a day, take time to ease their healing bodies. Billy’s always been a wary and inturned person, and he’ll not become less so now, but the steady calm routine has let him relax a little even so.

Goodnight’s never considered marriage as anything other than a closed book for him, and since he and Billy met, it’s always been just the two of them together. Two men riding out, earning a living,
seeing over the next hill: what need to give it a name or examine it? They could be brothers, boyhood friends, business partners, comrades in adversity, any one of a dozen connections. But now, with a home, a fireside to sit by and a bed to share, he can’t deny that their relationship has begun to take on the shape of something like a marriage.

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Sure enough, by noon the rain has passed off, leaving ragged clouds chasing high across the sky and a hazy sun shining. At half-past three Billy and Goodnight stand ready, hats brushed and boots polished; Goodnight sets a sprig of evergreen in Billy’s coat to match his own and stands back to admire the effect.

‘Not as though anyone’ll be looking at us,’ says Billy dismissively, but Goodnight smiles into his eyes.

‘I could never tire of looking at you, cher.’ If only he could offer his arm to his handsome partner for the walk to church; instead he kisses him softly just before he opens the door and they set off respectfully together.

It seems the whole town is out in its Sunday best: the square is crowded with men in stiff collars, women and girls in smart dresses and ribbons, little boys rushing about in too-tight jackets, and more wagons drawing up to add to the throng. Truthfully, he’s been a little surprised by the whole-hearted enthusiasm with which the town is embracing the occasion; after all, Leni saw her husband die here in the square beside Matthew Cullen, saw him buried in the graveyard with so many others.

But even a battlefield turns green again, and time just keeps moving you forward: the dead are buried, graves grass over and memory turns to legend. Life grows strong despite the grieving, and if two people, both carrying a weight of sorrow, can find some solace together, some reason to smile, why not seize that happiness with both hands? There’s nothing on the faces around them but optimism and goodwill; perhaps everyone hopes it’s an auspicious beginning for 1880.

‘Should have known you two’d be showing off.’ Well, there’s one man you can rely on to puncture high-flown thoughts.

‘Glad to see you making an effort, Joshua,’ says Goodnight loftily; Faraday is for once semi-respectable in shirt and tie, though the way he tugs at his collar suggests that the outfit has his patience under strain. Vasquez, next to him, is as confident and handsome as he promised, silver buttons and spurs flashing as bright as his grin.

‘Jack said there was a respectable man in all of us trying to get out,’ he continues, ‘and I said, not in Faraday, but I see I was wrong.’

Faraday’s too uncomfortable to find it funny. ‘Won’t be in this get-up a minute longer than I have to.’

‘You look like there’s an angry father with a shotgun just behind you,’ smirks Billy.

Faraday turns his scowl on Vasquez. ‘Wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t been made; only time I’ve seen the inside of a church in ten years was for the shooting.’

Vasquez clicks his tongue in disapproval. ‘You’d think you’d show some politeness to God after he saved you.’

‘Wasn’t anyone up there saved me,’ says Faraday promptly, ‘devil’s own luck, anyone’ll tell you that.’
‘Perhaps the floor of the church will split open when you step inside, and swallow you down,’ suggests Vasquez cheerfully.

The idea seems to improve Faraday’s temper no end, and he squawks with laughter. ‘Would you dive down after me?’

Vasquez cuffs him affectionately. ‘On your own, güero: today I am a respectable citizen.’

‘Speaking of which…’ Billy nudges Goodnight and nods towards a newly-arrived wagon, where Sam, much better dressed than when they last saw him, is offering a hand to help a tall well-dressed woman down from the front seat. Goodnight can’t help the grin that breaks over his face.

‘Goody.’ Billy’s half amused and half exasperated. ‘Go easy on him.’

‘Why?’ asks Goodnight, shouldering through the crowd towards them.

Sam turns as they come up: he’s shaved and buffed to within an inch of his life, but the most striking thing about him is the look on his face as he offers an arm to his guest.

She’s plainly dressed, as befits a widow, in a high-necked dark dress, though it’s fashionably cut to show off a handsome figure, and she looks around with lively enthusiasm. Sam murmurs something to her as they approach, then says proudly, ‘Goody, Billy, may I present Mrs Stella Barratt.’

Goodnight takes her hand and bows over it: he’s impressed by her poise, although she and Sam are rare dark faces among Rose Creek’s townsfolk. ‘Mrs Barratt, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Goodnight’s my name, and Sam’s my oldest friend-‘

‘Told her all about you,’ interrupts Sam, with a slight emphasis on the ‘all’.

‘And I plan to return the favour,’ says Goodnight smoothly.

‘Oh, I want to know everything,’ Mrs Barratt assures him, eyes sparkling, and Goodnight’s drawn irresistibly into a grin by her mischievous smile. Behind him Sam groans quietly.

Goodnight turns to Billy. ‘My partner, Mr Billy Rocks.’

Billy offers his hand in silence, but when Mrs Barratt takes it, for a moment their eyes meet in wordless communication.

‘I’m sure Sam’s been far too modest: did he ever tell you about the time we were chasing two bank robbers near Cheyenne, and –‘

‘We should take our places, interrupts Sam hastily. ‘I’m supposed to be Jack’s moral support.’ He ushers Stella before him towards the steps, turning to hiss urgently, ‘And if you tell that story, Goody, I swear I’ll push you off the bell-tower myself.’

‘Suppose I should save a tale or two for your wedding supper,’ concedes Goodnight happily as they follow.

The church is full to bursting, every pew packed: even the girls from the saloon are there in a row at the back, as modest as their one good dress will allow, the farmboys in front of them staring resolutely ahead in their collars and jackets, hair slicked smooth. Only Faraday doesn’t have to hunt for a seat, men and women making a respectful space for him as soon as he walks uncertainly through the door; Goodnight and Billy manage to squeeze in behind Emma and Abner Gray’s family.
Emma has her arm linked with Rachel Gray and though she’s dressed up for the occasion she looks strained. *She was married here, too.* Goodnight presses her shoulder briefly as they sit down.

Sam leads Mrs Barratt to sit with him in the front row; Red Harvest is there already as Jack’s unlikely other supporter, changed into a shirt and buckskins for the occasion and looking slightly puzzled.

The wedding itself is a simple affair, Jack and Leni walking up arm-in-arm to the church through two little rows of children with green branches who line the path to welcome them. Bride and groom stand calmly together before the preacher to make their promises: Jack may be white-haired, and Leni carrying too many traces of grief in her face to be a carefree young bride, but the open affection and optimism in their faces when Jack takes her hand to slide on the ring is touching.

Goodnight knows it’s foolish of him to find the short ceremony moving, but from the expressions around him he can tell he’s not alone: isn’t that what weddings are for? Billy doesn’t catch his eye, but the pew’s crowded enough that he can lean fractionally into Goodnight’s shoulder without it becoming remarkable, and warm strong fingers lace with his where no one can see.

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By the time the celebrations start up the evening is turning clear and frosty, the barn lit up by strings of lanterns glowing warm in the gathering dark. Two fiddlers and a banjo player sit on a makeshift platform at one end; at the other long trestle tables covered with white cloths are overflowing with hams and pies, dishes of Boston beans, cheeses and preserves, and to the side stand casks of hard cider, frothy and sharp. Everyone’s there: family, friends, cousins from out of town, children darting about, the whole town from the Trents and the Hinzes to the miners and bar girls turned out for the music and dancing.

The band strike up and Jack and Leni head off the line to a lively reel: Sam joins hands with Stella, and Goodnight bows to Harriet Tillman. Vasquez is making an early start on his conquests with a blushing Miss Wyatt; Billy, standing talking with Red Harvest, is not yet to be drawn, though he watches Goodnight with a tiny smile.

Goodnight does his best to make himself a popular partner, leading first Hannah Lynch and then Susannah from the Imperial into a square dance; it’s not until some time has passed and he pauses for a glass of cider that he notices Emma, sitting alone. There are plenty who aren’t dancing, of course, but there’s a wistful melancholy about her as she watches the other couples, one arm wrapped defensively around herself.

He sees her shake her head at an outstretched hand from Teddy; perhaps this is one situation where a little interference won’t hurt. A word from Goodnight in Jack’s ear immediately has him bowing in front of her with a grave dignity; no lady would refuse the bridegroom’s request, particularly one so gently made, and she stands up willingly to partner with him. When the music ends Goodnight is in front of her with his best charming smile before she can draw breath, and Sam sent off to rouse up the others.

Emma’s perfectly aware of what’s happening: she raises an eyebrow as they face each other, and when they take hands says abruptly, ‘You don’t need to arrange things for me.’

*So hard on herself.* ‘It’s not a betrayal, to enjoy things,’ he murmurs, and she tries to smile. ‘I know. It’s just…’

‘Not the same if you can’t dance with the one you want to.’

She looks at him closely and her face relaxes into a sad smile again. ‘I don’t want Leni to think I’m
Goodnight changes partners, then swings round to take her hand again. ‘Second best doesn’t mean bad. Still worth celebrating. Was a time I didn’t think I’d be dancing at all.’

Emma eyes him suspiciously. ‘Trying to play on my sympathies?’

‘Is it working?’ asks Goodnight innocently, swinging her round to make her laugh.

He can tell from her expression that despite his encouragement she’s likely to refuse the next dance, so he deliberately manoeuvres them to end with the music beside Faraday; when he offers, ‘Ain’t the dancer I was, but I reckon I could try if it’s slow…’ it would take a hard-hearted woman to refuse.

‘Brave,’ comments Billy as the music starts and they move tentatively away, arm in arm; ‘They both are,’ says Goodnight, though his attention is fixed on Billy’s profile, and the slight flush on his cheek. How brave am I?

‘How-‘ he starts, but there’s a touch on his shoulder, and he turns to see Mrs Barratt, who asks, a little awkwardly, ‘May I speak with you?’

It seems odd for her to buttonhole him like this; ‘Come and try some cider,’ he offers. He’s expecting her to ask about Sam, but her eyes are following Emma’s bright head through the crowd, and she asks suddenly, ‘Who is she?’

Goodnight hands her a glass. ‘Emma Cullen. Lady who brought us all here – you could say she’s the reason the town’s still here.’ They watch as she and Faraday spin carefully around. ‘Bogue killed her husband.’

‘Another widow,’ says Stella. She faces him. ‘My husband died of a fever two years ago. He worked for the Board of Education, setting up schools, and he took ill while he was away.’

‘I’m sorry,’ says Goodnight, completely at a loss as to why she should be telling him this.

She smiles without humour. ‘Widows are always out to snare a man, aren’t we?’

Goodnight’s startled at her directness. ‘You don’t imagine I think…’

‘Do you?’ Her calm poise doesn’t alter.

‘No.’

She raises an eyebrow. ‘Some do.’ So that’s it.

‘Haven’t heard any criticism of Jack and Leni,’ he says simply, ‘folk are glad for the two of them. And Sam’s a man who knows his own mind, that I do know.’

Stella seems to relax again, considering him with her head on one side. ‘He says you know him better than anybody.’

‘Guess I do,’ says Goodnight. ‘Let’s see: stubborn as a mule, can’t stand by and mind his own business for five minutes, and always shooting off with noble intentions which get us regular folks into trouble.’ He cracks a smile. ‘Also the most honest man I know, believes in justice with all his heart, and so generous he’d give away the shirt off his back.’

Her mischievous smile is back. ‘He said every story you’d tell would make him look either hare-brained or ridiculous.’
‘Or both.’ Goodnight readies himself. ‘Did he ever tell you about the time…’

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After a certain point the evening begins to blur into a series of images: Sam standing up solemnly to toast long life and happiness to bride and groom; Emma pink-cheeked and laughing in a square with Billy and the Lynches, her melancholy forgotten, Jack making a heartfelt tribute to his ‘brothers in courage’, the seven of them all under the same roof again; cakes and dancing, jokes and presents. And in the middle of it all, Red Harvest, serious and frowning, marching up with a gift for the bride, handing over an untidy roll of leather with a little bow. Jack steps up to untie it, and unrolls into a thick black bearskin.

‘Bearskin for a wedding,’ says Red approvingly.

‘And for a bear!’ Jack’s roar of laughter carries to the rafters, and he folds Red into a crushing hug.

Soon after, the new Mr and Mrs Horne drive away by torchlight in a shower of rice and the celebrations become more leisurely; the crowd thins out and the music changes from lively reels and polkas to more romantic waltzes. Goodnight wants nothing more than to pull Billy into his arms and onto the floor, but caution still inhibits him: the town is accommodating, but even so…

Vasquez and Faraday are dancing, impossible to ignore, but they’re making a show of it, capering together and spinning each other with whoops of merriment, making it a game. Goodnight sighs inwardly. That’s not what he wants, to hide their bond under a show of play: he wants to dance with Billy as a real partner. He’s brooding over the dancing couples, weighing it up, when Sam slaps him on the back. ‘One last drink with me?’

The free-flowing cider’s gone to everyone’s head, even stoical Sam: when Goodnight asks conspiratorially, ‘So, we going to be doing this again in the foreseeable?’ he grins, shy as a schoolboy, ‘Guess we are, at that. You stand up with me like I did for Jack?’

Goodnight claps him on the back, knowing the question doesn’t need an answer, and Sam slings an arm around his shoulders. ‘If she’ll have me, that is. Have to find the courage to ask.’

‘Got a ring in your pocket?’ teases Goodnight, and Sam’s look tells him all he needs to know. He’d laugh, but Sam is disarmingly earnest: ‘Lord, Goody, my own fireside and a child in the cradle: thought the time for that was long gone … But now - all this time it’s like I’ve been walking in the shadow and now I’ve come to the top of the hill and the land spread out bright to the horizon.’

It’s touching to see, and Goodnight squeezes his shoulder. ‘I’m glad of it. None of us is a stranger to regrets, but if you can set beside them something better …’

‘She’s too good for me,’ breaks in Sam eagerly, ‘smart and funny, and so calm and steadying—’ He breaks off with a huff of amusement. ‘Not that anyone need lesson you in that.’

‘He’s the light of my life, Sam,’ says Goodnight simply, too drunk to be less than honest.

Sam’s gaze flickers behind Goodnight and a knowing grin spreads across his face. ‘You’re a lucky man.’

Goodnight turns and Billy is there, in his polished boots and leather vest, hair beginning to come undone, and the gentlest, most private look on his face. He holds out a hand. ‘We promised to dance.’

_I am more lucky than I have ever deserved_, thinks Goodnight, _and life is all too short_. He walks into
Billy’s embrace, anxieties forgotten, and they drift into the waltz together. There’s nothing hesitant about the arm that comes round his waist, or the press of a warm cheek against his: it fills Goodnight up until there’s nothing in his world but the music and sensation and a feeling of coming home. ‘Ma vie,’ he murmurs in his ear.

The music, the cider and the occasion have had their effect on everyone: they join with Sam waltzing with Stella, the two of them gazing into each other’s eyes as though they’re the only two people in the room, with Faraday and Vasquez, bickering affectionately as they sway through the dance together, with Emma, smiling shyly as she partners one of Leni’s cousins.

All around them are dancing couples: husbands and wives, awkward farmhands and shy young women, grandfathers with little granddaughters, saloon girls dancing together, and Goodnight, dancing in a dusty barn to the music of a makeshift band, is full of joy to be part of it, together, to be able to hold Billy alive and strong in his arms, the ghost of what might have been laid to rest by the steady beat of his heart.

Outside the sky is clear and frosty, sparkling with stars; Goodnight slings his arm round Billy for balance; rather than sobering him up, the sharp fresh air seems to go to Goodnight’s head even more, and Billy’s hardly better than him, the two of them stumbling and laughing their way home along a street still busy with revellers who shout farewells as they pass by.

Goodnight’s making heavy weather of the latch to the cabin, Billy propping him up and mocking his ineptitude, when his foot catches in something soft on the step. Billy squats down carefully to examine the dark bundle propped against the door, then gathers it up with an exclamation. He turns to Goodnight. ‘Here.’ And Goodnight’s arms are suddenly overflowing with mysterious musty leather.

Inside Billy lights the lamp and they shake the strange gift out together: it’s a twin to Jack’s bearskin, brown instead of black, a thick heavy fur on a cured leather skin. ‘Red must have left it,’ says Goodnight, confused. ‘What do we do with it, hang it over the door?’

‘Bearskin for a marriage…’ says Billy thoughtfully. ‘I think we put it on the bed.’ He tucks his fingers into Goodnight’s vest as Goodnight starts to laugh again.

‘Y’know what, Billy – we went to the church, and we danced at the supper, and now we have the wedding present.’

‘Bring it with you,’ says Billy, tugging him towards the bedroom, ‘we’ve one more thing to do.’

Laughter fizzes up like bubbles as they stumble into the bedroom, kissing as they go; Billy tosses the bearskin onto the bed, then turns his attention to Goodnight’s clothes. Undressing seems to be unusually challenging: Goodnight keeps losing the thread of what he’s doing, starting on Billy’s vest, then breaking off to devote his attention to picking out his hairpins so he can bury his hands in the silky depths of his hair. Billy’s despairing mutter, ‘Why do you have so many buttons?’ has him dissolving in laughter again as he’s stripped impatiently out of his shirt and a cufflink goes bouncing across the floor.

He can’t manage to step out of his pants with any dignity, overbalancing backwards onto the bed, so he capitalises on it by hooking a leg round Billy’s to bring him tumbling down on top, the two of them sinking into the shaggy brown fur. The sensation of it, so feathery-soft, is overwhelming: Goodnight purrs with pleasure, rolling Billy over into it. ‘Off,’ he says, tugging at Billy’s remaining clothes and kicking away his own, desperate for them to be bare in it, to lose himself in a blizzard of
heated skin and slow kisses and soft, soft fur.

It’s so loose and easy, his head spinning from the rush of sensation, teasing and licking and spilling over into laughter, that it’s not until Billy’s lush wet mouth is on him and his hands gripped in sooty tangled hair that he realises what’s happening, desire rediscovered like summer’s heat in midwinter. ‘Yes,’ he groans, ‘yes’: it rises in him like a spring flood, and he wants it all, wants it all now, wants to touch and taste, to take and thrust... Billy slides up to press him into the fur and take them in hand together, kissing until he’s breathless, and Goodnight wraps himself in him, drowns in him, a swirl behind his eyelids of gold and brown and black, until the ice shatters and the torrent tumbles them away.

After the wedding there’s a sense of setting-to for the new year: for the farmers there’s winter wheat to be tended, fields to be hoed and trees to prune; the few miners who’ve stayed to eke out a living are busy at their traps and washes, and there’s hunting to bring in some welcome fresh meat. Billy’s often out, sometimes with Red, while Goodnight sets himself to developing opinions on railroad regulation and the question of trade tariffs.

‘You make your point admirably...’ Josiah lays out two sheets side by side on the table.

‘I sense a “but”,’ says Goodnight resignedly. At this time of the afternoon in the Imperial there’s more than enough space to spread out; besides him and Josiah there are just a couple of clerks and one or two miners with some coin to spare. The girls are idle, sitting at the back mending clothes or braiding each others’ hair; perhaps he can play piano a little, later on, to entertain them.

‘Well – that is...’ stutters Josiah.

‘Spit it out and save me from my purple prose,’ smiles Goodnight: he finds Josiah’s advice invaluable, but he’s still absurdly diffident about criticising his novice efforts.

‘I think you overload your examples here – one would do, to introduce your theme, then if you were to cut these two paragraphs’ – Josiah sketches with his pencil – ‘and replace them with this, the whole would be most trenchantly argued.’

‘Trenchant, eh,’ says Goodnight, scoring ruthlessly through the offending text. ‘Wentworth will appreciate that.’

In a town this small newcomers are rare, so everyone’s curiosity is piqued by the man who strides confidently through the doors, scans the room and then heads for the bar. There are always one or two passing through, men with a message to spread, preachers or salesmen, families following a hopeful trail to a fresh beginning, gamblers or grifters like him and Billy, intent on parting unwise men from their money.

But this man is wearing a long pale duster coat and shows signs of hard travel: twin pistols sit at his hips, and there’s a swagger about him that Goodnight hasn’t seen for a while. Right now he’s just speaking quietly to Davy at the bar; Davy shakes his head, then moves to the other end of the bar, cloth in hand, and as he does so his eyes flicker up to meet Goodnight’s. Trouble, then.

Goodnight feels a queasy sense of reluctance: whatever this man might want, people are going to look to him. Billy’s not here, nor Sam with his quick draw and his air of authority; he’s going to have
to face this alone. He’s not wearing his gunbelt; why would he, for a literary discussion with a schoolteacher?

*Getting soft,* echoes Billy’s voice in his head; so many nights they’ve spent in bars primed to erupt to violence at the smallest spark, thick with the barely-controlled aggression of desperate men, yet without fully realising it he’s been seduced into the townsman’s habit of expecting friendly faces and familiar interchange, his gun left hanging on the wall at home, and something old in him beginning to relax.

Perhaps it’s nothing. He should go up and speak – maybe he’s just on his way somewhere else. As though at his thought the man turns, glass in hand, leaning against the bar to survey the room. He’s pleasant-looking enough, eyes blue under a thatch of curly hair, but he’s examining the customers a little too closely, and when his gaze slides appraisingly across Josiah and comes to rest on Goodnight, he feels like a specimen pinned down for display. *He knows who I am.*

At the thought of a confrontation his throat closes; he tugs at his cravat, feeling the creep of dread begin at the back of his neck. ‘I’ll just step outside,’ he manages, ‘get a breath of air’; Josiah’s leaning forward anxiously, but Goodnight picks up his hat and bolts for the front step, where he stands drawing breath, cursing once again at his weakness. Just a moment out here to steady his nerves, and he’ll go back inside, take responsibility and ask what the man’s here for. He scans the road hopefully for sign of riders returning, but there’s no telltale puff of dust.

Along to his left a gaggle of children are arguing and chattering, girls and boys hanging around after school, and Goodnight gradually becomes aware that they’re talking to someone he can’t see.

‘… saw the whole thing,’ announces one of the boys grandly.

‘Did not so,’ contradicts his friend scornfully, ‘you were down in the cellar with the rest of us.’ *Again? But Josiah says, you can’t blame them…*

‘Well, my pa saw it,’ asserts the first boy, ‘he was up on the hotel.’

‘So tell me about it,’ says a man’s voice, ‘and I’ll give you a penny to buy candy.’ The inducement has them all shouting at once.

‘They laid all kinds of traps for ‘em,’ offers the second boy eagerly, ‘blew them up with dynamite. Smoke so you couldn’t see, and Mr Horne with his axe in the middle of it, like a prophet in the bible.’

‘He was shot full of arrows,’ says a girl, ‘but he’s better now.’ It’s not the first visitor they’ve had who’s been keen to hear the story; according to Sam their exploits against Bogue have been told and retold far and wide.

‘Who else was there?’ prompts the man.

‘Mr Faraday,’ begins a younger boy, but the older interrupts him. ‘He was the bravest, went riding out though they were shooting all round him. Exploded the gun with a stick of dynamite, and Bogue too. Boom!’

‘No he didn’t,’ says the boy with the strongest grip on reality, ‘Mr Chisolm shot Bogue dead, in the church.’

‘No, you’re wrong,’ contradicts the girl, ‘my ma said it was Mrs Cullen killed Bogue.’

‘Girls can’t shoot,’ says the boy loftily, ‘she wouldn’t have done that.’
‘What about the others,’ asks the man chattily, ‘there was an Indian, wasn’t there?’ and Goodnight’s stomach sinks.

‘There was Mr Rocks,’ says the boy at once. ‘He’s got fifty knives and he threw them like this.’ He mimes Billy’s spinning dance.

‘And Mr Vasquez, my pa said he’s never seen anyone shoot like that.’

‘He’s very handsome,’ giggles the girl.

‘Now I think you’ve earned yourself a penny,’ says the man, and the satisfaction in his voice is all the hint Goodnight needs. ‘And I’d be pleased to meet someone as good a shot as that. Mr Vasquez, where could I–’

Nerves forgotten in the brewing crisis, Goodnight strides over, scattering the little group the way he’s seen Josiah do. ‘What are you all doing hanging round the saloon? Adam, shouldn’t you be at your father’s store? And Katy, it’s time you took your brother home. Go on now!’ His tone brooks no argument and the children run off, but the danger’s not done.

‘Wasn’t doing no harm,’ says their interlocutor, rising to his feet in a leisurely way. He’s the image of the man inside – same curly hair, same weatherbeaten face – though he’s dressed more plainly and his grip of his pistol is smooth with handling. ‘Just hearing a bit of the tale of how seven men saved a town.’

‘That’s a story you can hear in a lot of places,’ says Goodnight shortly, ‘but it don’t mean it’s all true.’

‘Oh, I reckon some of it’s true,’ says the man, and he looks Goodnight up and down pointedly. ‘I think I know one of the heroes of Rose Creek when I see him – Goodnight Robicheaux, ain’t it?’

Goodnight nods warily. ‘And you are?’

‘Harry Kincaid,’ says the man, ‘just passing through with my brother, and keen to quench our thirst and hear about what happened here.’

‘You’ll hear it better in the saloon that from a bunch of schoolchildren, no doubt,’ says Goodnight stiffly; Kincaid smirks and pushes open the door to the Imperial and saunters through.

He doesn’t need it spelt out for him: they’ve tracked Vasquez here for his bounty. He wonders where Vasquez is now – at the end of an afternoon’s labour digging holes for fenceposts or ploughing a field, tireless and cheerful. Goodnight owes him, he and Billy both do: he has to step up to this one. Should he go and fetch his guns? The thought brings a hollow sickening: surely this needn’t come to bloodshed. Must be another way to head them off.

He pulls himself together and walks back in to find the brothers shoulder-to-shoulder at the bar. They’re very alike, though now they’re together he can see that Harry is the taller and darker of the two. No one else has approached them, so Goodnight pastes on an approximation of a smile. ‘Seems you have business in our town.’

‘I’m Wyatt Kincaid,’ the first man announces to the bar at large, ‘and this is my brother Harry: officers of the law, duly sworn.’ Maybe, thinks Goodnight; he remembers making that claim himself. ‘I’m sure a peaceable town like this believes in upholding the law, ain’t that right?’

Goodnight’s too impatient for this rigmarole: best to get it out in the open. ‘You’re looking for a man, that so?’
‘We are,’ says Wyatt seriously. ‘An outlaw, murderer, goes by Vasquez. Mexican: tall, flashy, good with a gun.’

Goodnight relaxes fractionally. If they’re describing Vasquez as he was on his warrant, then they won’t be looking for a farmhand in a sweat-stained shirt. He puts on his best helpful expression. ‘Should have asked straight out: no need to go round the houses about it. You’re right he was here’ – they can’t hope to deny that – ‘but he moved on six months ago, took off after Bogue was done for.’

‘Now you’d think that,’ says Harry comfortably, ‘man of his kind, he never stayed in one place long before, but we’ve been tracking him a while now, and ain’t no sign of him beyond here.’

‘Well, it’s not my fault if you ain’t equal to your job,’ says Goodnight just as affably. ‘He took off after the fighting was done, same as Sam Chisolm.’ This has to be the best tactic: the whole town will back his story, no doubt of that.

‘That’s what your bartender here says too,’ says Harry. His stare is distinctly unfriendly, but Wyatt’s still pretending to politeness. ‘But you seem to have made yourself pretty comfortable here, and I heard the same of Jack Horne.’

‘Took us some time to recover,’ says Goodnight, ‘if you’d heard the story with all the embellishments then you’d know the doc here brought us back from near the other side.’ The doors behind him open again, and at the familiar footfall something warms and steadies in his churning belly. ‘But Vasquez, he wasn’t hurt, and he took off straight after.’

‘And I imagine he didn’t say where,’ says Wyatt, eyeing him narrowly.

‘Right smart of you,’ says Billy over Goodnight’s shoulder. He’s not wearing his knifebelt, but Goodnight of all people knows that doesn’t mean he’s not dangerous. ‘If he did say where, Goody and I wouldn’t have been awake to hear.’

Wyatt exchanges a glance with Harry, then shrugs, unwilling to push further now he’s facing two of them. ‘Guess my brother and I will have a few drinks and see if there were others more attentive than you that day.’

‘Y’all do that and welcome,’ says Goodnight, all Southern courtesy. ‘Stick around long as you like, I’m sure Davy will appreciate the custom.’

‘I owe Josiah an apology,’ says Goodnight, leading Billy back to where Josiah is gathering up his papers for him. ‘Shouldn’t have run out on you like that.’

Josiah looks nervous, and Goodnight can’t blame him for wanting to leave. ‘We’ll finish this another time, perhaps’ he replies, then adds conversationally, ‘I did say I’d call in and speak to Garrett before I went home.’

‘Won’t keep you from it,’ approves Goodnight: once Garrett knows what’s been going on here, everyone will.

The Kincaids are talking low at their table, heads close; Billy pulls up Josiah’s vacated chair and drops his own voice. ‘Spotted them coming in and thought it looked like trouble. You OK?’

Better for you being here, is what he wants to say, but Billy’s anxious expression fills him with a weight of guilt. Instead he says uneasily, ‘Wasn’t expecting it. Should have known better, I guess – trouble always comes. Can’t outrun it.’
Billy reaches for the bottle, fingers brushing his. ‘You did fine. Red’s headed off to tell Teddy you could do with your horse fetching up to town.’ So they’ll know, out at the farm.

‘Good thinking.’ Goodnight leans back in his chair, trying to will himself to calm. Everyone in town will tell the brothers the same story they’ve heard here: all they have to do is wait it out.

The atmosphere in the room gradually relaxes again; one or two more customers trickle in, the hum of conversation rises, two of the girls flirting with the Kincaids. After a while Teddy arrives as expected, hitching his own and Goodnight’s horse outside; Goodnight waves him over, though the hostility with which Teddy eyes the bounty-hunters as he slips into his seat is so obvious it has him gritting his teeth. But Harry just tips his hat to them with a mocking grin as he and Wyatt stand up and clump out; through the window they can see them strolling across the street to the boarding-house.

‘No doubt they’ll try their charm at every place in town,’ observes Goodnight.

‘Won’t hear a squeak from anyone,’ Teddy assures them fiercely; Goodnight sighs.

‘I know. But they started on the children: stopped it before it got too far, but it was a sharp move.’

‘We can wait them out – won’t hurt Vasquez to lay low for a week,’ asserts Teddy confidently.

Billy unwinds himself and stretches. ‘Why wait? There’s only two of them: we could stop the trouble right here.’ He’s outwardly relaxed, but Goodnight can see the tension strung under his loose shoulders.

Teddy blanches. ‘Kill them in cold blood?’

Billy bares his teeth. ‘My speciality,’ and there he is, the fierce proud fighter Goodnight knows.

Inadequacy squirms in his belly as he warns, ‘May not be the wisest course. These two don’t seem like anything special: if they can follow the trail here, so can others. And if they disappear here, well, won’t that just send the message they were onto something? I say better let them go, spread the word that Rose Creek’s a dead-end.’

Teddy nods, but Billy’s not so easily convinced. ‘I never ran from a bounty-hunter, and there’s only one I let live.’

‘I’m not suggesting we take that approach with Wyatt and Harry,’ says Goodnight dryly; Teddy chokes into his glass. ‘But let’s see if we can keep it peaceable.’

A little voice tells him Sam wouldn’t shrink from a showdown: is the advice for his own benefit?

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The next day is tense, everyone about their business aware of Wyatt and Harry sitting in the saloon, watching the comings and goings. They’ve asked the same questions everywhere and got the same reply, storekeepers and clerks cheerfully bland, but if they’re frustrated it’s well-hidden. Returning from the schoolhouse and his delayed discussion with Josiah, Goodnight even sees them trying out their questions on Fitzgerald, evidently in the hope that a preacher will tell the whole of the truth; he’d certainly back Fitzgerald to have the better of that one.

Billy’s twitchy, knives to hand in a way they haven’t been for months, but, ‘Give it a day or two,’ Goodnight says, hoping he sounds more confident than he feels, ‘and they’ll realise they’re on a hiding to nothing.’
That afternoon, though, Goodnight’s outside the mail office, about to take his completed article for dispatch, when a rider appears at the end of the street. Even at this distance he’s unmistakable, and Goodnight’s heart sinks: Faraday. Of all the- And he’s riding Vasquez’ big white stallion.

Of course the Kincaid brothers take notice, crossing the road from where they’ve been lounging as Faraday approaches the Imperial. Goodnight knows he can’t rush over and head him off without arousing suspicion: he strolls closer as unhurriedly as he can manage.

‘That’s an eye-catching animal you have there,’ remarks Harry amiably.

‘Horse is a horse,’ Faraday says curtly. Goodnight’s too far away to read his face, but there’s no way he can’t know about these two. Come to take the measure of them, obviously, but Faraday’s not the man who’ll make a sticky situation any less so: Vasquez must have tried to stop him.

‘Not so many ride a white,’ says Wyatt, ignoring his brusqueness. ‘Had him long?’

‘Won him in a game of cards,’ says Faraday, giving up any pretence at politeness. Goodnight’s torn: he’s certain Faraday won’t want him to intervene, but if this plays out the way he thinks, it could be disastrous.

Wyatt holds up his hands. ‘No offence. Just we’re looking for a particular man with a particular horse, and we have to chase up every avenue.’

‘No concern of mine,’ says Faraday tightly.

Mounted, his injuries aren’t so obvious; Goodnight knows he’s been stalling, reluctant to dismount in front of strangers, but eventually he has no choice but to swing his leg over and slither awkwardly to the ground, catching at the saddle as he staggers.

Harry blurts a laugh, and the red of anger and embarrassment shows the seams of scars white against Faraday’s skin. ‘Oh, now I think I’ve heard of you: the man who blew up a Gatling gun and lived. Hero of the town.’ The man scans him head to toe, direct and insulting, and Goodnight sees Faraday as an outsider must: limping and clumsy, a figure for pity or mockery, not a man to respect.

Faraday snaps, ‘Least I ain’t your sort.’

‘Know all about us, do you?’ asks Harry. How did it get out of hand so fast?

Goodnight strides the last few paces along the sidewalk towards them, in time to hear Faraday snarl, ‘I know a pair of skunks who are more interested in money than justice.’

Wyatt leans back thoughtfully. ‘Now I wonder why you’re so riled up, we’re just here to see the law satisfied, and this Vasquez killed a ranger, can’t have a man like that on the loose.’

‘I ain’t talkin’ to you.’

Faraday is making for the door, but Harry grabs his arm as he passes. ‘You’ll be spilling what you know.’

Faraday tries to wrench himself free, but can’t catch his balance; Goodnight’s there behind him to steady him with a hand on his back. ‘Joshua! You won’t say no to keeping me company with a drink.’

Faraday’s too angry to pick up the cue. ‘Ain’t telling you nothing,’ he growls.
‘So there’s something to tell,’ says Wyatt, ‘now that ain’t the same song as everyone else here is singing,’ and everything freezes into slow motion as Faraday curses and reaches for his gun.

He’ll see later that this was probably what Faraday intended all along, came to town imagining he’d make quick work of Vasquez’ problem, and the old Faraday would have done: Wyatt and Harry are slow to respond, perhaps conscious of the gathering crowd around them. But Faraday’s not the man he was: he fumbles his draw, pistol slipping from his three-fingered grasp and tumbling to the sidewalk.

Goodnight’s paralysed, unable to move as the Colt spins to a rest by Harry’s foot: his heart contracts as Harry looks at it, then up at Faraday, and laughs. It’s cruel: he gives the gun a kick to send it sliding back to Faraday’s feet. ‘Have another go. If you can pick it up.’

Faraday’s chest is heaving with rage and humiliation: all Goodnight can do is reach to squeeze his shoulder. ‘No need for it to come to violence,’ he says loudly, ‘like you said, this is a peaceable town, and you two officers of the law.’

Wyatt takes a step back, hands spread. ‘We’re not going to shoot the hero of Rose Creek.’

‘That’s right,’ says Garrett gravely from behind him, shotgun levelled, ‘you’re not going to be shooting anyone.’ And he jerks his head to their other side where Davy’s appeared at the saloon door with the gun he keeps under the counter.

‘Harry,’ says Wyatt carefully, and Harry likewise raises his hands.

‘Now I think you boys are done with your business here,’ says Goodnight, trying to force his pounding heart to calm.

‘Time you were moving on,’ agrees Garrett.

‘Guess we will, then,’ says Wyatt; Goodnight motions to Garrett to lower his gun, though Davy keeps them in his sights as they stride away across the road to the boarding-house.

Goodnight leans down, picks up Faraday’s Colt and hands it back to him wordlessly, hand shaking.

‘Didn’t need defendin’,’ spits Faraday defiantly; it’s patently untrue, but Goodnight’s not about to take issue with him. It’s the first time the spell of respect and gratitude has been broken, and what it reveals is ugly. He feels a sick fury on Faraday’s behalf: he gave everything, he saved us, and this is to be his reward?

Faraday turns away. ‘Could use a drink.’

Goodnight knows it’s not the answer, but it’s an answer. ‘On me,’ he says.

While Goodnight’s at the bar the Kincaid brothers clatter down the street with a shout, making their departure obvious. It’s not the outcome he’d hoped for, but blaming Faraday at this stage is pointless. Besides, when Goodnight puts the bottle in front of him, he’s making a good enough job of it himself.

‘Never could keep from runnin’ my mouth, my ma used to tell me that. ‘Most got Vas turned in, just ‘cause I’m so dumb.’

Goodnight shoves a glass across the table to him. ‘They already knew he was here; it would have come out sooner or later.’
Faraday’s mired too deep in self-reproach to listen. ‘Shouldn’t have tried to draw on ‘em. But the way they laughed at me…’ He looks up at Goodnight, sharp as ever. ‘They ain’t gone; they’ll just hang round like cur dogs till they run him to ground.’

‘Or come back with help,’ says Goodnight grimly. ‘Five hundred dollars goes a long way.’

Faraday drains the glass and crashes it onto the table. ‘And me worse than no help to him, not like this. Last time, we were showin’ off, countin’ how many Blackstones we could get; ended up fighting back to back. Won’t be doing that for him now.’

Goodnight has no comfort to offer: he knows all too intimately what it is to be a dead weight to a capable and independent partner.

Faraday meets his eyes, piercing and uncomfortable. ‘My gunfighting days are over, ain’t they?’

‘Like mine,’ says Goodnight, and it’s a hard thing to hear aloud.

The sound of more riders echoes in the street, quick this time, and there’s a brief commotion outside; Vasquez and Billy come in together, stony-faced. So it was only ever going to end one way.

Goodnight stands up. ‘You were right. They won’t have gone far.’

Billy’s as calm as ever, meeting his gaze. ‘You don’t have to come.’

The words aren’t loud enough to carry, and Vasquez is squatting close to Faraday, too absorbed in their own conversation to listen, but still, Goodnight shrinks. Sparring me, or himself? His chin comes up. ‘Not letting you go alone.’ Flashes in his mind: Billy throwing him the rifle as he climbs the ladder; Billy taking the rifle from his unresisting hands. I can do it if I have to.

Vasquez uncoils himself from next to Faraday’s chair; though he’s still in working clothes he’s armed, his face a combination of determination and guilt. ‘No one needs to come. This is my problem, for me to set right.’

‘Don’t be such a damn fool!’ Faraday’s already struggling to his feet. ‘I was the one caused all this…’

Vasquez takes his arm to press him gently down again. ‘Bringing trouble down on the town – I never wanted that. And I will not see more of my friends drawn into it.’

‘Don’t be so fuckin’ noble and dumb and-’ Faraday’s face is working: Vasquez curls a hand around his neck, unusually demonstrative.

‘Joshua, I was so worried. Tearing off down here, trying to take them on: I won’t see you hurt.’

Goodnight jumps at Billy’s gentle touch on his arm. ‘Red’s tracking them: three’s enough. Stay with him.’

He wants to argue, but they both know he doesn’t have the stomach for it. Instead he says harshly, ‘Take care.’

Billy nods, holding his gaze a moment longer, then follows Vasquez out, heels ringing loud on the floorboards.

Faraday laughs humourlessly in the silence that follows. ‘Better off without us, ain’t they?’

Anger would be a welcome relief, but the self-hatred and misery Goodnight sees written on
Faraday’s face when he turns around replaces it with despair. He reaches for the bottle and refills the glasses, dragging up his chair. ‘Drink up.’

Afternoon stretches into evening as the whiskey sinks in one bottle and then the next; their conversation comes in brief stutters, both staring into the bottom of a glass, imagination following the trackers, seeing the ambush, the standoff, the fighting. *Can’t outrun it, not for long.*

The other customers know better than to approach them and they sink further and further into their whiskey haze, Goodnight losing himself in memories of other nights drinking to blunt the shame of failure, times he turned and ran from what he couldn’t face. That’s his story, isn’t it – fighting, trying to fight, failing to fight, leaning more and more on the broken reed of his deadly reputation, and on the partner who has to drag him like a dead weight.

His attention fades in and out, Faraday telling stories he can’t make sense of, boasting about times his quickdraw saved him, about times he killed men with a card trick, getting louder and slower…

…and then suddenly Billy’s there beside him, whole and calm, saying, ‘Time to go.’

Goodnight can only stare at him, Billy in his shirt-sleeves, looking like he’s just come back from a day’s carpentering; Billy, always there in the end to haul him to his feet and take him off to bed.

When he stands up the room reels around him, but Billy props him under his shoulder, and it’s not the first time, not by far, though it’s the first for a while. Billy’s skin is chilly and damp from washing, the end of his hair wet, and his shirt is clean. He smells of soap: what did he smell of when he came home? *Gunpowder, blood, earth?* He can’t bring himself to ask, and Billy won’t say.

‘This way,’ he soothes, easing his staggering feet.

‘What about Far-’ Goodnight slurs; probably too loud, but Faraday seems beyond hearing.

‘Vasquez is coming to take him back. Red went on, to speak to Sam.’

*To warn him they were coming, or to tell him about a pair of unmarked graves?* Visions blur in front of him, and he feels sick from more than the whiskey swimming in his belly.

‘C’mon,’ says Billy, infinitely patient, infinitely understanding, ‘Let’s get you back home.’

Chapter End Notes

Speak to me: fontainebleau22.tumblr.com
February

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Even from a distance the two crosses are unmistakeable, dark against the desert scrub. At first they waver and shimmer in the heat, but as he rides closer they stand out stark and distinct. A shadow passes over his head as a black bird swoops down. Crows. They always know.

He’s alone under the cloudless sky, the muscles of his horse bunching under his thighs as it paces: the road seems to wind, but the crosses are always ahead, always a little closer. He doesn’t want to see, but he can’t turn away. So many graves: trenches in the churned mud of a battlefield, bodies tumbled in carelessly; rows of graves in a neatly-tended graveyard; those Indian corpses, laid out for the birds.

Now the horse is gone and he’s on foot, and over his shoulder it’s not a rifle he’s carrying but a spade. Maybe that’s his job. Maybe that’s why he can’t turn back, his feet carrying him on step by unwilling step. They rode out, the two of them, and they died.

The crow is perching on one of the crossbars, watching with a bright black eye as he gulps down his fear. Closer still, to a cloud of buzzing flies, the scent of blood and before each cross an unfilled grave. Whose bodies is he going to find, eyes open to the burning sky? Whose faces will he scatter with dirt? He can see the figure in each pit, knows them from their clothes, tries to close his eyes because he knows what he’s going to-

‘Goody.’ There’s a clap of black feathers, a slide and a lurch, and he’s sitting up in bed, a hoarse cark ringing in his ears. Billy’s close behind him, strong hands flat on his chest. ‘You were dreaming. It was just a dream.’

The image floats in front of him as he shudders for breath, the world steadying around him: the mattress underneath him, the arms holding him, the faint light coming through the doorway. It was so vivid: he scrubs his face to try and drive away the clutch of the heat, the throat-catching scent of butchery. ‘Shit,’ he says, ‘I’m sor-‘

‘Don’t be dumb,’ interrupts Billy mildly, leaning across him to light the lamp. He doesn’t ask, what did you see?; instead he shifts back to his side of the bed and coaxes Goodnight over beside him, cigarette case in hand.

Goodnight sits back against the pillow, chilled and queasy. He’d thought it might be different, that the fall from the belltower might have offered a kind of absolution to free him from his nightmares, but the old guilt is immovable, though these days it shapes itself into new forms. He knows Billy’s not going to tell him what happened with Harry and Wyatt, and he doesn’t know if it would be worse or better if he did.

‘Here.’ He takes the cigarette Billy offers him and draws deep, the warm bite in his throat comfortably grounding. Billy takes it gently from his fingers and pulls him into his embrace, dragging the covers across them.

‘Thought it would be better,’ says Goodnight huskily into the silence. ‘If I’d found my courage, stood up to fight again; thought maybe I’d put it behind me. But it keeps coming back.’ Always ahead of me.
He’s said it so often, night after night into the dark, and Billy says what he always has, ‘It was a dream, let it go. No call to torture yourself,’ his steady hand passing him the glowing cigarette.

Goodnight leans into his embrace, but he’s not willing to let it be so easily dismissed, his fear breathed out to wreath away in the smoke. This is something he has to get out. Now’s not the time, but when is? ‘Even the kids’ games. Just don’t have the stomach for it.’ It’s not the whole of the truth, but it’s a beginning.

Billy takes the cigarette from him again and begins a slow circling on his shoulder. ‘You don’t have to. You’re my manager, you can leave the fighting to me.’

‘Don’t work like that, though, does it? Always ends up there’s a dissatisfied customer or a bunch of thieves, or bounty-hunters like those two… always comes to shooting in the end.’

Billy’s thumb is still tracing circles as he blows smoke gently up to the ceiling. ‘And you pull it out of the bag when you have to. Having the shakes isn’t new.’

The words are meant to comfort, but Goodnight squeezes his eyes closed. It’s true that in the fury and terror of the fight he’d lost all care, shot man after man, picking them off clean and accurate: he didn’t hesitate, he enjoyed it. And that’s what Billy’s counting on, that when it comes to the pinch, rage or terror or self-defence will carry him through.

But now? At heart he knows it’s gone. It’s not just a sense of fragility: he’s back to fitness now, even if he aches in the cold, but in the time it’s taken to heal he’s drifted further and further from his old self. He looks over at Billy. *Can I wait for him to find out?* ‘Never been much use to you, have I?’ he asks, and he gets the answer he always does, a tiny shake of Billy’s head and his hand a warm weight settling on his back.

Time slows as they smoke the cigarette down, and Goodnight slumps lower against Billy, warm relaxation creeping up through him until the crosses in the hot desert seem far away. Eventually Billy leans over him again to turn out the lamp, then settles with his chest to Goodnight’s back, and he drifts into a dreamless sleep.

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Next morning he’s out in the bare yard behind the cabin, emptying the basin of washing-up water in a rainbow arc, the morning air cool on his arms where his sleeves are rolled. The shouts of waggoners and the sound of sawing carry from the street: indoors Billy’s scraping the chairs across the boards as he sweeps. It’s a simple morning ritual, the day’s easy pattern like any other, but today it comes over him all at once: *this*.

The cabin’s small: as Abner said, it’s draughty in the winter and in the summer it’ll be airless and cramped, tarpaper curling in the sun. But it’s theirs, and these months have shown him how they could have a life here. How he could sit and write, coffeepot at his elbow, bringing in an income while Billy hunted or fished; how they could have friends and neighbours, evenings out and games of cards; he only has to look around to think how they could turn over the soil out here, plant some vegetables, make a little porch, even, where they could sit out in the evening… All these years he’s been running, demons at his heels, Billy his one fixed point in a rootless life, but now – *I want this*.

It’s a relief to frame it plainly to himself at last. But he can’t just change the bargain, say to Billy, *we could stay*, when settling’s never been their plan. They were a pair of drifters when they met, Goodnight in headlong flight from the past that threatened to consume him, Billy completely alone in an alien country, and they came together to stand together against a hostile world, the two of them all in all to each other. They’ve never sought out any other companion, never accepted any friendly
overture, complete in their own company; it’s an understanding that’s served them well as they’ve drifted from one suspicious town to the next.

But now, unlooked-for, change has overtaken them. First they’d become part of an unlikely band of rescuers, forging ties of respect and trust in a time of danger and reckless hope; then they’d had no choice but to become acquainted with the townsfolk, and without really meaning to, through the months of slow recuperation. Goodnight’s begun to find a place for himself. He no longer thinks twice before knocking on the door of the schoolhouse with papers under his arm to seek Josiah’s advice on his writing; he doesn’t hesitate to push open the door of Garrett’s mail office to pass the time of day. He’s shared more of himself with people here than he ever would have expected, and in exchange he’s found a sense of calm, acceptance, and a tentative kind of security.

Of course Billy’s not found the same. What reason has he ever had to make himself approachable and friendly, when half a lifetime of prejudice has been so harsh a teacher? Though there’s goodwill in plenty, his ingrained stiffness makes the townsfolk nervous; he knows Billy feels his difference keenly, and even Goodnight can occasionally catch the momentary flinch of awkwardness before it’s glossed over. Now the rebuilding’s done there’s little to bring him into contact with the farmers and traders and nothing to replace the simple camaraderie of shared labour; he’ll raise his hat politely, sit listening to the gossip in the saloon, but he hasn’t forged the casual ties that Goodnight has. Among their strange brotherhood he’ll let flashes of the man inside the shell emerge – he’s easiest with Vasquez and with Sam, though he’s still distant with Faraday and more so with Jack – but it’s telling that his only true confidant is Red Harvest, the one man more adrift from civil society than Billy himself.

No. It’s taken time to heal, but he’s not Faraday: he’s well again, back to strength and ready to travel. Neither of them came here seeing it as anything other than a step on a journey, and if Rose Creek’s not the end for Billy then of course they’ll go on together to see what the future has for them, good and bad alike. Goodnight lifts his head to take a deep breath of the cool spring air. And if it’s not the end – well, that doesn’t mean the end isn’t out there somewhere. Their road’s wound far, and he wouldn’t change a moment of it, all those wild years together, and maybe more to come, but now perhaps he’s been afforded a glimpse of where the road might be leading.

He turns around, swinging the empty basin by its handle, and there is Billy, leaning in the doorway watching him, and seeing him so relaxed, hair loose and a half-smile on his face, at ease as only he sees him Goodnight feels the familiar tug of love in his chest.

He is the gift I never expected to have.

‘Spring not so far away,’ he says with a nod to the horizon. ‘Should be getting the horses fit again.’

‘Be some rain to come yet,’ says Billy thoughtfully. ‘Won’t want to head out before it dries.’

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Thursday evening brings two riders to their door at the expected time, Faraday on a black horse borrowed from the farm, Vasquez on his white stallion, in town for the first time since the confrontation with the Kincaids. Goodnight doesn’t recall a lot of that night and he’s sure Faraday remembers less, but there’s no avoiding the topic: ‘No one new come in?’ is the first thing out of Faraday’s mouth.

‘Evening, Joshua,’ says Goodnight; ‘Relax, mijo,’ says Vasquez patiently, ‘lightning will not strike again so soon.’

‘Where there’s one there’ll be more,’ growls Faraday. ‘Goody wasn’t wrong.’

It’s left to Billy to ask the question that’s hanging as they crowd round the table and shuffle the cards.
‘Thinking it’s time you moved on?’

‘Man with any sense would be heading out,’ agrees Faraday straight away.

Vasquez tilts his chair back, easy as ever. ‘Run and hide again? I did that for too long.’

‘Go back to Mexico,’ says Faraday, and it has the ring of an argument often repeated.

‘Nothing there to go back for,’ shrugs Vasquez, fixing him with a stare. Faraday stares back.

‘Well you ain’t making me your reason to stay – can’t say I was what kept you where you were in danger.’

They’re bristling at each other like a pair of tomcats, and rather than see the evening head south before it’s begun, ‘Surely that’s an exaggeration,’ breaks in Goodnight, ‘the whole town had his back.’

The thought certainly seems to please Vasquez: ‘Pretty impressive for an outlaw, no?’ he grins, and to Faraday, ‘Next time if you can keep from interfering it will not come to anything.’

‘Next time’s what I don’t like,’ grumbles Faraday, but Vasquez seems even less concerned than Goodnight expected. He leans forward and casts a gaze around the three of them, surprisingly earnest.

‘I am not so slow to learn when I am well off. I have a life again here, and I am not going to run away from it at the first sign of trouble.’

Faraday eyes him sceptically. ‘Still don’t convince me that you’re cut out to be a farmhand.’

Goodnight can see why Faraday would find it so hard to fathom: it is the oddest transformation. Vasquez came here as a gunfighter, they all did, and now he spends his days cheerfully labouring in shirt and suspenders, head bare to the sun, hands rough from plough and saw.

Vasquez laughs. ‘What else would I be?’ he teases, ‘a storekeeper’s clerk? A sheriff? A cardsharp like you?’

Goodnight catches Billy’s raised eyebrow – cardsharp’s certainly too kind: Faraday may be sitting up to play in private again, but his days of making a living by sleight of hand are gone – but the subject of their scrutiny is oblivious. ‘Fine living to be made off of men who don’t know their limitations,’ he says with a smirk. ‘Get ’em riled up and boasting, their cash just waltzes into your pocket.’ He looks sidelong at Billy. ‘Never met a one who could learn.’

‘Nor me,’ agrees Billy with the flicker of a grin; it’s a rare moment of amity between them. Letting up on him at last? Goodnight wonders. Maybe just glad he’s not his problem for much longer.

Lord, but fate plays us for fools, though: here’s Faraday itching to be away and Vasquez glad to stay, and me and Billy just the same, each of us half of a pair. And he can’t help his mind wandering, tilting his chair back and swirling his glass as Vasquez and Billy try to bluff each other down, how can Faraday not be glad of what’s in front of him?

No one can deny Vasquez is attractive, honed lean and muscular by outdoor work, and a glint in his dark eyes that’s hot and inviting: he’d have to be dead not to appreciate it, even if his soul is wholly Billy’s. A partner content with what he and Rose Creek have to offer, happy to do a day’s work and come home at the end of it, hauling up a bucket and pull off his sweated shirt to wash… he catches Billy’s eyes on him, a faint quirk to his lips, and rocks forward hastily to the table, gathering his cards in an attempt to hide the blush that heats his face like a schoolboy’s.
The evening lets them all borrow a little from the past, tall tales and boasts and filthy jokes along with the drink and the cards; when the bottles are finally empty and Faraday’s raking in the last of their small change, ‘Next week, yes?’ asks Vasquez, an invitation that’s already become a habit.

To Goodnight’s surprise before they go Faraday leaves Vasquez with Billy and limps into the lean-to to corner him in private. ‘Goody, would it – I ain’t one to ask, but…’

It’s an odd thing to see Joshua Faraday lost for words. ‘Would it what?’ he asks.

‘Lynch said …’ Faraday shifts his weight on his stiff leg.

‘Spit it out, Joshua. Answer’s probably yes.’

‘He says hot water eases the scars, they pull so tight … but the farmhouse is all, y’know, everyone’s there, and we can’t heat water real well where we are without a stove; Vas says he’s working on it, but… maybe seeing as you’ve got the tub….’

*The bathtub?* He’s too taken aback to form a coherent answer, and Faraday’s already started to hunch and turn away. ‘Might be more work than – ‘ he mumbles; Goodnight hastens to interrupt as heartily as he can, ‘Bath we can do, if you can fit in it. Come round tomorrow afternoon: Billy’s heading out with Red, so it’ll just be me.’

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‘What did Faraday want?’ asks Billy curiously as soon as they’re alone.

‘A bath,’ says Goodnight, deadpan.

‘A bath?’

‘Yes. Here, in our bathtub. I told him to come round tomorrow while you’re out.’ Goodnight smiles complacently. ‘Obviously it’s a transparent attempt to seduce me: once he’s lolling about naked in the steam he reckons I won’t be able to control myself…’

‘Idiot.’ Billy brushes past him on his way to the kitchen for water.

‘I couldn’t say no,’ points out Goodnight reasonably as Billy comes back with the jug. He follows him through to the bedroom. ‘Lynch recommends it to ease the scars, and they can’t heat enough water out in the cabin. Where else is he going to go?’

Billy fills the basin, unhooks his suspenders and starts to wash; Goodnight leans in the doorway to spectate. ‘I guess I can haul some water for him to soak and listen to his troubles. Not that I welcome his confidences.’

‘About Vasquez?’ All it takes is a glance over his shoulder to have the blush threatening again.

‘I have no interest in what Joshua says about Vasquez,’ says Goodnight loftily.

‘I know what you were thinking, you know,’ says Billy, muffled, as he rinses his face.

‘Do you now, Billy?’ asks Goodnight.

Billy turns round and looks at him pityingly. ‘You were imagining Vasquez with his shirt off.’
How does he do it? ‘I was not,’ he protests, but it comes out strangled.

‘Think I don’t know that expression?’ asks Billy. He tugs his shirt off over his head and stands there in the light of the lamp, all hard muscle and twitching lips. ‘That look, on your face, right now.’

Goodnight’s on him in a second, bending to chase the water down his chest with his tongue, one hand tugging his hair free to spill over his shoulders as Billy laughs in his embrace.

‘You know you’re my one and only,’ he grins, thrilling at the pulse of heat that goes arrowing to his groin as his lips rove further down Billy’s stomach.

‘Prove it,’ challenges Billy, eyes dark with lust, and Goodnight drops to his knees, as intoxicated as ever after all these years; ‘My pleasure, cher,’ he murmurs, as Billy’s fingers wind into his hair.

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The next afternoon, cutting wood to keep the stove fed and trudging back and forth to the well with the waterbucket, Goodnight’s torn between cursing Billy for his absence and pleasure in the evidence that he no longer thinks of him as an invalid who can’t shoulder the heavy work on his own. The former wins out as he makes his third trip with a slopping bucket; it’s taken him an hour by the time the bath is ready, each pailful of water heated to boiling, sloshed into the tub, and immediately refilled and replaced on the stovetop. He never figured himself for a bathhouse help, but as he said to Billy, if Faraday’s forced himself to ask he can hardly refuse.

When his customer arrives, for once not growling at the hand who drops him from the back of the farmwagon, Goodnight realises how far he’s underestimated the awkwardness of the situation.

‘Hey.’ Faraday stands in the middle of the room eyeing the tub, obviously unsure how to proceed. The old Faraday, he’s sure, would’ve shucked his clothes without a thought, but now he’s just too self-conscious.

‘Coffee?’ asks Goodnight, then without waiting for an answer, ‘I’ll brew it while you strip off, make sure you get the bathwater while it’s hot.’

‘Right,’ says Faraday, and from the kitchen Goodnight hears him begin to undress. He draws out his task, loitering out of sight, but there’s no sound of splashing, and when he returns Faraday’s still standing next to the bathtub in his drawers.

Goodnight’s sorry for the jokes he made: without his clothes Faraday is a gut-wrenching sight, his flesh gouged and knotted everywhere into pink ridges of scar tissue. But sympathy’s never the right tack; he summons up as good an impression of impatience as he can. ‘I assure you I’m completely resistant to your charms, Joshua, but keep your drawers on by all means.’

Faraday scowls, skins out of his drawers and steps into the bath, sitting down quickly with an involuntary shiver at the water’s heat. His frame is big enough to make the tub seem small, and it’s odd to see him there in front of the fire, pale and brown-haired, in Billy’s usual place.

Goodnight takes the pail that’s steaming on the stovetop and pours it in carefully behind him. ‘Lynch is right about hot water: stops my leg seizing up. Billy’s like to grow gills, amount of time he spends in there.’

‘Wouldn’t be any more of a freak if I did that,’ says Faraday bitterly, but he sighs in appreciation at the added heat and relaxes a little. Goodnight refills the pail and lifts it back up to heat, then lights a cigarette from the fire and draws up a chair behind so they don’t have to look at each other.
‘S good of you to go to the trouble,’ says Faraday gruffly. ‘Vas’s been on at me about it, but I ain’t going to the farmhouse to have ‘em all gawk at me.’

‘Well, don’t get any notions about turning me into your manservant,’ warns Goodnight, ‘but if it helps then I’m glad.’

Faraday takes a gulp from his mug and leans his head back on the rim of the tub, tension visibly ebbing out of him as the hot water begins to do its work. ‘S the scars, they pull so tight: seems it’s getting worse, not better – that doc’s a fool.’

Goodnight’s about to contradict him, but a sudden memory surfaces of his own frustration with Lynch’s hearty reassurances. ‘Give him some credit,’ he says mildly, ‘there’s not many would have even tried to patch you together, and fewer would have succeeded.’

‘No need for you to start too.’ Faraday’s still grudging. ‘Had a basinful of all his boasting while I was stuck there.’

‘Did he give you any of his salve?’ asks Goodnight. ‘Worked pretty well on my leg.’

Faraday scoffs. ‘Ain’t an old wife to be fussing with that.’

Considering he’s just spent an hour feeding the stove and hauling buckets about, Goodnight’s damned if he’ll be insulted too; he grabs the towel and snaps it across the back of Faraday’s head, making him jerk in surprise. ‘You are the rudest son-of-a-bitch I ever met.’

Faraday sinks lower into the water. ‘Just meant there’s no point working at what won’t mend,’ he mutters stubbornly.

It’s only been ten minutes: how does Vasquez stand this for days at a time? ‘Don’t be such a goddamned idiot.’

Faraday snorts. ‘Should have said that to me before I went off after the gun.’ Goodnight sighs, but Faraday doesn’t seem to expect a response: illness hasn’t made him any less self-absorbed. ‘Ain’t nothing turning out how I thought. I ain’t going to be riding out soon, that’s just kidding myself.’ He peers round at Goodnight. ‘You saw how those bounty-hunters treated me. Here it’s all “Mr Faraday” and “Will you let me buy you a drink?” and “Let me shake you by the hand again,” but that won’t stretch five miles. Going to have to be a lot better’n now ‘fore I can go.’

He spreads his arms out on the rim again and settles his head back. ‘I ain’t been stuck in one place since I ran off when I turned fourteen: either I’d be done with a town, or it with me, or sometimes both, and Jack and I’d be off to the next, new marks, new games … never was tempted to stay.’

‘This ain’t such a bad place to fetch up.’ Goodnight feels required to come to the defence of Rose Creek. ‘And I though you and Vasquez had reached an understanding?’ he adds tentatively. Billy would look askance at him for prying, but he can’t resist.

Faraday’s laugh is sour. ‘You mean where he works like a dog and I don’t give him jack shit? That ain’t likely to change soon neither. Only things I was ever good at was card tricks and finding trouble.’

It’s obviously a sore point; ‘Let me top you up,’ says Goodnight, coming round to lift the pail off the stove again. ‘Last one, so make the most of it.’ He pours in the water, steam wisping up, and Faraday sloshes it about, resettling.

‘Didn’t you ever think about the future?’ asks Goodnight as he takes the bucket out to the lean-to.
The question’s half to himself: what Faraday’s just described is the kind of life they’ve all led, in
different ways – when they joined up with Sam there wasn’t one of them had a place they belonged.
They might have had the glamour of gunfighting and gambling instead of sodbusting and labouring,
no ties or responsibility and the thrill of the new always ahead somewhere, but look at it another
way, maybe Bogue’s man was right to call them a bunch of strays. ‘About when you got too old for
fighting and gambling, when civilisation caught up with you out here?’

Faraday’s guffaw sends a fresh wave of water slopping over the rim of the tub. ‘Too old? Never
thought I’d live long enough to have to worry. Hell, I never expected to live after I took that shot and
rode out with the dynamite. Might have been–’

‘Now you ain’t going down that road again,’ says Goodnight sharply, stepping back out to confront
him.

‘That for you to say?’ Faraday meets his eyes, chin up, exposed in front of him, daring him to see.
‘Look at me. This is how it’s going to be. This is better.’

And Goodnight can’t do anything but look at the scarred body in front of him, not a single place on it
that isn’tridged and discoloured. ‘Fingers ain’t going to grow back. Ain’t going to hear any better,
that’s gone, and my leg’s not going to straighten out again…’ then in a sudden rush, ‘might as well
be dead from the navel down.’

Son of a bitch. Goodnight’s skin crawls and he swings abruptly away to fiddle awkwardly with the
stove. He can’t know, surely he can’t…

Faraday’s oblivious to his flinching embarrassment, the words flooding out. ‘Ain’t anyone else I can
ask, ain’t going to say it to the doc, he don’t need to know and blab about it – bad enough people
feeling sorry for me now.’

Goodnight tries to steady himself. It’s not about you. He remembers all unwilling how it was:
difficult enough for him and Billy to sit out the winter freeze, even with so many years of hot desert
nights and sunny creeksides behind them. But for Faraday, slammed abruptly from the carefree days
of early summer to a frosty midwinter, and Vasquez left reeling at his inturned anger and despair?

Faraday’s squirming restlessly behind him, and he wishes he were anywhere else, off with Billy,
even out with Vasquez hacking at the ground, but if Faraday’s forced it out, the heat flush of the
water hiding the stain of shame, the least he can do is try his best to find words to ease his mind. He
sits down carefully, sideways on to the tub.

‘Didn’t all come back so fast,’ he says slowly, not meeting Faraday’s eye. ‘Some things – well, they
took longer than others, and while you’re saying it, Just takes time, it’s hard to keep believing it.’

He flickers his eyes sideways: Faraday’s gaze is firmly on his hands as he fiddles with the washcloth.
Platitudes are no comfort: what can he say that will help? ‘Think of it like this: it’s like a river. In
winter it freezes over hard and seems like it’ll be locked solid forever, but the water’s still running
there underneath, and come spring it’ll melt and flow again.’

‘Very poetical,’ scoffs Faraday, but it seems to make him a little happier nonetheless.

Goodnight stands up. ‘That’s enough with the soaking, and the talking.’

The tub is small and slippery, and Faraday won’t make it to his feet on his own: Goodnight hands
him the towel and takes him under the armpits, his shoulders pink from the heat, to haul him
unceremoniously to his feet. Faraday scrabbles about for his footing, but ends up standing decently
covered in front of the stove.

‘Now once you get presentable again I could see my way to letting you stand me a glass at the Imperial for my trouble ‘fore you head back.’

Faraday brightens. ‘Guess I could look in there, at that.’

Goodnight winks at him. ‘Be to everyone’s advantage to show yourself off while you’re clean.’

He takes himself off to the bedroom to give Faraday privacy to dry off and dress, and sits threading his fingers absently through the soft fur that covers the bed. Is he giving good advice, he wonders? Hope’s important, and there’s no reason to believe that what’s true of him won’t be true of Faraday too. But then he and Billy had so much to draw on, a fire lit between them that had never failed, burning high in the thrill of discovery and exploration, banked hot and steady as the years passed, flickering low from time to time in sickness or sorrow, but always a steady glow, helping them to trust that the season would come round again in its time, and to find comfort and pleasure even in the depths of winter.

Vasquez is patient, he’s proved that, optimistic and determined, but can a bond as new-minted as his and Faraday’s survive such a battering? Well, they’ve made it this far, though with faltering steps and they never seem to stop arguing. The thought brings a smile with it: maybe there is fire enough there after all. Just have to find their way through it for themselves, like we did.

‘C’mon, Goody.’ There’s the stamp and clatter of Faraday heaving to his feet. ‘Gotta say I owe you for this one.’

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True to his decision, Goodnight begins riding out more regularly with Billy to get his horse into better condition. Sometimes they head out for a day to one of the places he’s found with Red; sometimes they take a wide looping circuit around the town, crossing and recrossing the creek. It’s beginning to turn to spring at last, early flowers blossoming starlike on the bushes, and Goodnight has to admit that when he tops the rise out of the valley and sees the plains open out in front of him, when he and Billy spur into a gallop, their horses’ hooves drumming as they race over the rich new grass, he does feel the old elation coursing through him. It’s been a long haul, but here they are on the other side at last, back in the saddle like their old selves, and no mark for anyone to see of the experience they’ve been through.

One afternoon they’re picking their way slowly down a gentle slope of trees, making for the creek where they can ford across to the plain again, and Goodnight muses as he follows Billy’s dark shape flickering ahead of him between the trunks. If we head out soon, back to the travelling life, in a few years this will be just another episode in the story, like those months up in Montana, or that time we had to wait in El Paso: will we say to each other, remember that winter in Rose Creek? Will Sam tell us what happens to them all, if Emma gets what she wanted in the end, how Red Harvest ends up? And where will we be, me and Billy? He pictures the unknown future winding away ahead of them and wonders again what he asked Faraday, where does it go in the end?

‘…need to head back there before summer’s over.’ He realises that Billy’s pulled up and is looking at him questioningly over his shoulder.

‘Sorry, cher,’ he says contritely. ‘Where again?’

Billy rolls his eyes. ‘Edison. I said, we’ll need to be able to strike back for Sam’s wedding. But after that…’
‘World’s our oyster,’ says Goodnight cheerfully. ‘Got a preference? With the money we won’t need to set up fights everywhere we go, not for a while; but that’s not to say there aren’t plenty of towns like this where we’d provide welcome entertainment.’

A light rain is beginning to fall, pattering on the leaves above their heads. ‘I did think…’ Billy raises an eyebrow. ‘Might be we could start moving east, think about heading to New Orleans.’ He grins. ‘Always did say I’d show you the Vieux Carré.’

Billy’s answering smile is bright, but there’s still a furrow in his brow. ‘You ready to go back that way?’

‘I think I am,’ says Goodnight. ‘Not saying I’m aiming to throw myself into the bosom of my family, but I do feel the lure of civilisation more than I used.’

They’ve reached the edge of the trees and halt side by side; the rain’s come on heavier, a sharp shower bouncing on the stones beside the fast-flowing water. Billy says tangentially, ‘They’ll miss you.’

‘In Rose Creek,’ he elaborates, when Goodnight looks over at him enquiringly, his choice of words impossible to mistake.

‘Josiah will, I suppose,’ concedes Goodnight, ‘he’ll miss having someone to talk to about poetry. And I daresay Gavin at the saloon will miss the extra trade. But they’ve got their town back, that was the bargain: we don’t owe them anything else.’

He tries to read Billy’s expression as he gazes out across the open country. ‘No need to set it in stone; take us a while to get there, and plenty to keep us occupied on the way.’

It’s a wet ride home without any cover, and wetter still once they’ve stabled the horses at the Cullen farm and set off back to town on foot, their coats already soaked through and rain dripping from the brims of their hats.

‘Something I don’t miss,’ admits Billy, ‘wet nights. When there’s no chance of a fire, and the best you can do is bed down in a tent you know is going to leak.’

‘Finding a stream’s made its way under the bedroll in the small hours,’ reminisces Goodnight as they squelch along. ‘Y’know what I always hated the most, though? Times when we’d get to someplace wet through and nothing to do but let our clothes dry on us, all stiff and damp and cold.’ *My old grey coat…*

‘I never minded that as much as the days when it never stopped, just rained so long it went through everything and you could feel it run down into your boots while you rode. Like it could just melt you away if it went on long enough.’

Goodnight chuckles even as he feels a cold trickle work its way under his collar. ‘Surprisingly poetic, cher.’

It’s a relief to reach the shelter of the sidewalk, and they hurry the length of Main Street, deserted in the driving rain. ‘Least there’s no need of any of that tonight.’

And who wouldn’t share the glow of comfort as Billy lifts the latch and they clatter indoors to shed their wet boots and strip off their clothes, to dry off and warm up; to spend an evening cooking their dinner and basking by the stove, going early to bed together under the bearskin, and after, lying side by side in bed, drowsy and drifting, listening to the sound of the rain over their heads.
‘We’ll need to see to that cracked shingle near the stovepipe,’ remarks Goodnight idly after dinner two days later, ‘else next time it’ll be letting the water in.’

‘For God’s sake,’ snaps Billy, ‘no need to nag. I said I’ll see to it.’

Goodnight looks up from his book, taken aback at such an uncharacteristic response. ‘Sorry, cher, was it something I –’

‘No,’ says Billy tightly, ‘just –’ His shoulders hunch and he pinches his brow with his fingers.

Goodnight’s stomach sinks like a stone. Billy might have the constitution of an ox, but even he’s suffered the odd bout of illness and it always begins this way, with him fighting to hide his feelings of debility until the point that his temper starts to crack.

He stands up and goes to run a hand down Billy’s back: he’s uncomfortably hot, even through his shirt, and close to Goodnight can see the sheen of sweat on his face and neck. ‘Go and lie down, cher,’ he suggests gently, ‘if you’re snapping this bad you must be feeling worse.’

On past occasions Goodnight’s all but had to wrestle him into bed, but now, equally worryingly, he doesn’t protest: Goodnight hears his boots thud to the floor on the other side of the wall and a creak as he rolls onto the mattress, followed by a muffled sneeze.

Aware that too much fussing might irritate him into getting up again, Goodnight busies himself brewing fresh tea and delays taking in the mug until he reckons Billy’s had time to relax a little. He’s still trying to cling to an appearance of strength and sits up when Goodnight comes in, though he can’t conceal a wince. ‘Head hurt?’ asks Goodnight, perching on the side of the bed.

‘Some,’ says Billy, taking the mug.

Headache. Fever. Sneezing. Goodnight’s stomach lightens just a little. Maybe not so serious. ‘Drink it while it’s hot and then see if you can get some sleep,’ he ventures.

Billy scowls. ‘I’m all right; no need to look at me with that dying duck expression.’ But he slides back down against the pillow all the same, and Goodnight carelessly pulls the bearskin across the bed to cover him up.

It’s a fine line, gauging what care he’ll accept and he resists the temptation to touch his brow. ‘I won’t disturb you,’ he says, and retreats back to the other room.

He sits for an hour or so, book unread in front of him, alert to the rustle of the mattress as Billy shifts restlessly and the occasional sneeze, fighting the temptation to go and look at him; he recognises the signs of a winter fever and knows at heart that he’s being an old wife to fuss so – all Billy needs is to sleep it off, and thank the Lord he can do that in comfort. But how can there be anything at the back of his mind except the memory, still so recent, of him ashy pale and staggering, one hand to his gut, the shadow never so close…

Eventually he banks the stove, clears the table quietly and picks up the lamp. Billy’s no more than a crotchety mound under the fur, but he acquiesces sleepily as Goodnight eases off his clothes and persuades him under the quilt.

The night which follows is disturbed and fretful, Billy alternating between pushing off the covers and curling up against him shivering and coughing, and his own dreams are choppy and confused, the claws of anxiety digging in each time he wakes. By morning light Billy’s abandoned all pretence at
strength and meekly allows Goodnight to wipe his face and neck with a cool cloth and coax him to drink some more tea.

Drawing the covers over his shoulders and seeing him lie down dull-eyed and unresisting summons up the ghosts of other times – rolling him in blankets in a camp miles from help and waiting out a fever; draping their coats over him in a hayloft, once, after a near miss in a shootout. This is nothing, just a passing chill, but even so he needn’t sit it out alone, and once he’s sure Billy’s dropped back into a fitful doze he puts on coat and hat and goes to take consultation.

‘Grippe? I should say so!’ Lynch sounds as enthusiastic as always, no matter how alarming the condition he’s discussing. Goodnight’s found him in his office, but it’s plain it’s a fleeting visit: he’s busy restocking his bag with glass bottles and mysterious lengths of tubing.

‘Mrs Scott has all five of her children laid up, and Scott too, him bawling the worst of them. And old Merrett’s the only one in his house hasn’t caught it, says it’s because he drinks so much the germs can’t survive it.’ Lynch snaps the bag shut and lifts his face to Goodnight with a professional physician’s manner again. ‘It’s not serious for a grown man. Keep him warm, get him to drink, water not whisky, Merrett be damned, and it’ll run its course.’

Goodnight feels a fool: he and Billy used to be racketing round the country with a gunfighter’s swagger, tough as nails: has it come to this, to be running for help over a cough and a sweat? ‘Thanks, doc,’ he says, ‘sorry to take up your time.’

Lynch is already shrugging into his coat. ‘Only natural to worry.’ He reaches for his hat. ‘I’ll come out with you: that wretched Rawlings boy would choose now to fall off the hayrick again.’

Goodnight hears coughing as he opens the door to the cabin again, and is just in time to help Billy on his way back from the outhouse and put him to bed again. To see him drawn and shivering is troubling despite Lynch’s assurance and though there’s other work to do Goodnight can’t be happy unless he’s close to him, so he gives in to his wish and fetches a book so he can do what Billy did for him those months ago: sit up in bed and let him gradually relax against him, run his fingers lightly through the tangled damp hair to soothe him, feeling his skin fever hot. Billy mumbles something that he can’t quite catch, shifting restlessly against him: ‘Sleep,’ Goodnight tells him softly, ‘I’ll watch for us.’

A few hours later he’s jerked awake by a tap at the door, and slips from the bed to open it and find Lynch, bag in hand. ‘Come to take a look at Billy for you,’ he announces quietly.

‘That’s generous-’ begins Goodnight, but, ‘Nonsense,’ says Lynch cheerfully, ‘I’ve been from pillar to post today with the other cases and Rawlings’ lad, but I won’t let one of my walking advertisements go unattended.’

He must read something in Goodnight’s expression as he stands back to let him in, because he sober, taking his hat off to run a hand through his hair. ‘Goodnight, I know I ride that joke till it’s near lame, but the gunshots you took – it was a close thing for both of you.’

He peers at him narrowly, keeping his voice low. ‘You’re no fool for wanting a medical opinion: I know Billy hates to show it, but he won’t have left his injuries behind him yet, so I’ll see the patient.’

‘Be a weight off my mind,’ admits Goodnight with heartfelt gratitude, and Lynch nods approvingly.
‘Let’s be sure he’s no worse than he should be, eh? Through here?’

It hardly needs direction: Goodnight nods towards the bedroom and Lynch clumps through; Goodnight hears him speaking low and then the snap and clink of his bag and a cough from Billy. The examination is brief, then Lynch reappears, setting his bag down by the chair with a reassuring smile.

‘Nothing to worry about: fever will run its course in a day or two. You’re doing the right thing – he’s as snug as a muskrat in winter under that fur.’ And only then, as his relief recedes, does Goodnight realise how much of themselves they’ve revealed: the double bed with its neat quilt and pillows, their clothes hung up side by side and the book he was reading still lying on the covers.

Lynch catches the consternation on his face and puffs out a laugh. ‘No secret that you and he are a bachelor marriage, not after those two months at Mrs T’s,’ he says easily, ‘and I for one am glad of it.’

‘Glad?’ echoes Goodnight: such sunny acceptance is rare.

‘Best treatment for any ill’s good care – wonder whether you would have pulled through without each other. And not to speak out of turn, but your friend Faraday definitely wouldn’t be doing so well without that Mexican friend of his.’

‘Don’t think we need wonder on either count,’ replies Goodnight seriously, ‘though I suspect you had something to do with it too.’

‘Well, maybe so,’ agrees Lynch complacently. He rummages in his bag to produce a small brown bottle which he puts on the table. ‘Dose him up with this twice a day.’

‘Fee for your consultation?’ asks Goodnight, but Lynch waves a hand dismissively.

‘Wouldn’t think of it. Just keep him warm and rested and he’ll do fine, but call me again if he seems worse.’ He pats Goodnight’s shoulder seriously. ‘No call to be shy about it.’

Goodnight closes the door as quietly as he can, then goes back to his place beside Billy, careful not to disturb him. His face is half turned away, the light faint, and Goodnight waits until he settles, simply sitting and watching the slow rise and fall of his chest and the faint trace of colour on his cheek.

It’s comforting to have a doctor to hand, but Lynch’s words were sobering even so: he leans closer, all his attention narrowing down to the lines and contours of that beloved face – the tiny lines graven deeper over the years, by laughter and pain, concentration and effort, the single strand of grey at his temple that’s new: his Billy, so strong and so brave, and gradually he bows his head until it rests against Billy’s shoulder, matching their breathing together, the only sound in the room, nothing in his heart but thankfulness and love.

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It’s lucky, he appreciates later, that it takes him some time to succumb. At least he’s able to tend to Billy while he’s at his weakest, to lie beside him through broken nights, pressing close to keep him warm as he shivers, to bring him water and sponge him down as he sweats, and when the fever breaks and leaves him coughing and weak, to bring him bowls of soup and read to him to pass the time.

He has no shortage of remedies and offers of assistance: Leni Horne appears with a jar of bitter horehound tea that she declares is sovereign for chills, waving away his thanks with brisk good
nature; Rachel Gray sends a brick to warm Billy’s feet, and Josiah sends Antony across with a bundle of newspapers containing a new serial novel. It’s a different kind of generosity than before – the overwhelming all-embracing gratitude has ebbed, to both their relief, and these days they’re just part of the fabric of the town, their neighbours rallying round not because he and Billy are heroes, not because they want something from them, but because they’re friends who are ill.

Goodnight finds it chastening. When he rode into Rose Creek, truth be told, he’d regarded these people with contempt, as weaklings, naïve and helpless, easily impressed by show and reputation. It could have been any one of fifty towns they’d seen, somewhere full of silly, narrow, godfearing folk to be fleeced of their cash, taken for what they could offer and left in their wake. Perhaps they both had more in common with Faraday than he liked to think: certainly they’d never tried to befriend anyone like this, they’d never stayed anywhere long enough.

Now he’s seeing the better side of them and his own worse: his behaviour has come to seem to him arrogant, condescending, even. His own family, though they’re long behind him now, were high society, wealth and status their unthinking inheritance, and out here in these towns of farmers and storekeepers and clerks scraping a living, even in his worst moments he’s never doubted that he was better than them, more educated, more imaginative, a man of vision and worldliness. It’s a novel experience, to feel himself wrapped around with connections of simple neighbourliness, ties he’s never had in his adult life, and to feel the simple kindness and concern that underlies them.

Billy is on the mend, up and dressed again, though still too tired to be out, when an ache he can’t ignore begins in Goodnight’s head and legs, and his throat feels lined with grit. ‘Brew up another kettle of that foul tea,’ he says ruefully to Billy, ‘and this time you can make me drink it.’

Billy comes slowly over to hug him, to his surprise, resting his head on his shoulder for a moment, then straightens up determinedly. ‘Go and lie down.’

‘Where have I heard that recently?’ Nevertheless it’s a relief to take his rapidly-increasing shivers under the fur and accept a mug to warm his hands.

‘Firewood,’ he says vaguely, but Billy says, ‘Hush now.’

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The grippe hits him hard, harder than it has Billy: for a few days he’s feverish and uncomfortable, day and night blending together in a painful swirl of sweaty sheets and permanent thirst, the erratic chiming of the clock increasing his confusion.

He wakes up once in the dark, alone, knowing there’s something he has to do – Billy was ill, that’s right, out in the rain, they had to get out of the rain, he’s clammy all over with it, and though his throat is dry he tries to croak it out when Billy takes him by the shoulders, he’s out there in the rain, we can’t leave him…

Another time he hears Lynch and Billy talking, muzzily, then Lynch spends some time examining his chest as he lies cold and shivering before covering him up again with a gentle pat, and Goodnight turns over to tumble back down into the comforting dark.

Once he wakes up, blinking, to see that it’s day, the light too bright, and there’s not a part of him that doesn’t ache. Billy’s lying next to him, propped on one elbow. He reaches to smooth Goodnight’s sticky hair from his brow. ‘How are you feeling?’

Goodnight swallows and coughs; his head thumps. ‘Sore.’ Billy looks so serious, he needs to reassure him. ‘S just grippe. Pass in a day or two, Lynch says.’
‘I know,’ says Billy, rubbing a thumb gently along his jaw. He reaches for a glass of water. ‘Don’t try to sit up yet.’

Goodnight sinks back, relieved: his hips and back hurt, though not as much as his head. Billy helps him drink. ‘Just like September again,’ he manages.

Billy shakes his head, smiling a little. ‘Not as bad as that. Though-’ he breaks off as Goodnight goes into a coughing fit, and by the time he’s settled again, the quilt tucked warmly round him, his train of thought seems to have gone. ‘I’ll fetch you some tea to drink, and then you should go back to sleep.’

When he finally returns to full awareness he finds himself alone under a mound of heavy covers, warm and no longer aching. It feels like afternoon: there are quiet sounds of activity on the other side of the partition, and he’s happy to lie for a while, detached and drifting, listening to the wind in the roof. After a while he hears the front door open and the sound of muted conversation: a woman, he thinks. A draft of cooler air snakes in, carrying with it a faint freshness of outdoors.

The door closes again, Billy crosses to the kitchen and back, then his steps come closer and Goodnight pushes himself to sit up in his nightshirt. Billy’s smile seems to light up the room, and Goodnight burrows into his embrace, careless of just how unwashed he must be.

‘Feeling better?’ asks Billy with a gentle squeeze.

Goodnight pauses, measuring. ‘Yes. Though not like getting up.’

‘Nothing new there,’ teases Billy.

‘What day is it?’

‘Saturday.’

Goodnight’s momentarily confused. ‘We missed poker.’

Billy laughs. ‘Oh, Faraday’s been sick too. All the hands had it, Emma was at her wits’ end, Vasquez said.’

‘He wasn’t ill? You just know he wouldn’t be,’ says Goodnight enviously.

‘Must be all that exercise,’ agrees Billy without a flicker.

‘Don’t tease me, cher,’ begs Goodnight, ‘I’m not a well man.’ The expression that crosses Billy’s face has him reaching for his hands again. ‘It was just grippe. I’ll be fine again in a day or two-’

Billy shakes his head affectionately. ‘Longer than that, you’ll need time to recover.’

‘Week then,’ begins Goodnight, ‘it’s a setback, but we’ll be OK again…’ but something closed about Billy’s face makes him stop.

He waits, and eventually Billy says, looking down and picking at one of the rings on the quilt, ‘It just made me think. Of other times. Like when you were sick from bad water, out in the desert that time.’

Goodnight’s never really remembered that, not very clearly. ‘Or when I was shot and we had to lay up in the stables.’

‘Remember that,’ says Goodnight, ‘a tale to tell.’
Billy meets his eyes, a little line between his brows. ‘We talk about them now, how it was a scare but you pulled through, how we got lucky and found help in time…’ It’s no surprise that their thoughts should have followed the same track. ‘I was glad Lynch was here.’

‘Me too, cher.’

Goodnight leans back again, already tired. His stomach gurgles and Billy straightens up.

‘Let me get you food. We’ve plenty: there’s stew, and pie, and some kind of pudding…’

‘Really?’

Billy pulls a face. ‘People kept coming round. Bringing stuff. Seeing we were OK.’

‘Who?’ asks Goodnight, intrigued despite his lassitude.

‘Hold on.’ Billy goes away and comes back again shortly with a steaming mug, a plate of pie and an assortment of bottles which he ranges on the bedcover while Goodnight digs into the food.

‘Good pie,’ says Goodnight indistinctly; right now it tastes like the best thing he’s ever eaten.

‘Abner brought it. He dropped off a load of firewood too. Vasquez brought the stew from Emma.’ Billy waits until Goodnight’s cleaned his plate and is sipping his tea, then holds up a brown bottle.

‘And Jack gave us this.’

Goodnight puts down his mug, uncorks it and gives it a tentative sniff. The smell is eyewatering.

‘What do I do with it?’ he asks once he’s stopped coughing. ‘Drink it?’

Billy laughs, and it’s good to see his worry lift. ‘Rub it on, I think.’

‘Where?’ asks Goodnight suspiciously.

‘On your back,’ says Billy, and pours out a handful: Goodnight lets him hitch up his shirt and massage it in.

‘What’s in the other bottles?’ he asks, back already beginning to tingle.

‘More of Lynch’s tonic, and … applejack? Abner left that too.’

‘Now you’re talking,’ says Goodnight with a wink. ‘Required for medicinal purposes, no doubt about that.’

Even the smallest measure of spirits has him coughing again, but it spreads a glow in his chest to match the warmth of Jack’s ointment on his back, and Goodnight settles down again contentedly.

‘Stand to keep me company for a while?’

Billy fetches the paper, shucks his boots and props himself up crossways on the bed, half under the bearskin; Goodnight stretches out with a sigh. He casts a speculative glance at Abner’s bottle, still there on the chest, but Billy doesn’t even look up from the page. ‘Finish your tea.’
Speak to me: fontainebleau22.tumblr.com
March

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘So.’ Goodnight is facing down Sam Chisolm, sheriff and marshal, across a table. ‘You know what this means.’

Sam shifts uneasily in his chair. ‘Now, Goody. We’ve been friends a long time.’

Goodnight adopts a practised air of sorrow. ‘I’d like to let that count, Sam, you know I would, but a promise is a promise.’

They’re the only customers in the hotel at this time of day: spring’s a busy time for farmers, out ploughing and sowing, pruning or seeing to the stock, school’s in session and storekeepers at work behind their counters; only men of leisure and lawmen who’ve brought a pair of horse thieves to justice and are passing through on their way home have time to sit drinking in the afternoon.

Billy looks from one to the other of them. ‘Sam’s a man of forthright opinions,’ explains Goodnight, ‘and he passed comment once or twice on the topic of matrimony.’

Billy raises an eyebrow at Sam. ‘I can’t believe you remember it,’ says Sam to Goodnight, ‘though it may be that I was a little needlessly outspoken.’

‘What were your words again?’ ponders Goodnight. ‘“If you ever see me standing up to marry, you can duck me in the horse trough till my head cools and then put me to shovelling out the cowshed until I come to my senses”, wasn’t that it?’

‘Can see how that could be awkward, concedes Billy, straightfaced, ‘but Goody always told me, Sam’s a man of his word.’

‘Can’t hold a man responsible for everything he says in his salad days,’ says Sam, ‘and come to think of it, I do seem to remember that you made a similar undertaking.’

‘Am I the one getting up before the preacher on the first Sunday in May?’ asks Goodnight complacently.

‘No, no.’ Sam looks thoughtful. ‘Though I do think I may have missed an opportunity somewhere along the line…’ He drinks his beer and flicks foam from his moustache. ‘Your threats do not deter me. First Sunday in May and I shall be a married man. You’ll be my supporter?’

Goodnight draws himself up. ‘Sam, no disaster, natural or unnatural, could prevent my attendance at your wedding: not the Great Neapolitan Earthquake or the eruption of Mount Tambora: if the very gates of Tartarus were to yawning wide and spew forth…’

‘We’ll be there.’ Billy’s laconic statement cuts through Goodnight’s oration to leave him gaping like a fish for a moment, then the three of them dissolve into laughter.

Sam leans forward. ‘Now there’s something I want your opinion on. Mine won’t be an affair for the whole town like Jack’s, but Vasquez and Faraday and Jack will come to see me wed, and Red will be there, and I’d a mind to ask Ms Emma too, but we saw how hard she took it last time, and that was among friends. Would she find it difficult to come, do you think?’
Goodnight’s pleased that this one’s easy. ‘Tide’s turned for her, I think, since New Year.’ Emma seems to him to be easing into a new life; Vasquez has taken up some of the slack at the farm, making her future more certain, and recently she’s seemed a little brighter, her grief less all-consuming. ‘And I reckon she and you have enough history that she’d be glad to see you set your feet to the future.’

Sam smiles fondly. ‘Always the way with words. And speaking of the future, I guess you two’ll be on the road again now the weather’s turned?’

‘Soon, I expect,’ says Goodnight vaguely: he and Billy haven’t exactly discussed it. ‘Took me a while to get back properly after the grippe,’ he adds, and that’s part of it: once the worst was over there had been a week of tiring too easily and aching bones again, a worrisome echo of his recovery, and after that it had been a relief to fall back into their regular routine. They’ve talked some more about heading East, and Billy, he knows, has taken his knives out for some target practice along the creekside where he wouldn’t attract an audience, but when is something they both seem to be holding back on.

‘Be sorry to see you gone,’ says Sam, ‘got into the way of having friends close by.’

‘Likewise,’ smiles Goodnight, and it brings a pang of regret. ‘But we’ll keep in touch. Come back if there’s another town to save.’ Sam’s answering smile is warm; Goodnight knows he always kept an eye on him in their years apart. ‘And you’ll be dropping back here anyway to see the others?’

Sam’s expression soberes. ‘Be looking out for Faraday for the foreseeable.’ He shakes his head. ‘Lord, I feel responsible. He was just in Amador City that day, happened along, came on the job, and after… but he’s healing up at least, they say – he riding again yet?’

‘Yes,’ says Billy, ‘though not Jack.’

‘Slow progress,’ adds Goodnight, heavy with the weight of Joshua’s confidences.

‘Well, I’ll give him what help he’ll take,’ says Sam, ‘though I suspect that won’t be much.’ He drains his glass and sets it down, then gets to his feet. ‘I hate to leave you so soon, but I need to be making time to get home.’

To hear him say it so casually warms Goodnight’s heart: Sam came through the fight with Bogue outwardly unchanged, a little more grizzled, perhaps; but these days he’s lighter, his flashing smile more ready, and just as with Emma, Goodnight sees the evidence of healing. For as long as he’s known him Sam’s been a lonely man, as much a misfit as he was himself, but now he has a warm hearth and a loving partner to ride home to.

‘Give Stella regards from Billy and me, and tell her I’ll dance with her again when she’s Mrs Chisolm.’

The grin that breaks out on Sam’s face is as wide and foolish as he could hope, and he pulls Goodnight into a hug. ‘You can duck me in the trough to your heart’s content: I know this is the right thing.’

He claps Billy on the back before he mounts up, and holds Goodnight at arms’ length, looking him up and down. ‘Lord, Goody, but I’m glad. Glad you’re well again, glad for you and Billy, glad for all of us.’

Goodnight tips his hat affectionately. ‘Something from the ashes after all.’
He and Billy stand together to watch Sam out of town, his dark figure dwindling as he rides up over the rise and out of sight. Then Goodnight turns to Billy and meets a grin of anticipation. ‘That big old shiner?’ he asks.

‘One more time,’ agrees Billy.

They’ve left their fishing poles ready to hand behind the door of the cabin, and propping them over their shoulders they take the road in the opposite direction from Sam, out towards the broad expanse of farmland where the creek winds upstream from the town.

Spring’s arrived with a rush as though to make up for lost time, fields lush with new growth and flowers bursting to colour the ridges and hollows, lambs and kids frisking as their placid dams graze, birds twittering from dawn to dusk, the whole world come to life again. It’s perfect weather for fishing, the sun shining low under a bank of retreating cloud; they follow the road around the bend, feet almost noiseless on the grassy track, and as they leave the town behind them Goodnight feels like a boy again, racing down to the river after school.

Billy says suddenly, ‘We should stay. Until the wedding.’

Goodnight looks over at him in surprise. ‘You think?’

Billy shrugs, calmly practical. ‘No point heading out to come straight back. It’s only a few weeks.’

‘Makes sense,’ agrees Goodnight, hoping he doesn’t betray the surge of relief that courses through him at the idea of staying in their temporary home a little while longer. ‘Be on hand to see Sam through. If you can stand another month in town.’

‘I can,’ smiles Billy. ‘All still be out there for us when we’re ready.’

Goodnight smiles back: no one can deny it makes sense. ‘Did occur to me that trying to set up fights while we’re skirting close round here’s not the soundest plan: if they’ve heard the story, and I’m certain they all have, I don’t know how easy it’ll be to find a man willing to stand up against you.’

It’s not a prospect he’s enjoyed, Billy challenging for fights again after all these months without seeing him bruised and bloodied. ‘Most likely just to want to stand us drinks and hear the story for the twentieth time.’

Billy shifts the pole on his shoulder. ‘We can speak to Abner about having the cabin another month or so, pay him some rent for going on into spring.’

They’re just beyond the Gray’s farm now, at the very edge of Rose Creek, heading for a spot Billy’s discovered where the tilled land falls away to the open plain and sky, and the creek bends and broadens under the trees: an expanse of soft grass beside a series of spreading pools, one of them deep enough for swimming, though it’s too cool for that yet.

Billy had asked Abner if he minded when he first started fishing there, but, Feel free, Abner had said, away up there; me and my lads have our own stretch nearer the house. It’s far enough out of town that wandering children or strolling couples are rare, and upstream of the mineworkings so the water’s pure and the fish plentiful, shiners and catfish and brown trout; Billy’s been patiently angling for one particularly impressive trout that’s so far proved too wily to be caught.

It’s where they settle, finding a log to sit on as the grass is still damp and baiting their hooks. The sun filters through the leaves to sparkle on the water, flies dancing above the surface as they cast their lines out; ‘Looks promising,’ says Billy with satisfaction. They make themselves comfortable and begin their wait, birdsong starting up again above their heads.
Billy’s float bobs immediately, and he leans forward, but it settles again, drifting in the current; ‘Take them a while to start biting,’ he comments quietly.

Goodnight gazes at his own line reflectively. ‘If we’re here a bit longer, I might have a word with Red: thought I could see if I can learn a bit of his lingo.’

That startles a muffled laugh from Billy. ‘After the way you mangle Korean? Why?’

Goodnight nudges him in reproof. ‘Could be useful to speak a little of it: Sam says the different tribes have different languages, but Comanche’s what they’re all most likely to know. And Red speaks English, so he’s an ideal teacher.’

‘If he has the patience.’ Billy’s still amused, but Goodnight’s not to be put off.

‘Sam learnt it: how hard can it be? And if I can get on enough to be able to talk, well, Coolidge is keen for me to write more on politics, you know, and there’s only so many times I can stand to hear the worthies in Garrett’s sound off with their opinions on the land question or the Indian wars. One side’s not a fair argument.’

That earns him a tiny smile of approval, though Billy’s concentrating on his float again as he says hesitantly, ‘The writing…’

Goodnight thinks he knows what he’s about to say and hastens to get in first. ‘It’s been good, I’ve enjoyed it, you know that. But no reason I can’t keep it up while we’re travelling. Mail can find us, surely.’ He hopes he sounds confident: there really is no reason he can’t write just as well at a desk in a hotel, or when they camp in the evening; and if they know where they’re headed, he can have mail sent on. Won’t be as reliable, but still. ‘And you need a bigger arena to exercise your talents.’

Billy’s float begins to bob in earnest this time, distracting their attention; he carefully reels in the line and flips a catfish out onto the bank. He stuns it neatly, then takes more bait and casts the line out once more. ‘Right now I could see if Vas needs a hand at their place: he wants to make the bunkhouse bigger, he said.’

‘Good idea, cher.’ Goodnight’s been curious to see Vasquez’ and Faraday’s place, but they’ve never issued an invitation and he’s certain it would be tactless to turn up unannounced: privacy is what Faraday most sorely needs. ‘I’m sure he could use some company: can’t imagine that Joshua can be much help with the work. Or for encouragement.’ It’s hard to forget what he saw, and what Joshua said.

Billy eyes him, the tiny crease of worry back between his brows. ‘You don’t need another thing to feel guilty about. You didn’t bring him here.’

‘I know. But-’ Goodnight’s gesture takes in the river, the sunny afternoon, themselves. ‘We got back to where we were and he never will.’

Billy nods suddenly towards the water where Goodnight’s own line is twitching; he pulls it in steadily and triumphantly hauls out a shining bass. After that there’s a steady flow of bites, and an hour or so is long enough to give them a creditable catch.

‘Shall we string them up over a fire here?’ asks Goodnight. ‘If we can find enough dry wood?’

‘Getting soft,’ scoffs Billy, standing up and stretching, ‘always enough if you look.’ And he goes up and down the bank to collect kindling and branches while Goodnight casts his hook out once more.
to see if he can add to their haul. Sure enough, he comes back with enough wood to get a small fire going, and while it burns up he cleans the fish and threads them on a green twig to cook.

They sit side by side to eat, the flesh succulent and smoky, fresh as it comes, with handfuls of miner’s lettuce and sorrel to add relish. It’s peaceful, just the gentle chatter of the creek beside them and the birds above: beyond the trees he can see right across to the hills, blue in the distance.

Goodnight sighs. ‘What?’ asks Billy. *Always so concerned:* he leans into him.

‘Nothing. That’s just it.’ Billy shoots him a how-are-you-so-annoying look. ‘No, I mean, it’s just… fish cooked over a fire.’ Billy rolls his eyes and Goodnight tries to marshal his feelings into something he can express. ‘I was thinking, coming over, it’s like being a boy again. Playing at roughing it – fishing and making campfires, riding out to hunt and see new places, and then back home to a warm bed and a roof. Enough to eat all the time, a bit of money coming in. No danger. No hardship.’

Billy looks at him narrowly. ‘You’re allowed not to suffer.’

Goodnight tilts his head, amused. ‘That’s rich coming from you, Mr I-don’t-need-comfort.’

Billy lifts one shoulder. ‘Can’t let yourself get used to it. Can’t mind it.’ His manner’s dismissive, but Goodnight sees the hint of awkwardness that still underlies it.

‘I mind it for you,’ he says fiercely, pressing their knees together. ‘You don’t know how I’ve enjoyed it, seeing you eating properly for a change, indoors when it’s raining or cold, not pretending that you’re not tired or sore or thirsty.’

Billy’s smile has something wistful about it. ‘Like I said, getting soft.’ Goodnight starts speaking again, but Billy interrupts him. ‘I do know. It’s better for you: I like to see you sleeping in a bed instead of getting cold and stiff on the ground.’

Goodnight waggles his eyebrows with a grin and regrets it almost instantly, yelping as Billy tips him backward off the log and makes a spirited attempt to wrestle him into the creek.

When they eventually regain their dignity they sit for a while longer, afternoon turning to evening, talking and being silent by turns, Billy occasionally bouncing a stone across the water. It’s like a hundred other afternoons they’ve idled away, just the two of them by a creekside or under the trees, and though the town’s so close they could be miles away, just the birds for company. Goodnight can imagine coming out here in summer when it’s hot to lie in the grass and read, or to strip off and swim, Billy with his hair flowing wet down his shoulders, and then to linger while the sky darkens and the stars come out bright, alone in the quiet dark with the frogs and the fireflies.

The sun’s beginning to sink by the time they scuff out the fire, gather their poles and set off back along the road. ‘Have to come back again for that big trout,’ grumbles Billy.

‘Still a few weeks for it,’ smiles Goodnight, and he feels a guilty twinge for the way his heart lifts at the reprieve he’s been given. ‘Might help if we don’t roll about so much on the bank, though.’

The fields around them are empty, farmhands finally headed home, but a sudden peal of laughter closer by has both their heads turning. Down among the trees, a little distance away, two women are walking by the water, arm-in-arm.

‘That’s Emma,’ says Billy, sharper-eyed, and though the light is fading Goodnight recognises the
flame of her hair tumbling down her back. Her companions’s a tall fair woman he doesn’t know: they’re carrying their sunbonnets in their hands, heads together and laughing like girls.

Goodnight exchanges a glance with Billy: if they’re all heading back to town they could call out a greeting and join them, let themselves be drawn into conversation and an invitation to dinner; but the reluctance in Billy’s expression mirrors his own: their own company is enough this evening, and something in the carefree intimacy between Emma and her friend hints to him that they might have come this way seeking solitude too. ‘No need to intrude, cher,’ he smiles, and they let Emma and her friend pass out of sight undisturbed as they head home.

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Now they have a few weeks’ grace it’s the simplest thing to fall back into the rhythm of writing and hunting, chores and cardgames: and as promised, Goodnight approaches Red to propose that he learn a little Comanche. Red’s amenable to the idea, though he seems both amused and sceptical at the prospect, and Goodnight arms himself with notebook, pencil and what he hopes is an engaging manner for their first lesson. They meet on the boardwalk outside the hotel, Red still not fully at ease under a roof; Goodnight thinks privately that it might do some of the citizens who hold forth so volubly on politics no harm to see him conversing with Red in his own tongue.

The principle they adopt is simple enough, beginning with words for the objects around them and for simple actions, Red repeating them patiently while Goodnight writes them down as best he can. Red finds the notion of writing odd, he can tell, but after he’s filled several pages with the names of animals, body parts, foods and everyday phrases, Goodnight’s sure that it’s the only way he can possibly remember any of it.

‘Numukuhtsu,’ says Red.

Goodnight furrows his brow. ‘Kuhtsu? Isn’t that cow?’ Red cracks a smile: he’s a conscientious teacher, but he doesn’t even try to hide his entertainment at Goodnight’s mangling of the sounds. ‘And numu…’ Red puts a hand on his chest. ‘People, that’s right,’ says Goodnight. ‘So… numukuhtsu.’ Red picks up a stick and with a few swift strokes sketches an animal on the dusty boards. ‘Buffalo!’ exclaims Goodnight, and adds it to his list of words.

‘Ta’kwubai,’ says Red, miming a rifle shot.

‘Tah-kwu-bai,’ repeats Goodnight, then, testing, ‘Ho’ai?’ Red laughs as though he’s made a joke, then says a sentence which eludes him, though he hears something like taibo, white man, and ho’ai again. ‘One word at a time?’ he asks optimistically: the trick of how they string sentences together simply baffles him, and Red can hardly explain it in terms of the grammar Goodnight learnt at school.

As he’s spelling out each word he sees Billy heading in their direction, tipping his hat with reserved politeness to the women he passes: he looks just like himself again, all coiled energy in black and white, though when he comes closer Goodnight can see that there’s fine sawdust collected in the creases of his clothes and clinging to his skin.

‘Maruawe,’ he says cheerfully to Red. ‘He learning anything?’

‘Some,’ says Red with a little smile.

‘Uphill work, cher,’ says Goodnight ruefully, ‘though no doubt it’s improving to my character. Been hard at work?’
‘Harder than either of you,’ says Billy smugly, leaning on the rail.

‘Cutting and hammering and making more things to put in a house?’ Goodnight’s only just beginning to grasp how different Red’s view of the world is from their own.

‘Helping out Vas,’ says Billy easily. ‘He’s making another room, and he needs it done fast.’

_Another room?_ Goodnight’s intrigued. ‘Guess they’re more settled than we thought.’

Red snickers. ‘Everyone is the same. Sam is like a _tuibihtsi_, all he can think of is marrying.’

‘That why you’re not working with him right now?’

Red nods, still amused. ‘When he has his woman and his house, he will think more of work again. I am better here.’ He stands up, today’s lesson clearly at an end; ‘_Puetsuku,_’ he says.

‘Definitely,’ says Goodnight, proud to have remembered _tomorrow_. ‘Here?’

‘No. Bring your horse: we will go out.’

‘Out?’

Red’s back to being serious. ‘English is for towns; _numu tekwapu_ is for the world.’

Put like that, it seems obvious: Goodnight grins. ‘Show me what I’m really learning about, eh? Come with us?’ he suggests to Billy.

‘Of course,’ says Billy, then, as Red steps down off the boardwalk, ‘_Noo nu puetsuku u punine._’ Red raises a hand in acknowledgement.

‘You son-of-a-bitch,’ groans Goodnight. ‘Have you known all along?’

Billy smiles enigmatically. ‘He said one or two things, while we were out hunting.’

‘And you, with your uncanny powers over language, are rattling away like an Indian yourself while I’m struggling to say I mean you no harm, or Please share my fire.’

Billy sits down in Red’s vacated chair. ‘Not that hard, is it?’

Goodnight sighs. ‘It’s not Red’s fault, he’s taught me a lot of words – places, people, animals – but they don’t write it down, so he can’t tell me if I’ve got it right or not. I think at bottom he pities me for needing to use pen and paper at all, but otherwise I’d never remember a quarter of it.’ He closes the notebook resignedly. ‘Be a long time before I’m chattering.’

‘Rome wasn’t built in a day, isn’t that what you say?’

Goodnight fixes him with a reproachful gaze: he’s not going to rise to such rank showing off. ‘What are you doing here anyway?’ he asks.

‘Come to fetch you,’ says Billy seriously. ‘It’s bath night.’

‘Now I really do feel like a schoolboy again,’ grouses Goodnight half-seriously.
Billy’s attachment to their tin bathtub is another oddity. His affinity for water is no secret: he’s always been a strong swimmer, eager to make the most of river or creek when the opportunity presents, and like everyone else, hitting the bathhouse on arriving in a new town was part of their routine. But Goodnight would never have expected him to become such a stickler for regular baths, or such a dedicated soaker, lying and smoking contemplatively, knees and chest above the water, until his skin wrinkles.

It’s Goodnight’s turn for the second-hand bathwater tonight, with an extra bucket to heat it up again: Billy’s already out and wrapped in a towel while Goodnight sits scrubbing industriously at his feet. ‘Y’know, cher, this is undoubtedly the cleanest we’ve ever been. Dirt barely has a chance to get comfortable on us’.

Billy comes to kneel down next to the tub. ‘Let me do your back.’ He draws deep on his cigarette, then beckons, and Goodnight leans in to breathe the smoke from his lips, warm and inviting.

He smiles into his eyes for a moment, then takes the cigarette from him and hunches forward obligingly as Billy picks up the soap and washcloth. ‘Determined to see me clean in every pore? Might be led to think you had certain intentions.’

‘Man has to have standards,’ says Billy absently as he soaps Goodnight’s back, hands caressing gently across his skin. ‘Looking better than you were.’

‘Scars have faded,’ says Goodnight, stretching out an arm, and they have, from the angry colours when the bandages first came off to pale puckers and ridges. He reaches out to touch Billy’s chest, where his hard life is written on his skin. ‘Just enough to tell the tale.’

Billy smiles, with just an edge of mischief. ‘Not the only change,’ he says thoughtfully, prodding gently at Goodnight’s waist.

Goodnight instantly straightens his back and draws his stomach in to make the little roll of flesh vanish. ‘Are you implying that I’m getting fat?’

‘Can’t argue with the evidence. Must be all the sitting.’ Billy looks entirely too pleased with himself for Goodnight’s liking.

‘Think you’re not better padded than you were?’ he challenges, but it’s hopeless – though Billy’s filled out again, there’s still not an ounce of fat on him; he’s all muscle.

‘Nothing compared to you. You’re almost as big as Jack.’ Billy’s eyes are dancing. ‘Stand up and let me see.’

‘Certainly not,’ snaps Goodnight, outraged. He heaves himself up out of the bath, cascading water onto the floor, and grabbing a towel. ‘I shall cover up my hideous bloated form to save you from the sight.’

He retreats to the bedroom with wounded dignity to dry off, but Billy follows purposefully. ‘Stalking me?’

Billy snickers. ‘You’re so big and slow-moving, you’re no challenge for a predator.’ How has he always been able to set Goodnight’s pulse thudding with just the tilt of an eyebrow?

‘Maybe I’m like a bear,’ says Goodnight as Billy inches closer, ‘I look fat and slow but I use the weight to my advantage.’ He lunges in to tackle Billy onto the bed and they wrestle for a while, towels slipping to the floor, until Billy lets him pin him down in the fur and drape himself across him like a dead weight. ‘Finished insulting me?’
'You’re a fine figure of a man,’ says Billy indistinctly. ‘Let me up.’

‘Why?’ Goodnight’s enjoying the writhing beneath him, and the roving hands that are attempting to distract him.

Billy twists up suddenly and rolls him over. ‘Want to make the most of being clean.’ And that’s been a revelation too, ease and hot water and their own four walls bringing a new luxury to their lovemaking after all these years: they can tease each other with leisurely explorations of lips and tongue, have all the time they need, lying tangled together, tasting bathwarmed skin and soap and musk, to bring each other to the brink of helpless abandon.

‘So this was your intention all along?’ asks Goodnight, heat coursing through him and coiling in his belly.

‘Of course,’ says Billy, sinking down with a beatific smile, and Goodnight surrenders with a sigh of pleasure. Bathnight always ends like this.

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With thoughts of leaving still comfortably far away, neither Goodnight nor Billy lack for occupation: when Billy’s not with Vasquez and Goodnight not learning with Red Harvest or discussing literature with Josiah they ride out to hunt, spend their afternoons fishing and pass sociable evenings in the hotel. Goodnight feels himself fully restored, energetic again, and though the cabin’s been their refuge over the winter, the first settled home they’ve ever had, just occasionally, he has to admit, it can begin to feel confining.

Today it’s rained all day; the church bell began tolling for a funeral a while ago, and the slow regular strikes jar on Goodnight’s nerves. He’s sitting at one side of the table, a blank sheet of paper in front of him, struggling for inspiration: nothing he writes seems remotely worthwhile, just a rehash of the same twice-told opinions he hears every day: complaints about the weather, anxiety about the banks, groundless rumours of land taxes. He’s been wrestling with it for hours, one sheet after another struck through and crumpled at his feet; he itches to do something else, but it’s too wet to be outdoors and invite another chill, and too early for him to admit defeat.

Billy’s never other than outwardly patient, but he’s already cleaned their guns and his knives and chopped wood enough for a fortnight; now he’s sitting at the table sharpening the axe. Rain drums on the roof, there’s the sound of an intermittent drip in the lean-to they haven’t been able to locate, and even the regular swish of the grindstone is annoying; Goodnight’s pen hovers over a blank page until the ink falls off in a blot and he swears.

Billy lifts his eyebrows with maddening calm, and Goodnight feels a surge of irritation. ‘Can’t you-‘ he begins angrily, then stops as he hears himself. He jams the pen back into the inkstand and shoves his chair back with a screech. ‘Not your fault, cher. I don’t have a single idea, and I couldn’t express it in English, French or Comanche if I did. Only one answer, and that’s strong drink.’ Billy drops his sharpening stone with a clatter and wordlessly hands him his hat.

The bell’s stopped tolling, but as they head to the saloon they can’t help seeing the two figures standing in the churchyard. Now peace is restored a funeral is rare: Goodnight wonders who it was that died. It’s a mournful sight, Fitzgerald at the head of a grave, bible in hand, his words too faint to make out, and a single mourner at its foot, a man in drab working clothes, bareheaded in the rain.

The saloon, when they get there, does little to raise their spirits: everyone seems to have had the same
idea on a dull afternoon, and the room’s crowded and overhot, full of red-faced farmhands and early drunks, a raucous game of dice going on and the girls busy among the packed tables. By unspoken consent they take their glasses and head for the darkest corner where the tables are empty except for a lone customer sitting with his back to the room.

His hunched posture says clearly that he doesn’t want company, but as they approach he raises his head and says in a tired voice, ‘Goodnight, Billy.’ It’s Vasquez, as far from his usual cheerful self as he could be.

‘A poor day,’ says Goodnight in greeting. ‘ Came out to stop us snapping at each other.’

They pull out chairs and Vasquez returns to staring morosely into his drink. ‘Lesson I should have learned sooner.’

‘Take it he’s not here?’ asks Billy.

Vasquez just looks at him. ‘He does not need to be in the hotel to drink.’ The intensity of his gloom is troubling, and Goodnight remembers Faraday’s despair, *No point working at what won’t mend.*

‘Won’t take a telling?’ he asks sympathetically.

Vasquez still seems to be searching for an answer in his glass. ‘He will not listen to anyone, not to Lynch, to me, to Emma…’

‘Wasn’t so keen on my advice either,’ says Goodnight.

Vasquez looks up in surprise. ‘You are the only ones he pays attention to, you and Billy. He speaks to Jack, a little, but when Sam came…’

‘What happened?’ Goodnight had thought Sam was being needlessly pessimistic.

‘He came to talk about the bounty, and about some work, but Joshua was angry. Said only a fool would make the same mistake twice, that Sam was thinking only of himself… in the end he threatened to draw a gun on him. Of course it was no harm, Sam is too calm for that, but…’ He massages his brow. ‘*Mierda.* When you go…’

Goodnight looks at Billy, who says, ‘Won’t be until May,’ but Vasquez says wearily, ‘Before, after, it will be the same.’

The door opens again, diverting their attention; Goodnight recognises the man hesitating on the threshold as the lone mourner from the burial, fresh clay on his boots and his coat soaked through. He stands irresolute for a moment, eyes darting round the busy room, then squares his shoulders and makes for the bar. Goodnight is touched by a visceral pity for his situation, to bury your friend alone and then have to face a cheerful oblivious crowd.

‘Do you know who it was that died?’ he asks Vasquez.

‘One of the miners,’ says Vasquez vaguely, ‘Emma heard it from Lynch’s wife.’

Goodnight and Billy exchange glances. The mine’s stood unworked since July, and most of Bogue’s sorry crew of miners moved on long ago to seek better prospects further north. But a few have stayed on, keeping the sluices running and wringing out what living they can, too committed or simply too tired to move on and try their fortune elsewhere. It’s an odd half-existence: they stood up and defended the town just like the storekeepers and farmers, yet the victory doesn’t seem to have brought them much benefit.
He reads the same thought in Billy’s face as he gets to his feet. ‘Shall I-’

‘Do, cher,’ says Goodnight: ‘We can sit somewhere else,’ he offers to Vasquez, but Vasquez just shrugs. ‘I have nothing else to do.’

Billy and the miner come back together, glass and bottle in hand, and Billy introduces him: ‘Pete Farrell.’ He’s thin and sinewy, his face creased with age and weather; his hands are dotted with powder burns. Goodnight racks his brains: did I train him to shoot a rusty gun? Did I see him in the fight? It’s so hard to remember, and he never knew any names.

Farrell jerks his head. ‘Know you fellas, of course.’

‘We saw the burial,’ says Goodnight gently, ‘If you’d sit down with us we could drink a toast to your friend’s memory.’ Farrell begins to answer, then swallows it down, biting his lip; Goodnight hastily pushes out a chair as he struggles to contain his emotion. ‘Will you tell us a little about him?’ he prompts.

Farrell sits and takes a gulp of his whiskey. ‘Mason, his name was, Andrew Mason: my friend and partner near on thirty years.’ His shoulders slump as he drops his guard. ‘After all he came through, to be carried off by a little cut, hardly more’n a scratch. It just don’t seem-’ He breaks off, fighting down emotion again. ‘God’s will, it must be, but it’s a sore thing.’

‘You came here with Bogue?’ asks Billy.

Farrell nods. ‘We were prospectors first, me and Andy: tried in the Comstock, and then came down to California. Saw other men strike it rich, but we never found more’n a few flakes, and a great lot of stones. That’s how we ended up with Bogue: the claim came to nothing and we had to go working for someone else, tho’ a bad bargain it was. But we saw him off, the mean old rattler, and when it was over and us still standing, Andy and I said to each other, “We fought for it, and we’ll stay.”’

‘Here’s to him and to you, for your courage,’ says Goodnight, raising his glass and the four of them drink solemnly.

Billy takes the bottle and pours refills for them all. ‘How did you meet?’ he asks.

Farrell’s face softens as he looks into the past. ‘Fresh off the ship. Come over from Ireland in ’52, and I walked off the ship on the dock at Providence and stood gawking around me like a stunned chicken. My legs were wobbling under me and I had no notion what I should do or where to go. I heard a voice say next to me, “So this is the New World?” and I saw a lad all pale and dirty who looked as befuddled as I felt. “Guess we just make it up as we go along,” he said, and stuck out his paw, and that was Andy. Didn’t seem so strange once there were two of us: we found someone to tell us where we could stay, and we worked and got along, then in ’59 we put our money together and came out West.’

Goodnight watches Billy’s expression, suspecting he’s remembering that unknowable time when he first set foot in America; it’s a strange thought, the happenstance that determines a man’s life. That Sam chose to intervene when a bunch of Yanks couldn’t leave the war behind; that he walked into a bar one afternoon in Texas just as a fight broke out; he looks at Vasquez and wonders if he’s remembering how he faced off against Faraday on that ridge outside Junction City.

Farrell tosses down another drink. ‘We went through some hard times together, out prospecting, up to our waists in freezing water, day after day; more times than I like to recall that we went hungry, and I won’t tell you what we had to eat to get by.’ His gaze is gone inward, snagged on memory. ‘Time I had the yellow fever, Andy pulled me through that, and the day we had to lay down our
picks and admit we’d failed. But he always said, things will turn around. Just didn’t know how to
give up.’

‘Good friends make us all better men,’ says Goodnight, ‘and he was lucky to have a friend like you.’
He feels Billy squeeze his knee under the table.

‘And you never quarrelled. Like right hand and left, never at odds.’ Goodnight looks across in
consternation, but though the words could be mockery Vasquez is serious, eyebrows knitted in a
frown as he looks from Farrell to Goodnight and Billy and back.

Farrell splutters a laugh, unexpectedly. ‘Never quarrelled? Andy wasn’t never backward in telling
me when I was being dumb, and I’m as stubborn as a mule: we had years of arguing between us. But
what’s a quarrel, in the end?’ He turns the glass in his hand. ‘Give anything to hear him yelling at me
now.’

‘I am sorry,’ says Vasquez after a pause. ‘For a long time I had no friends, I could not, and now
sometimes I think I have forgotten how it is…’ He trails away to silence.

Farrell smiles sadly. ‘You can say to me I was lucky: ain’t nothing so bad when there’s two of you.
Won’t be the same without him.’ A tear finally rises to his eye and he brushes it away roughly. ‘He
never let me down for one minute, and in the end I couldn’t do nothing for him: just stand by and
watch as a little fucking scratch from a nail carried him off so quick.’

‘Town’s not done right by you,’ says Billy fiercely, but Farrell shakes his head.

‘Wasn’t nobody’s fault. That Lynch, he did what he could and he didn’t want paying. And ‘least
he’s buried decent, in the graveyard with a proper marker to carry his name.’

It’s the only comfort they can offer him, to sit and let him talk, backs turned on the shouts and
laughter around them, drawing memories from him of better times. Farrell spins tales of a shared
lifetime of hardship and endeavour, the image of his lost friend alive again between them; but despite
their attention eventually he cuts himself short and pushes his glass away.

‘Can’t be spending the whole evening here, now I’ve no one to tell me I’ve had enough and see me
home, so I’d best do it myself.’ He stands, oddly dignified in his shabby clothes, and says formally,
‘Thank you, gentlemen, it’s been a pleasure to sit and speak of him and know he was appreciated.’

‘He was a brave man,’ says Goodnight, ‘and I see another too.’ Farrell raises two fingers to his hat
and turns away before his emotion can show again.

None of them seems willing to break the silence that settles over them after he’s gone, the stoicism
with which he carried his sorrow making it all the more touching. Eventually Vasquez says quietly,
as though to himself, ‘I said, if he lived, I would not ask for anything else.’

‘Memento mori,’ says Goodnight soberly.

Vasquez unfolds himself from his chair. ‘I have things I must do. Things I must say.’ Billy murmurs
something to him Goodnight can’t hear, and the two of them watch as he strides purposefully to the
door.

‘I’ll settle up,’ says Billy, pushing back his chair; watching him walk away, even so short a distance,
is excruciating. Goodnight aches to wrap him in his arms, to reassure himself of the living breath and
warmth of him and the beat of his heart. He can’t suppress a shiver, anxiety rising to strangle him:
Billy’s brought more to his life than he ever deserved: calm for his fears, solace for his corroding guilt, and most of all, companionship and love, each ordinary day made infinitely joyful by just seeing him, hearing his voice, feeling his touch. How could he stand the loss of that? Not if they parted ways: he’s long accepted that Billy could do better than a weak and haunted man like him, and would resign himself to that, though his life alone after would be grey and thin. But what if he were taken from me?

‘Back,’ says Billy behind him, and Goodnight opens his eyes to see the same urgency in his lover’s face. ‘Let’s get out of here.’

He slings an arm across his shoulders as they hurry home through the rain, and as soon as the cabin door closes behind them Billy pulls him into a crushing hug. Goodnight tucks his face into his neck, hands clutching his coat; words tumble out of him. ‘…if it had turned out different – having to go on without you: I couldn’t, I wouldn’t.’ He never wants to let him go, infinitely fragile and infinitely precious.

‘Don’t, Goody,’ says Billy, and he holds him tight, tighter, stroking through his hair and murmuring low until his breathing steadies.

At length they let each other go, Goodnight running reluctant hands over Billy’s arms. ‘We should sit down,’ he suggests shakily.

They’ve left the stove damped, and it’s short work to rattle it back up and feed the glow with sticks until it’s burning hot again; Goodnight tidies away his papers and takes the axe out back while Billy makes tea and cuts bread and cheese, mundane actions calming to both of them.

They draw their chairs up to the warmth to eat, and afterwards Goodnight watches Billy, skin burnished by the glow of the fire, trying to fathom what he should say. In the end it’s Billy who breaks the silence. ‘Guess I thought if we survived a battle like that, came through against the odds, it means we’re proof against fate. But it doesn’t, does it?’

Goodnight reaches for him. ‘I can’t…’ – it’s such a relief to let it out – ‘I don’t think I can stand to watch you walk into the ring again. Not over and over. Not once.’ It’s the image that never leaves him, the nightmare to be lived each time behind a faked smile and a swagger. All it would take is a bullet gone astray, the unlucky slash of a blade, a blow mistimed, and Goodnight could have to see him white-faced and fallen, beyond saving, the last seconds of his life bleeding away into the dust. ‘I know it’s what you do, who you are, but’ – Billy’s thumb rubs soothingly back and forth across his hand – ‘all I want is to keep you safe.’

Billy raises a hand to touch his cheek. ‘And I want my thirty years with you. I want us to be old and grey together, telling the same old stories and raking over old quarrels.’ Goodnight moves in to kiss him, but Billy stops him. ‘And that’s why we’ll stay here. In Rose Creek.’

‘But…’ Goodnight’s brought up short, searching his face. ‘You don’t want that.’

‘Not arguing,’ says Billy, with the beginning of a smile, and all Goodnight can do is smile back, his emotions a confusion that he can’t name. ‘I won’t take you away to see you ill and scared again.’

The months they’ve spent here: a makeshift domesticity, a temporary life, but always looking forward to the end, back to the life they’ve known and shared on the road, a life of brief acquaintances and half-familiar towns, always moving on, the endless trail in front of them. But now a different future takes shape to stand beside it as they bask in the fire’s warmth: safety. Stability. Waking up in the same place each morning, knowing where they’ll lie down to sleep at the day’s end.
Goodnight longs to accept the gift he’s being offered, but he can’t let Billy do this for him. ‘It’s not the life you want. It would be all for me if we stay here and nothing for you.’

Billy shakes his head, and Goodnight sees the decision already taken. ‘Maybe I’ll take to farming. Learnt enough from the almanac.’

Even as a joke, Goodnight won’t have it. ‘Can’t set a racehorse to draw a plough, cher. We won’t be turning farmer; I promised, and I meant it.’

Billy leans closer. ‘We don’t have to have all the answers now. But…’ He touches the streaks of grey in Goodnight’s beard. ‘We’re not going to stay young forever, are we?’

Growing old: it’s what he’d said to Joshua, what they all fear, underneath: getting slow, losing his edge, getting injured or sick, and what happens then, when you’re left to eke out an existence in the last town you washed up in. But what-if? Instead of a dangerous exhausting life, a calm simple one, with a roof and a fireside and a bed? Would growing old seem so bad, day by day with Billy, sharing the same jokes and telling the same tales, tending a garden and fishing and lying down together at night?

‘Well,’ says Goodnight cautiously, though a swell of joy is expanding in his chest, driving out his panic and fear, ‘We don’t have to say we’ll stay for good. We can try, and if it doesn’t work…’

‘We can stay over the summer, decide after that,’ says Billy, as though it’s the most obvious thing in the world. ‘See Sam as a married man. And Faraday and Vasquez; well, they’re not going anywhere soon.’

‘Make it up as we go along; guess that’s what we’ve always done too.’ Goodnight reaches to cup Billy’s face, stroking gently along his cheekbone, and follows it up with a kiss. Billy leans his head on Goodnight’s shoulder, legs propped on the grate, sighing out his tension, and the cabin seems to breathe out around them, like a tired horse in its stable at the end of the day.

Really, thinks Goodnight, they’ve come a long way on the road already, without realising, and here they are, sitting by the stove in the quiet of the night, and maybe not so different after all from the silence of the campfire. Perhaps we’re making it harder than it need be.

He presses another kiss to Billy’s temple and closes his eyes. ‘If we’re here a few months more I can help out Joshua some, even if he says he doesn’t need it.’

‘Maybe get some vegetables growing: yard’s calling out for it,’ says Billy.

‘Have a chance to learn properly from Red, so I really can write about the natives.’

‘Go back and see if I could catch that big shiner,’ says Billy. He’s getting sleepy, eyes closing in the fire’s warmth.

Goodnight pulls him nearer and closes his eyes, letting the fire and the silence lull him. Winter’s over and though spring has been long in coming, maybe what it’s brought is something new. Who ever gets to know what’s to happen? But for now, for the first time in a long time, a tiny shoot stirs green in his heart: peace.
June

‘Come out with me?’ Billy looks up from the bridle he’s oiling into twinkling blue eyes: Goody’s in
the doorway, back from wherever it is he’s been.

‘Where?’ Something’s been brewing for days, Goody getting mail he’s folded away in his pocket
and not discussed, or disappearing for odd hours with a murmur about speaking to Josiah: Billy’d
made up his mind to let it run its course, and now it seems to have reached a resolution.

Goody sheds his coat and hangs it up, then stands in shirt-sleeves looking expectant. ‘Take an
evening stroll?’

There’s something new in his manner, a bubbling suppressed excitement, and Billy puts down the
cloth, willing to play along. ‘Should we take the fishing poles?’ he ventures.

Goody grins, enigmatic. ‘Not this time.’

He leads the way out of town, along the road winding through the fields; it’s a warm evening, the
shadows just starting to lengthen. ‘Romantic walk by the river?’ teases Billy.

‘Something like that.’ Goody grins again, quick and infectious, and Billy feels the familiar bloom of
affection at seeing that smile turned on him. These last months it’s as though he’s watched Goody
age in reverse, from a grey, lined old man when he first recovered, gradually regaining vigour and
health as he put his injuries behind him, and now he’s less careworn than Billy’s ever known him.

It’s a familiar route, and he thinks he knows where they’re heading, but he’s content to stroll and
listen to Goody’s chatter until they reach the ridge beyond the Grays’ place where the land dips
down to the creek. Goody stops and stands looking out over the plain.

‘Not that I don’t enjoy your company on a summer evening,’ says Billy, watching him, ‘but are we
here to admire the view?’

Goody clears his throat, looking strangely nervous. ‘The cabin’s small, and it was built quick,’ he begins, ‘and being near the main street there’s always folk around to see us come and go.’

‘It’s fine,’ says Billy, puzzled; Goody’s never shown dissatisfaction with their new settled life before. ‘It’s more than fine,’ agrees Goody. ‘But we never meant to stay there forever.’

‘So?’ A dawning suspicion begins to rise as Goody turns to face him.

‘I wrote to Susannah, you remember. There’s always been the idea that one day I’d go back to Baton Rouge, be part of the family again, but it’s time I admitted I never will. And I settled it with her, and so … we have a little money.’

There’s a flush on his cheeks as he looks down to the trees by the creek. ‘And, well, if you were going to buy land, you’d want it somewhere like here: close by but out of the way, and open, you can see right over to the hills. Wood to hand, water pure before it reaches the town. Sheltered on the north side.’

Buy land? It’s not something he’s ever seen in his future: men like him didn’t come here to be settlers. Though it’s true, they’ve been half-rooted and uncertain, living in someone else’s property; they can’t stay in the cabin indefinitely. Goody reaches for his hand. ‘I didn’t want to say until I’d sounded him out – Abner’s willing to sell us a piece of land, not a big plot, but enough for a field for the horses, a stable, maybe, and – a house.’

A house. He sees it in his mind’s eye as Goody must, a low house down in the hollow, sheltered by the trees, far enough from town to be private, yet close enough to have friends and neighbours. A place where two men could live together and be themselves, live lightly from the land and find space and independence.

And there’s the heart of it: somewhere they wouldn’t have to hide. For so long, if they ever were to have a place of their own, he’d thought perhaps of a shack up in the mountains, somewhere there was no one else to see or care. It’s come slowly, and not without its rocky places, but after Jack’s wedding it doesn’t seem so far-fetched: these people who know what they are to each other, and accept them as two friends, two good neighbours, as Billy and Goodnight who are just, well, themselves, and whose domestic arrangements are their own affair.

‘We can build it ourselves: be a lot of work, but we could do it. Get some of the fat off me…’ Goody cuts himself off, searching his face, alight with hope. ‘What d’you think?’

_I never looked for this_, he thinks, _I don’t deserve it, you can’t expect happiness to last_, but Goody’s optimism and barely-hidden delight make him seem a boy again, and caught in those blue eyes and that blinding smile, what can he do but lean in to catch his lips and say, ‘Will we have a porch to sit on and watch the sunset when we’re two old-timers working over twenty-year-old quarrels?’

‘We will,’ says Goodnight, pulling him close. ‘Doesn’t mean we can’t travel, sleep under the stars and see more of the world, but we’ll have a place to call home.’

‘Yes, Goody.’ Billy kisses him, a gentle touch of lips as the sun’s last rays warm his cheek; he wishes he could preserve this moment forever, the joy so bright in Goody’s face.

Goody turns to look down at the hollow again, radiating happiness. ‘We gave a lot for Rose Creek, I won’t unsay it, but maybe Rose Creek will pay us more than we were promised.’
Billy feels tears start to his eyes, mirroring those he sees shining in Goody’s, and before they can rise he tugs at his hand. ‘Come on. Show me where the porch is going to be.’ And they set off together down the hill towards the creek and the cottonwoods to map out their future.

Chapter End Notes

1. The Comanche language was not a written language at the time that this fic is set; the alphabet used to write it today was not developed until the twentieth century. So I have written the words as Goodnight would have heard them. The words are taken from the Brief Comanche Etymological Dictionary.

2. Thank you to everyone who read along with this and encouraged me: this has been a long project, and I could not have done it without you.

3. But what happened with Vasquez and Faraday? How can you just leave their story hanging?
Because - there is a new fic coming to follow directly from this one, which will pick up the loose ends about Vasquez and Faraday in Rose Creek, and follow them through the year!

Speak to me: fontainebleau22.tumblr.com

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!