Every Story Worth Telling is a Love Story

by Ponderosa (ponderosa121)

Summary

Dick Brewer has only ever been a fair-weather believer in the Almighty, but on occasion he's given reason to wonder if there truly is some grand plan behind everything. It’s a nice thought out here where life is, at times, more than a little rough.

Notes

As someone with what I expect are similar, longstanding capital-f **Feelings** about Kiefer Sutherland, I'm thrilled to have been assigned to write a Yuletide gift for you! I wanted to write for ALL your prompts, but your idea for a Young Guns + Westworld fusion really captured me, so I ran with it. From the direction I chose to go with the park and its hosts, there are scatters of what I hope are fun dialogue easter eggs and I hope you don't mind that I took some liberties in casting when it came to Chavez's backstory. Happy, happy Yuletide, Zoi no miko!

It’s no great surprise when John comes home from town with another stray in tow. It’s a habit of his, collecting wayward souls. One look at the kid and Dick knows that William is going to fit right in.
He’s a little greener than most maybe, and the babyface makes it hard to guess his years, but he’s got a certain spark in his eye that tells Dick that the kid won’t be heading for the train come morning.

Truth of it is, Dick’s had a peculiar feeling for days now that they’d soon be setting another place at the table. The notion has been rattling around in the back of his mind like old bones that refuse to stay buried. He’s only ever been a fair-weather believer in the Almighty, but on occasions like these he’s given reason to wonder if there truly is some grand plan behind everything. It’s a nice thought out here where life is, at times, more than a little rough.

That odd sensation of deja vu sneaks back up on him as he tells the rest of the crew he’ll mind their horses. It seems like he’s always breaking up the same squabble, what with Dirty Steve balking like a mule and more snide words ricocheting in the air between him and Chavez. It takes hollering to make it clear he wasn’t fooling about them hurrying to wash up for supper, and Dick looks up at the broad blue stretch of winter sky until the urge to cuss leaves him.

Josiah, who has only a fine layer of dust on him from the road to town and no stake in the latest round of insults and posturing, sticks around as the others trail off. Of all the Regulators, he’s perhaps the one Dick finds most reliable. Or maybe it’s that he’s the rare sort of cowpunch who came to John’s place instilled with a few manners to begin with, and more important than that, without a great big chip on his shoulder to get riled up over.

“Might I lend a hand?” he asks, in a tone not too dissimilar to one he might use to approach a pretty gal. Shy isn’t the right word. Reverent doesn’t quite hit the mark either—that sort of respect is more the tone he uses conversing with John. Proper is as near a phrase as Dick can come up with. Still for all his kindness, there’s a keen edge to Josiah, a reminder that he’s not some dandy tenderfoot even if he on occasion looks the part.

Dick tugs off his work gloves and tucks them under his arm. “Much obliged,” he says, and gathers up his horse’s reins from the dust. He loops them over the saddle and grabs the lead. Josiah follows suit with the other horses, though he pats the neck of the blaze-nosed red fondly as he guides them down the path. Josiah’s ridden that red a few times since she’d been broken, Dick recalls, and had praised her steadiness when navigating a treacherous slope scattered with crumbling rock. He aims to remember that when it comes time for the spring roundup; last year they had quite a few cows straying into the hills.

The horses follow along without fuss—eager even—to be treated to a bit of extra feed now that the days have grown short. As they head towards the paddock, Josiah gestures to Dick’s cheek and his eyebrow lifts inquisitively. “Yours?”

Dick had plumb forgotten about the blood. He scrubs at the spot with the back of his hand and finds it too sticky now to wipe away. “Naw,” he says, and doesn’t care to elaborate further. The day’s coming to an end, and he’s eager to leave it behind.

“Anything to worry about?”

“Not any longer,” Dick says, and breaks out in a grin when Josiah chuckles. They have a good rapport, the two of them, an easy familiarity that Dick is thankful for. Josiah had ridden beside him to take care of that business with horse thieves a year or so back, and it had cemented their friendship in the way that only a tough scrape could. Why, if Lincoln County didn’t see so many young ladies coming in these days, he might even see fit to suggest they share a bunk and a bachelor marriage.

He opens the gate as he entertains the notion that perhaps he’s grown sweet enough on Josiah that he ought to quit hanging on the idea of finding a wife altogether. He wouldn’t be the first man around here to choose to settle down without a bride, and while he might disappoint his parents, that wasn’t
anything new, and Josiah was born what, six of eleven? There’d be plenty of nieces and nephews to carry on the Scurlock name.

Dick supposes he could speak plainly about it and suss out Josiah’s feelings on the matter. And now’s as good a time as any, but as he hitches the horses to the fence, Dick finds that his tongue has gotten just as twisted around as the knots. He searches for something neutral to jaw about. “What’s your take on the new fella, Doc?”

Josiah props his rifle on his shoulder and squints towards the dusky purples of the horizon. “Kid got into a scrap in town, but he’s quicker than he seems.” He pauses like he’s got something more on his mind, but the expression is gone in a blink and he shakes his head like he’s been caught woolgathering. He laughs quietly, and his bright blue eyes follow as Dick heaves a saddle up onto the fence. “Hey Dick, you ever feel like...you’ve been here before, in this exact same moment? As if you know what’s going to come out of your mouth even before you’ve had time to think it…?”

“Can’t say that I have,” Dick replies, finding himself hedging the truth like he might before leading the boys towards what promises to be a nasty dust up.

Josiah hums thoughtfully, and leaves it at that.

Impatient now that they’ve been untacked, the horses don’t give a shit that all the hairs on the back of Dick’s neck have stuck straight up. “C’mon,” he says, freeing the pair to mingle with the rest of the herd. “Let’s get ourselves some chow.”

* 

The start of the day is chill and quiet, too early yet for the sun to be out and balance the cold in the air. It’s dark as night inside the bunkhouse, shadows gathered thick up to the rafters, and Dick holds a lantern to light the corner where Billy had made his bed.

“Rise and shine, Billy!” Josiah says, and hauls the blankets off Billy in one forceful motion.

Skipping in hot on Doc’s heels, Dirty Steve whoops and dumps a cupful of water directly on Billy’s nose. After a bit of sputtering and cursing and flailing limbs, the faceful of icy good morning earns Steve the business end of a revolver. Steve knows a greenhorn when he sees one, though, and he roars with laughter as he throws the kid a bundle of clothes.

“Get up,” Dick says. He nods at the crack of pale light creeping through the shutters. Motes of dust swirl around inside the beam, dancing like fairies in the thin sliver of dawn. “The sun’s about to hit the horizon. There’s work to be done.”

“Work?” Billy says, his brain catching up to his body as he shoves his legs in his trousers. He’s bleary-eyed and stammering, his fingers clumsy with his belt. “What kind of work?”

“Y’hear that? ‘What kind of work,’ he says,” Charley drawls mockingly. He shoves open the shutters and a fresh wave of cold morning air sweeps in like the devil come calling. “The kind you signed yourself up for, buckaroo.”

“We start by milking the cows, feeding the chickens and the hogs, and then we’ll see just how well you handle that piece of iron you’re so fond of waving in people’s faces,” Josiah says. He grabs Billy’s boot out of his hands before the fool can pull it on without checking it first. Josiah upends it and sure enough a little scorpion plops out onto the floor.

Billy’s eyes bug out as the scorpion skitters for cover, and he looks ready to hightail it in much the same fashion, but then his jaw goes steely and he shoves his hair out of his face. He gets to his feet
“All right then,” Billy says, and Dick notices that he’s near as fair as Josiah and probably had been just as towheaded as a youngin’. “Let’s get started.”

Getting started, it turns out, ain’t exactly easy. Billy giggles as he spoons up his breakfast, like he’s never eaten a bowl of mush before in his life. And he’s just as lackadaisical with the cows as he had been pulling on his boots; more milk splashes into the dirt than into the pail and two of the girls are left with their udders full. Most of the crew don’t seem to notice Billy giving the chores no more than a lick and a promise, and when John comes out for a looksee, he’s as patient and paternal as ever. Only Josiah and Chavez seem to be on the same short fuse as Dick when it comes to the kid’s antics.

As mid-morning rolls around, Dick expects to be equally unimpressed with Billy’s shooting, and says as much to Josiah as Charley lines up a half dozen tin cans on the fence for target practice.

“I hope his gun is as quick as his mouth,” Dick says.

Billy hits every single one of them.

“Quicker by the looks of it,” Josiah marvels.

“Try it again, ten paces back,” Dick calls out, hands cupped around his mouth.

Billy’s smile is wide as the Rio Grande as he up and takes twenty long steps before taking aim. He hits each and every last can without wasting a bullet.

“Holee shit!” Steve crows and spits into the dirt. He knocks his bootheels against the fence he’s sat upon and applauds. “You might be as good a shot as Doc!”

Billy glows at the praise, and keeps grinning as he feeds another round of bullets into his shooter.

“Better than me, I’d say,” Josiah says quietly. He hooks his thumb in his gunbelt and cocks his weight to one hip. “Forget beef. With aim like that, Billy should join a traveling show.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me if he got kicked out of one,” Dick says, and scowls at his own choice of words. He doesn’t care to make it a habit of badmouthing John’s crew, least of all those rare young men he saw fit to host at the dinner table. A foreman doesn’t earn respect by sowing discord among the hands.

Chavez though, seems to share Dick’s sentiment. He kicks off the tree he’d been holding up and moves to stand beside them. “Traveling shows are more work than feeding chickens,” he remarks dryly, and doesn’t bother to hide his contempt.

“How a man can be so skilled as a shooter and yet so…naive. It’s a puzzle,” Josiah says, watching as Billy bullseyes another row of cans to Steve and Charley’s delight.

“How this is what I’m here for!” Billy shouts, twirling in the dust with his arms outstretched. “Hell yes. This place is the shit.”

The edges of Dick’s mouth reveal his disapproval, and he can’t force a smile when Billy glances his way. There’s a wildness to the kid, an unpredictability that makes Dick a fair bit uneasy. The men who end up Regulators aren’t saints—far from it—but even the greenest, or the sort that spend more effort trying to shirk their chores than it’d take to get ’em done, don’t quite raise Dick’s hackles the way Billy does.
Dick’s foul mood carries over to the next day, though Charley and Steve have taken to Billy like he’s God himself come down to earth to lead them. Dick rides northwest with Josiah along the banks of the Feliz, and it’s a fine respite from the wallow of his own thoughts. Even if it means the others will spend all day getting through what should be just the morning’s chores, Dick’s happy to leave the lot of them behind on the ranch to pal about.

“Not much snow on the mountains still,” Josiah says. They’ve been in the saddle a fair while, and he leans forward to stretch his back. Dick watches helplessly as Josiah eases back upright as smooth as a cat and lets out a long exhale that wouldn’t sound out of place in a bordello. “With such an easy winter, it’ll be spring before we know it.”

Dick clears his throat. “Plenty of weeks left before the calves are born,” he says without thinking, and that unsettling feeling crawls across his skin again.

“Hey Dick, you ever feel like...you’ve been here before, in this exact same moment? As if you know what’s going to come out of your mouth even before you’ve had time to think it...?”

This is a familiar path they ride, worn into the dirt over the years by hoof and leather and wagon wheel, but for a moment the path is too familiar, and his words hang in the air like an echo. With it is the overwhelming knowledge that if they keep riding, they’re bound to stumble upon a gruesome sight, a tale to take back to the ranch. Dick’s stomach turns and he recalls for an instant the air swarming thick with flies and the smell of rancid blood. “I get the feeling we should pause for a break and let the horses rest a bit.”

Josiah looks towards the hills, his mouth pressed into a line. “Strange,” he says, a touch distracted, “I get the feeling we ought to keep going.”

“That’s precisely why we’re gonna stop,” Dick says, determinedly. He slows his horse and dismounts, leading the mare towards the scatter of cottonwoods clustered along the water’s edge. A soft breeze whispers through the tangle of bare branches and the long line of reeds on the bank as he hitches her to a tree. Dick pulls a hook and line out of his bags and searches for a good branch to cut for a pole. It feels wrong to do this, like there’s an invisible magnet trying to drag him back to the road, but the longer he ignores the pull, the weaker it becomes.

Eventually, Josiah moves off the path and follows suit. He doesn’t look pleased about it, like maybe he’s wrestling with his own pull and premonition about what awaits them down the way. It takes a few, but he shakes the mood off like a dog and then he’s nothing but sunshine at the prospect of a long rest beside the river. He drops a companionable hand on Dick’s shoulder as Dick tests the bend of the branch he’s chosen. “You know the water’s so cold the fish will be slow to bite.”

“I ain’t very good at hooking them when they’re jumping either Doc, and you know it.” Dick looks Josiah straight in the eye, and every inch of his skin is humming, aware of just how close they’re standing. The afternoon sun hits at an angle, stretching the shadows into spindly things. Josiah’s hat hangs at his neck and the fringes of his hair catch the light coming in low through the branches, a brilliant golden glow as bright as straw, or like the cottonwoods had been before they dropped their leaves. Dick turns his gaze to the river before his face starts to redden like a schoolboy. “You bring a line?”

“Naw, figure I’ll just make myself comfortable and work on a poem about a fella who couldn’t catch a trout if it leapt out of the water, did a little jig, and kissed him on the nose.”

“I bet that fella knows a man who couldn’t see straight for a week ‘cause he caught a walloping.”
Dick finishes stripping the branch and carefully ties his line. He goes to survey the water while Josiah pokes around for a place to settle down. The river isn’t rushing, but it’s not a slow and lazy creek and there’s plenty of brush and cattails to offer a bit of cover for fish. He hears Josiah make himself comfortable beneath a tree, and any lingering worries about the decision to stop here fade like the wisps of a dream. Dick heads downstream a bit where the water runs more clear, and as he drops his line in the water, he’s left only with the sense that this is right and good.

The afternoon passes with the same quiet companionship as the morning, and Dick hardly notices the sun getting low until he hears Josiah stir. He glances back to see Josiah propped up on his elbows with a wry twist to his mouth.

“How’s the poem going?” Dick asks.

“Not bad,” Josiah says, and puts a hand to his chest to recite: “Down by the water all day, amongst the standing reeds, the foreman cast his line out and pulled in nothing but the weeds.”

“Nothing but the weeds, huh?” Dick pulls up a handful of cattails and tosses them, muddy roots and all, up the bank towards Josiah, chuckling at the indignant yelp as Josiah rolls to dodge the dripping mess. He’s the finest dressed of the lot of them, and while he doesn’t shy away from work that’s liable to get dirty, the waistcoat he’s sporting is his newest and thereby favorite.

“Don’t ask questions you don’t care to know the answers to,” Josiah warns, mouth slanting in a lazy smile. He scrambles to his feet, but not fast enough to avoid Dick’s hasty charge up the bank. Dick tackles him at the waist, carrying him back down into the thick scatter of moldering leaves. The wind leaves Josiah in a whoosh, and he throws up his hands in surrender, rasping out a not-entirely-sincere apology when he finds his breath.

Dick hovers over him, skin alive again, sizzling like lightning. The gnawing in his gut isn’t just from skipping dinner, it’s layered upon a different sort of hunger. He gives Josiah a playful slap on the cheek and waggles his finger. “Caught you, didn’t I?”

Josiah’s teeth scrape over his lip and he wriggles back up on his elbows. Josiah’s breath washes warm across his lips, close enough to be inviting a kiss, and Dick’s chest squeezes tight at the thought of leaning in to it. He can near feel it, the ticklish brush of Josiah’s whiskers and the soft lick of his tongue. The moment stretches like a ribbon of warm molasses, but he doesn’t commit quick enough and a cool breeze snaps Dick back to his senses. He rises to offer Josiah a hand. “Best we head back, Doc, unless we aim to choke down a cold supper.”

Josiah takes his proffered hand and Dick can’t help but notice the faint stain of color beneath the light dusting of freckles on his nose. “Guess it’s for the best,” he says in a rough whisper, his voice carrying a tinge of disappointment that haunts Dick the whole ride back.

Supper is hoe cakes and a bowl of stew thick with green chiles and chunks of winter squash, simple and filling fare after a hard day’s toil. After the meal, sitting nearest to John, Dick reckons he understands how their boss often feels when he looks about the room and sees how folks’ reading or mannerisms have improved. There’s a contentedness to a full belly, a warm hearth, and the stories shared between men.

Even Chavez, who oftentimes is a bit standoffish, sits companionably with Josiah playing rounds of cards. Josiah’s a fair gambler, and by the look of it, he’s taking Chavez for all he’s worth. Dick supposes that Chavez isn’t really a hard man to read once you’ve worked the herd with him for a while, else it wouldn’t be so easy for Steve to rile him up. Josiah’s tongue plays at the corner of his
mouth as he considers his cards, and Dick’s trousers tighten up a bit.

“What’s on your mind?” John inquires.

Dick can’t answer truthfully. There might not be ladies present, but John’s sitting room isn’t meant for rough talk in the way that the bunkhouse or the campfire is. He can’t fairly say that even beyond the pink flash of Josiah’s tongue bringing with it wicked thoughts, he’s begun to recognize how clever Josiah is with his hands, or taken notice of the sweetness in his smile, or been considering how that throaty laugh of his would likely sound devilishly good turned towards pleasure.

“Just that it’s a very fine evening.”

John nods, pleased, and echoes the sentiment before he returns to reading aloud to the room a passage from the newest novel he’s acquired.

*

They’re riding out to the range to check on the herd and Dick knows without a doubt that they’re going to get into a scrap with some rustlers. He can feel it in the marrow of his bones, that same eerie knowing that’s been haunting him for weeks now. Dressed in a new coat and hat, Billy is downright bouncing out his saddle he’s so excited, and his hand continually reaches down to flirt with the butt of his revolver.

“The kid is out for blood,” Chavez remarks, coming up beside Dick and speaking low enough that his voice won’t carry.

“Seems wrong, don’t it. Desiring so strongly to kill a man.”

“Depends.” Chavez briefly makes eye contact, then tugs his hat down low. A sharp line of shadow cuts across his face. His mouth twists. “Some men deserve it.”

“Sure, but Billy’s eighteen if he’s a day,” Dick says. He turns to keep his words aimed at Chavez, “That’s a little young to be so thirsty for killing.”

“Boys don’t know what they truly want. Men rarely do, either.” And with that, Chavez urges his horse to pick up the pace. His knives are at the ready, bristling at his boots, belt, and bags. Is he also plagued with the notion that they were heading towards a fight like a train with no other choice than to stay on its tracks?

Could they go back? Or perhaps simply stop here, like the other day when he and Josiah had spent the afternoon on the river’s edge and nothing had gone sideways except his own mess of feelings.

“Come to think of it, perhaps we ought to have a look towards the north,” Dick calls out, raising his voice like there’s a need to be heard over a stampede when there’s only birdsong interrupting the low rustle of a half dozen ponies picking their way across the scrubland.

“Yeah?” Billy pivots halfway in his saddle. “Is that’s where Murphy’s men are?”

“Cattle in the lower forty been spooked before. Murphy’s probably come back for another round,” Charley says. He adjusts his hat, and for a moment there sounded almost authoritative.

“We’re sure to find those Murphy boys in the lower forty,” Steve chimes in.

Riding point, Josiah slows and casts a glance towards Dick. “Wouldn’t hurt to turn north and see if they’re holed up in the hills,” he hedges.
Billy thumbs the handle of his pistol, face screwed into a considering look.

“Cattle in the lower forty been spooked before,” Charley repeats, and a mighty chill goes up Dick’s spine at how it’s a near perfect echo of what he’d said before. “Murphy’s probably come back for another round.”

“We’re sure to find those Murphy boys in the lower forty,” Steve adds, like he hadn’t just said the same exact thing a moment before.

“Lower forty it is!” Billy howls, and kicks his horse into a gallop. He pulls out his gun, firing a shot into the air, and Steve lets out a loud whoop.

Dick cusses and urges his horse to follow, knowing he can’t let Billy get killed no matter how stupid the kid aims to be. But this time, amongst the looks tossed about as Josiah reaches for his rifle and Chavez pulls a knife, Dick is certain that at least the three of them aren’t off their nut.

He also can’t ignore the zing of exhilaration along his nerves as they race towards the valley. He’s not itching for a fight the way Billy is, far from it, but he’ll be damned if Murphy’s boys make off with another dozen head of cattle on his watch. If they’re lucky, the no-good thieving lot will see the cloud kicked up from their approach and turn tail.

If not and his premonition holds good about the number of men and their skill, well, Dick leans low over his horse’s neck with the reins tight in one hand and narrows his eyes. “Ride smart, Regulators!” he shouts, and draws his pistol.

*

Despite Josiah’s brash warning, it’s Billy who’s earned the talking to, and Dick and Josiah aren’t trying to snoop, it’s just that they’re running low on logs split for the evening fire. They strip down to their shirtsleeves as they trade the ax back and forth over a growing pile of firewood.

From the snippets of conversation floating over, John’s embarking on a fool’s errand, trying in vain to reason with Billy.

“I know you were doing your utmost to assist,” he says. His hand is braced on Billy’s shoulder while Billy toes at the dirt and refuses to meet his gaze. “You can see how this might reflect poorly on my patronage though, can you not? The folks in this county need to recognize that no matter your past misdeeds, you boys are hard working, decent young men.”

Billy winces, and Dick wonders if by some miracle John has finally broken through to him. “I said I was sorry.”

“And it was an apology from the heart, son,” John says. He smiles, eyes crinkling at the corners. “I appreciate it and I want to express how very proud of you I am that you had the fortitude to admit wrongdoing. There’s no bringing those men back from the dead, but I’ll do my best to smooth any ruffled feathers with Mr. Murphy.”

Josiah hefts the ax and splits a log clean down the middle. The crack echoes through the yard. “Not even a thousand dollars would make Murphy swallow the news like it’s honey and not vinegar,” he mutters out the side of his mouth.
“He rules Lincoln County the way the Cardinal rules France.” Dick says, setting another log on the stump. He looks to the clear stretch of the horizon. “Feel’s like a storm’s coming.”

“Indeed it does.”

They nod respectfully as Billy approaches.

“I thought I was doing the vigilante outlaw storyline,” Billy says. He doesn’t stop to offer a hand, just sails on by, clearly talking at them and not to them. “Instead it’s a bunch of farmwork and touchy-feely I’m-so-proud-of-you daddy issues shit.”

“Storyline? What’s he on about?” Josiah asks once Billy is out of earshot. He rests the ax on the stump, and the muscles of his forearms cord pleasingly as he leans against the handle.

They watch Billy stroll into John’s house like he owns it. John invited him in on day two, and it still didn’t sit right with Dick that for some reason a no-name drifter like Billy was too good for the bunkhouse.

“Hell if I know,” Dick replies, but one thing that’s clear to him is that Billy isn’t as ignorant as he at times seems. Maybe he had spent time in a traveling show and came away with some fortune teller nonsense. Maybe John knew more about Billy than he cared to share.

“Well, if this is a stage and we are all merely players, it is a bullshit story to be in.”

“How’s that?”

Josiah’s mouth quirks at the corner. He hefts, the axe, the shaft sliding through his hands as he prepares for a swing. “Every story worth telling is a love story, Dick.”

* 

Things seem to be going all right the next morning as errands take them into town. A few dark looks get tossed their way, but none of Murphy’s boys step out to hassle them. Driving the buckboard, Dick slows the team down to a slow walk in front of the post office. Billy looks over at him questioningly.

“I’ll take the tools down to the blacksmith,” Dick tells him. “You two go on in and see to Mr. Tunstall’s packages.”

Josiah’s duster flares as he hops off. He’s dressed for town in his second-finest set of clothes: collared shirt and double-breasted waistcoat freshly laundered since they’d last been worn. He walks alongside the cart for a few paces. “You sure you want to split up?”

He might have opted otherwise if a vision had come to him again in warning, but there’s nothing tugging at his mind that’s worrisome. “We’ll be done in town quicker that way.”

“C’mon,” Billy says, impatiently.

“Coming,” Josiah replies, but his gaze stays locked on Dick. He looks as if he greatly desires to share a piece of his mind at the idea of minding the kid by his lonesome.

“Better get on,” Dick says.

Josiah flips his duster back so his holster is clearly visible, and raps his knuckles against the side of the cart before he turns to follow Billy. He gallantly tips his hat to a pair of women passing by. The
women titter and blush, and Dick’s eye lingers on the scene for a pause. Josiah certainly has always had a way with the ladies.

He flicks the reins to get moving at a good clip again. Perhaps the idea that Josiah might have some fond feelings for him in return was as pie in the sky as the thought of saving up enough money to invest in a ranching operation of his own. His mood sours, and the blacksmith takes notice as he offloads the tools for repair.

“You look like you’ve got women troubles,” Mr. Morgan says, opening his ledger. He licks the tip of his pencil and glances up at Dick between writing up the order.

“What makes you say that?”

“Money problems turn the corners of a man’s mouth. Trouble with the law narrows a man’s eyes. Women causing a man grief, well, that shows right here,” Mr. Morgan says, and taps the space between his eyebrows with a thick finger. It leaves a fresh mark behind to join the rest of the smudges scattered on his face.

Dick scowls, even though it’s likely to deepen the furrow. How preoccupied is he with pining over Josiah if even the smithy takes notice?

“Youngest foreman in the county, seems like you could have your pick.”

“Might be foreman, but I’m still only a cowpunch, and a bunkhouse is no place for a bride. It’ll be a few years still before I can buy a place worth settling down at.”

Mr. Morgan reminisces for a bit about the work it took to go from tinker to townsman and then turns the conversation towards the weather. The topic is a balm, letting Dick opine without fretting and he leaves Morgan’s place with a little lift in his step.

When he brings the cart around, Josiah and Billy aren’t waiting out front, but there’s plenty of other folk in their place. Townies stand in clumps murmuring amongst themselves, casting worried looks towards a clear commotion going on inside the post office.

“What’s happening?” Dick asks, sliding off the buckboard. He spots Josiah inside on the floor and doesn’t wait for an answer, dropping the reins to the ground and vaulting up onto the wooden porch. The whole side of Josiah’s face is red with blood, and his hand is clasped to his ribs.

Billy stands in front of him, facing down a bigger fellow. Billy’s spitting fire and angry, his eyes wide. His gun is in his hand, other poised to hit the hammer rapid fire to deliver a half-dozen lead bits into the big man’s gut. “What the fuck are you doing?” Billy howls. “I need that host! He’s part of my quest.”

Dick’s heart is hammering, adrenaline urging him to rush in, but he’s no fool, so he approaches slowly, ready to quick draw if it comes to that. The man doesn’t look to have any friends left standing, but that’s no reason to throw caution to the wind.

“You can’t shoot me, the bullets won’t work, asshole,” the big man says, sneering. He puffs himself up, over six feet by the look at him, and he looms over Billy. “And it’s the same fucking quest, I’m just working for the other side. Don’t break character again or I’ll report you.”

To Billy’s credit, he doesn’t back down an inch despite being a half foot shorter and a hundred pounds slighter on muscle. “Fine, well. Go tell your boss that Mr. Tunstall has a new gunslinger. ...And if I shoot you it’ll still hurt like the devil, asshole.” He scrapes his teeth over his lip, and aims a touch lower. His face twists into a vicious grin, and he nods as Dick comes into his periphery. “Get
Doc out of here."

Dick eases an arm under Josiah who groans weakly but manages to clamber to his feet and limp along with aid.

Billy walks out backward, keeping his gun trained on Murphy’s man the whole way, and for all his flaws, Dick’s estimation of him rises. He might be a wild card who shirks his chores, but in this moment he’s earned the claim to be a Regulator.

*  

Josiah took a vicious beating. Four on one not counting the big fella, Billy relates, crowing about how “cool” Josiah had been before he’d been taken down. Dick doesn’t press for details, too busy giving himself a mental lacing for thinking things wouldn’t go sideways. They’d just sent bodies back to Murphy; he’d been a fool to believe retribution wouldn’t be swift.

His jaw aches from clenching his teeth for every rattling mile back to the ranch, and he leaves the cart with Charley to go inside and have a word with John. To his surprise, John insists they bring Josiah in to the main house and make use of the other bedroom kept ready for guests. The bunkhouse is nicer than most Dick’s seen, but he thanks John a dozen times over. The house might not be blessed with a woman’s touch, but it’ll do Josiah worlds better to rest up where the walls are bright and the air is fresh.

After Josiah’s brought up and settled, Dick hangs around. He leans against the wardrobe in the corner, as if the distance will ease some of the guilt gathered around him like a raincloud. “Mostly left your face alone by the look of it,” he says.

“They didn’t want to do all your ugly mugs a favor,” Josiah rasps. His quiet laugh turns into a cough and then into a soft moan of pain. He’s propped against the pillows in his long underwear and lists to the side as he drags in a full breath.

Chavez had come up as soon as he got word, and he perches now on the edge of the bed beside Josiah. “You check for broken bones?” he asks, casting a glance between Josiah and Dick.

Dick shakes his head as Josiah says, “I don’t believe anything’s broken. No sharp pains, anyhow. I’m just likely to be a mess of bruises for a few weeks.”

Chavez doesn’t say anything in response, but he takes hold of Josiah’s shoulder and runs his hands down Josiah’s arm to his elbow and wrist and then to each finger in turn, being as careful and thorough as any of them might with an ailing calf.

“Seems like most of the blood came from the cut above your eye,” Dick says, gesturing vaguely at where Josiah’s hair is stuck to his forehead. It’s a shallow wound that doesn’t need stitches; it’ll be healed in a week, probably not even leaving a scar.

“That, and from the other men,” Chavez remarks. He glances meaningfully at Josiah’s knuckles, raw from more than one strike against a hard jaw. “Five of them, three of you. Hardly seems fair…for them.”

“Maybe you should’ve given ‘em a chance to surrender,” Dick says, glad enough for the levity that he doesn’t admit to Chavez that he’d been tending to affairs at Mr. Morgan’s shop when the trouble started.

“Should’ve, but serves ‘em right,” Josiah murmurs. He’s tough, but he’s smart enough to know his limits, and right now his body is clearly begging for rest.
Dick slips out to fetch a washcloth and a bowl of water still warm from the kettle. Without a word, Chavez takes it from him and sets it on the bed stand. He helps Josiah unbutton the front of his union suit, peeling it down to his waist, and sure enough, there’s a mess of angry red splotches along his ribs that are already going purple.

“I’ll get you a change of clothes,” Dick says, averting his gaze from Josiah’s bare chest. There’s a tenderness to the way Chavez attends to him, a warmth of affection that strikes up a little pang of jealousy in Dick. It’s like a mouthful of lemon, sour and sharp, and Dick swallows it down. Now’s not the time to fret over feelings he hasn’t even expressed, or to wonder whether or not Chavez has a poker face after all when it comes to matters of the heart.

*  

After bringing Josiah that fresh set of clothes, Dick runs into Billy lingering in the gathering dark with his hat in his hands.

“Is he gonna be okay?”

“I believe so.”

Billy blows out a breath and stamps his heel. “I knew it. I knew Doc was going to be fine. He wiped the floor with those morons. If it hadn’t been for the other guest, hell—” Billy’s mouth snaps shut and he starts over with a bit of a stammer. “I mean to say, if it hadn’t been for Murphy’s new muscle, we would’ve gotten out of there without a scratch.”

“What do you know about him? This new fella of Murphy’s?”

“Nothing, really. He started the mess. He was, you know, a little, uh forward with Doc. You know what I mean….” Billy’s ears redden, and when Dick lifts an eyebrow, Billy stammers on. “It’s just—if you swing that way, Doc’s clearly the one that most folks are supposed to fall for.”

“So the man laid hands on Josiah?”

“Well, not quite, but he made some pretty crude statements that said he very much would like to and Doc took offense.”

“I see,” Dick says, and what he really cares to do is shake Billy until answers fall out of him. He shoves down that urge, same as he’d pushed aside the spike of jealousy he’d felt towards Chavez. Best if he sleeps on it, and if he still feels like this in the morning, then he can speak his mind to Josiah and to Billy and to God himself if need be.

*  

A good night’s sleep, the morning chores, and a short ride to the river and back clears Dick’s head of most of what’s been troubling him. Billy still presents a worrisome number of questions, but he’ll get answers out of him one way or another. And he’d known yesterday that he had no right to be feeling cross at Chavez over taking care of a man they both called friend, but it still took a while for the sting to subside. Even as a child, Dick had never been as generous as he or his mother had wished he’d be. Chavez though had taken it upon himself to update Dick on Josiah’s condition first thing, a charitable gesture Dick couldn’t discount.

“If you’re going to tell me I won’t be in any shape to dance on New Year’s Eve, I don’t care to hear it,” Josiah says as Dick enters the room to bring him dinner.

“I didn’t say a word.”
“I’m supposed to meet my wife at that shindig,” Josiah says.

“That so? She pretty?” Dick means it teasingly, as he would if they were out amongst the cattle jawing or relaxing by the evening fire. Josiah’s expression however remains serious, as if it wasn’t a hopeful wish but a certainty.

Dick sets the plate of food down and a moment passes in weighty silence. “How is it you’re so certain?” he asks, and lets the fear that’s been stirred up inside him spill into his voice, raw and honest.

“It’s like I know what’s coming,” Josiah whispers, his eyes darting towards the door. “I swear, Dick. I’m not spinning tales. I kept having this odd feeling…. And then about when Billy showed up, it got stronger. It’s like a dream at times, but I’m wide awake. And it’s more than that. I feel it so keenly, it’s more like a—”

“A memory,” Dick supplies, and Josiah’s relief washes across him like a wave. Chasing down those rustlers with Billy it hadn’t felt like knowing the future so much as dancing a familiar waltz. It’d been reliving something he’d already done, instinctively knowing the motions and which way the men would bolt. Which fella Charley would tear off after, and which one had a holdout pistol in his sleeve.

“Chavez has been feeling it too,” Josiah says. He pushes aside the dinner Dick had brought him and leans forward to clasp Dick’s hand in his. His fingers are warm and strong, and surely he can feel the sudden leap in the pulse at Dick’s wrist. “Memory is the perfect way to describe it. It’s just flashes, but I remember how it feels the first time I see her. She’s more than beautiful. She’s intoxicating, mysterious, everything I’ve ever dreamed of. I know the moment I lay eyes on her that I’ll feel my heart will burst if I can’t have her.

“But it’s not just her,” Josiah continues. He wets his lips and his bright blue gaze slides away, his countenance darkening. “There are other things I keep remembering— Things confounding to the soul.”

“What do you think it is?” Dick asks, hoping that with his poet’s soul Josiah might have some special insight on the strange goings on. “A message from spirits beyond? From...God?”

“It could be,” Josiah says, letting Dick’s hand slip from his grasp. He tucks his hair behind his ear, and Dick imagines for an instant curving his palm there, cradling the angle of Josiah’s jaw. The soft scratch of two days without the touch of a razor tickling against his skin. “Maybe we’re meant to change the path that fate’s laid out for us....”

“Maybe,” Dick echoes, and his heart aches for a moment with an unspeakable longing. “Billy knows more than he lets on, I’m sure of it.”

“Truth will out.”

“I pray you’re right, Doc.”

*

On the eve of the new year, the ranch is raucous and lively. John took Billy in to the mercantile at first light for a proper suit and hat, and by noon everyone has given up on pretending anything of substance will be done today. Occasional squabbles break out over the better shaving mirror, but it’s not long before the whole crew of Regulators has washed up, scrubbed behind his ears, and put on his Sunday best.
With pomade in his hair and freshly laundered clothes, Dick feels like a million dollars. Waiting around outside the main house, he can almost forget the chaos that’s been dogging their heels. If it weren’t for Josiah’s forced convalescence, he might be whistling a merrier tune, but the circumstances coupled with the unusual speed at which the bruises along Josiah’s ribs and limbs have faded leaves everything mired in an eerie unease.

Chavez keeps him company. Or, more to the point, does his own waiting for Josiah to emerge. He cuts a fine figure in black and crimson. The outfit is brand spanking new, Dick notes, bought after last year’s drive took them up to Dodge City and filled their pockets with ready cash but he couldn’t recall Chavez wearing it before today.

“Feels like we’re waiting for a bride to show,” Dick mutters.

Chavez cracks a smile and a new memory, if that’s what these fancies are, rises like a tide. It swirls around Dick, drags him into a moment where the air is heavy with the smell of roses in bloom. He’s been standing for hours beside Chavez, feet aching in his boots, waiting for Josiah to show after being called to the Captain’s office. No, not Chavez, not exactly, and not Josiah exactly either, though the image of him in Dick’s mind is similar enough to the way he looks after three weeks on the trail without a razor in sight— Still, the dissonance pulls Dick out of the memory and back to the present where Chavez has shifted his stance, standing up a little straighter.

“How do I look?” Josiah asks them from the doorway, a hint of shyness in the cast of his glance. So often the men who come west are full of bravado and peacock swagger, and though Josiah can ride and shoot and kill a man dead in his tracks if needs be, he’s always carrying a softness with him wrapped around the iron of his spine, a gentleness that runs deeper than the sheen of good manners.

“Like you’re ready to break some hearts,” Chavez answers first. Though he’s noticed too, surely, how the cut at Josiah’s forehead is nearly a memory and there’s nary a wobble in his step despite what had promised to be bone-deep bruises only a few days prior.

Dick doesn’t care about the peculiarities at the moment, not when Josiah’s smile is like first light at dawn, gentle and welcome, spreading slowly into something glorious to behold. “Well then, gentlemen,” Josiah says, joining them. “I believe I’m fit to dance.”

* *

“Not much for women, are ya, Chavez?” Billy asks, stumbling over after a wild turn around the square with a curly-haired beauty. He hops up to sit, legs swinging, on a rain barrel.

“He’s just been dancing with a string of them,” Dick points out.

“Sure he has,” Billy says, smirking. “But his eyes have mostly been on Doc over there. Told you he’s the pretty one.”

Dick can’t argue with that. On either point. His gaze has hardly strayed since they arrived. Meanwhile, Josiah’s eyes have been fixed on the young Chinese woman glued to Murphy’s side since he spotted her.

“I believe he’s mustering up the nerve to ask Mr. Murphy if he can dance with that young lady,” Dick says.

“Funny, because I was thinking the same thing,” Billy says. He sounds genuinely wistful at the notion, and it takes Dick aback. He’d gotten so used to thinking of Billy as some half-mad maverick hellbent on shooting anything that moves, that a bit of tenderness comes as a shock.
Dick’s not sure how he ought to respond. There’s no doubt that’s the woman Josiah believes he’s meant to marry. That he professed to falling head over heels for at the mere sight of. Would it be unreasonably selfish to urge Billy to go introduce himself to the woman first? Would Josiah be wounded if Billy usurped his moment? Or is it like the handful of other pivotal moments they’ve run up against that have seemed inevitable…and yet weren’t so long as you were willing to struggle against the strange tide of fate.

“Go on,” Chavez says, taking the choice out of Dick’s hands. “Dance with the woman if she’ll have you.”

Billy turns bright red, but he hops off the barrel and tugs his waistcoat down. He spits in his palm and slicks his hair back from his face. It makes him look even younger. “Wish me luck, fellas.”

“Good luck,” Dick mumbles, and like a lodestone, goes right back to keeping an eye on Josiah. He sees the moment Josiah spots Billy’s approach, the stricken look when Billy very gallantly asks her to dance, and then, when Billy leads her into the crowd the soft smile that replaces Josiah’s shock and dismay. Dick turns away, feeling almost ashamed at the intimacy of emotion he’s read, and for his own relief that Josiah hadn’t appeared too upset.

He tips his face towards the heavens. It’s nearing ten o’clock and the sky is ablaze with stars. Music flows around him unheard, a background noise that never strikes him with the urge to tap his toe. A star travels across the sky, trailing a streak of light, and he nearly misses Josiah’s quiet approach.

“Was that your doing?” Josiah points to where Billy and the young woman are dancing.

“It was me,” Chavez says, gravely. Abruptly, he grabs Josiah by the shoulder, thumb digging in hard enough to crumple the wool of Josiah’s coat. “That woman isn’t your destiny any more than she’s mine.”

“How can you know that?” Josiah asks. He doesn’t seem particularly angry or distraught, but Dick gets the sense that he hadn’t confided to Chavez his remembered feelings about the woman.

“Because I remember that she has a birthmark on her back, just below the point of her left shoulder blade that’s in the shape of half a heart. And I remember her standing amongst royalty in a palace lined with gold and not as a washerwoman’s daughter.”

Josiah stares at him.

“That’s quite a yarn,” Dick says, fumbling for the right words to diffuse the sudden crackling energy in the air.

“It’s no story,” Chavez says, but he releases his hold on Josiah.

Josiah’s gaze goes unfocused for a moment, then he looks over the dancers in the square and quotes Whitman: “May-be the things I perceive, the animals, plants, men, hills, shining and flowing waters…. The skies of day and night, colors, densities, forms, may-be these are—as doubtless they are—only apparitions, and the real something has yet to be known….”

“I had a dream before the memories came. A dream that showed me that all of us, we’re merely puppets,” Chavez tells them. He makes a sour face. “We’re players in a story that doesn’t belong to us.”

“Billy’s story,” Dick says. Contemplating the idea is like tugging on a thread, unraveling an edge that leaves a bit of his mind raw and frayed and terrified. It’s both preposterous and also uncomfortably plausible that many of the things he’s said and done are merely pages from a play he’s not meant to
know he’s a part of, his feeble self doomed to reread the same lines over and over to different folk that come through.

“What about that new man of Murphy’s?” Josiah wonders aloud.

“He’s the same as Billy. Different,” Chavez says. “I can’t claim to understand it or explain it. The dream opened my eyes, but it was still a dream.” He pauses, as if he cares to say more, but he shakes his head and leaves them, drifting off into the crowd to find a drink or another dance partner.

Firecrackers spit and fizzle, and Dick’s hand goes to his holster out of habit. He sees Josiah’s done the same, and Dick laughs off how jumpy they are, but he knows the sound of it is brittle as spun sugar.

“What about that new man of Murphy’s?” Josiah wonders aloud.

“Do you believe it?” Josiah asks as light blossoms and fades in the sky above them.

Dick mulls it over. He isn’t sure, but maybe it’s because he’s afraid of what it means if it’s true. Phantom memories are one thing. To have the whole of your existence writ around someone else with no way to be the master of your own fate? It invites a chill down a man’s spine. “I can’t say I don’t. Even you believed that young miss was destined to be your wife.”

“I did. I do. It’s the oddest thing, Dick. I can’t quite explain, but the moment I saw Billy approach her and that he was going to treat her right, everything went topsy-turvy. It didn’t matter anymore the way I’d felt about her, like God decided that if Billy wanted to court her, I didn’t need to go down that path myself.”

“Isn’t that unsettling on its own? Being a chess piece moved by some invisible hand.”

“I suppose, but it seems I’m no longer beholden to fall in love with a woman I don’t even know. No matter how beautiful she is.” Josiah runs his hands through his hair, his expression edging towards manic like he’s been tossing back whiskey all night and is ready throw his head back and howl at the moon. “I feel so free in this moment, I can’t even put it into words.”

“We’re toying with the notion that we’re puppets come to life and you feel free,” Dick says, incredulously. “We’ve gone mad. You, and me, and Chavez, the three of us.”

The last of the fireworks boom and crack, and Josiah grabs Dick’s elbow, tugging him towards the revelry. “Forget all of it for now! There’s more I need to tell you, but it can wait until the morrow. Let’s dance a while. Have a bit of fun. You haven’t had more than a single turn all night, and I’ve been too wound up with nerves until now to enjoy myself.”

“I ain’t quite in a festive mood,” Dick says, but allows himself to be dragged along.

“You will be,” Josiah says, and a memory comes roaring back, slamming into Dick’s mind, the echo of words still hanging in the air.

The present catches up to him in jolt, the wet echoes of a kiss falling away like grains of sand. Dick stumbles, trying in vain to catch it and stay in that honey golden memory. Josiah’s hands steady him,
not at the hip but at the chest. They stand mere inches apart as Josiah studies him intently. “Perhaps I was wrong. Are you all right?”

Dick waves away the worry, but not Josiah’s closeness. He places a hand over Josiah’s where it rests near his heart. “I’m fine, I swear it,” he says, and his chest swells with unspoken emotion as Josiah’s cheeks color.

Josiah produces a shining silver flask that must be new—or newly won from some fool who thought it smart to roll the bones tonight. He takes a nip and offers it to Dick. When Dick shakes his head, he tucks it into Dick’s pocket. “For later.”

“Care to lead or are you hoping to find another pretty face?”

“Yours will do,” Josiah says, and from there the rest of the night passes in a pleasant blur of music and laughter and Josiah’s body swaying with his own in time to the music.

* *

Words had been exchanged prior to leaving the shindig. Murphy’s fellow, the big man that Dick still didn’t have a name to rightly call him by, had tried to start some trouble with Billy. Enough townsfolk wouldn’t have the night ruined, and when the Regulators stepped up wholesale bristling and ready to brawl, he’d backed off to skulk in the shadows with his boss.

It had put a damper on the night however, and as they ride back to the ranch in the early dawn, Dick makes certain that no matter how drunk the lot of them are, that each Regulator understands to keep an eye out for trouble. He can feel the potential for danger like a hot whisper against the nape of his neck, and fearing the worst, he keeps his horse close to John as John drives the buckboard. A part of him knows with that awful, deadly conviction, that in a different time, John has died here, bleeding out into the dirt with a dozen bulletholes as Murphy looks on. The miles crawl by like mud, but they somehow make it back unmolested.

Billy insists they don’t retire straightaway. After a brief conversation with John, he assembles them all in the sitting room. He’s been wrestling with something since they left the party, and though he’s going on no sleep like they all are, he’s so full of restless energy that he keeps passing his hat from hand to hand and jiggles his leg so hard it makes the china in the hutch rattle.

He clears his throat to claim the room’s attention. “I’ve been told by Mr. McSween that Murphy’s keeping Yen Sun against her will,” Billy tells them.

“Who in blazes is Yen Sun?” Steve asks.

“Language,” John chides.

“Pardon, Mr. Tunstall. Who pray tell is Yen Sun?”

“The woman Billy was dancing when that big feller came over and started hollering,” Charley supplies.

“Mr. McSween is right. Murphy took her as ‘payment’ for a debt,” Josiah chimes in. There’s a dark, vicious edge to his tone.

“We gotta do something,” Billy implores. He’s utterly taken with her, it’s clear, and for the first time Dick believes Billy has a true sense of purpose about him.

John breathes out a weary sigh. “What would you have me do, son? I’m trying my very best to avoid
an outright range war over the cattle in this county. Supposing she is in need of liberation as you say, Mr. Murphy and Mr. Dolan aren’t going to simply hand over this young lady without some sort of concession.”

An oppressive mood claims the room; it’s clear John’s not referring not to a payment made in coin but in blood. Tangling with a half-dozen rustlers is one thing, but none of them are keen on the notion of picking up the hornet’s nest and giving it a shake. Billy looks pleadingly towards Charley and Steve who have been steadfast on his side until this very moment, but even they seem queasy at the notion of taking the fight straight to Mr. Murphy.

“Mr. Tunstall, I mean no disrespect,” Dick begins, picking his words carefully, “but while you have indeed tried to take the high road at every turn, war’s coming to Lincoln County one way or another.” From the corner of his eye he sees Chavez dip his head in silent agreement.

“Mr. Murphy and Mr. Dolan have more money than they have friends,” Dick continues. “If we’re smart about it, no one’ll be the wiser and the young miss won’t be forced to live in such unseemly conditions any longer than is absolutely necessary.”

John steeples his fingers under his chin. His words carry weight, and if he agrees, then to the man, the Regulators will have each bound themselves to this path.

“Begging your pardon, Mr. Tunstall,” Josiah says. He rises to his feet and nods at Billy and Dick in turn. “I’m in agreement with the pair of them. It isn’t right Murphy taking Yen Sun away from her family, and it isn’t right the way he’s been treating you and the other folk in the county. He’ll do anything to fill his coffers, and it’s only a matter of time before more innocent lives see ruin. You’ve tried the law and affording him the courtesy of a gentleman. Mr. Tunstall, maybe it’s high time we afford Murphy the courtesy of a horse thief instead.”

“I can’t dissuade you?” John asks.

“No, sir,” Billy says, resolute.

John turns to look at Dick. “Do you have a plan?”

“The rumblings of one.”

“I don’t care to hear it. In fact, I think at first light, I’ll impose myself on Mr. McSween and his wife for a day or two and talk business.”

“You should take a couple men with you,” Chavez suggests.

“Take Steve and Charley along,” Dick says. Charley’s the sort to get a case of nerves, and Steve’s a fine shooter, but he’s not particularly good at keeping quiet. “They can pick up the tools from Mr. Morgan and keep on the up and up.”

“What about me?” McCloskey asks. He’s been thick as thieves with Steve and Charley since coming into John’s employ, but Dick has another role in mind for him.

“You ride with us,” Dick tells him. “As the most recent arrival to have worked for Mr. Murphy. We might need you.”

McCloskey doesn’t seem entirely pleased to be part of the crew going into the lion’s den, but he doesn’t make a fuss.

“I have my reservations, but I’ll consider the matter settled and in your hands, Richard,” John says.
“Now boys, let’s all get a bit of rest, and tomorrow afternoon I shall remember that I had hoped to call on Mr. McSween. Whatever happens in the dark of night once Charles, Stephen, and I have departed, remains between the five of you and God.”

* 

After a full night of revelry followed by the macabre plans made in the weak light of dawn, Dick had expected he’d be chasing sleep, but the moment his back had hit his bunk he’d gone straight to snoring. He wakes somewhere past noon and stumbles out of the bunkhouse into the bright light of the midday sun. Bleary-eyed and yawning, a bit of water on his face prepares him to face the day.

To his surprise, chores hadn’t been ignored, and inside at the table sits a stack of biscuits and a string of sausages still warm from the ashes of the stove. He fixes himself a plate and a cup of coffee to wash it all down with, sitting down at the table with a bone-weary sigh. The ranch is quiet with only the sound of chickens scratching in the shade outside the window.

Dick doesn’t need to find where folks went off to, he sits there just long enough that they find him. It’s Billy who shows up first and thanks him for his words of support to John.

“Well Billy,” Dick says, too weary to mind his manners and hide his feelings. “It’s your quest now, right? A bit of proper outlaw-vigilante with a helping of damsel in distress to make it interesting.”

Billy turns white as a sheet. “I don’t know what you mean,” he squeaks out.

“Sure as hellfire you don’t.”

Billy’s throat jumps as he swallows nervously. “Okay, but, how is it that you can even talk about it? How do you...know what you are?” He glances about, as if he expects the law to bust in.

Dick swirls the gritty remains of his coffee and fixes Billy with a dead-eye stare. “I don’t rightly know. Just answer me this, would you: After we do this for you, then what?”

“I have no fucking idea. Yen Sun was just so pretty and so nice. I thought maybe I could get her to go south to the border with me. Maybe we could get married!” Billy says. He senses that’s not what Dick’s asking and winces as he continues. “I mean, I know it’s not real, but I’m not married on the outside, you know—I don’t even have a girlfriend—and I’ve got maybe another week before I need to go home.

“My parents are rich, but they’re not rich enough to afford more than a couple weeks here every five years. They’re over in the Baroque part of the park, but hanging around Versailles sounded boring. I’ve been there in real life, and I always wanted to be a cowboy”

“What happens to us, Billy.”

“I– I dunno. If I had to guess, you’re programmed to reset for the next guest.”

Programmed... Dick isn’t sure exactly what Billy means, but he gets the gist of it. The question that plagues him now is how different is it for him than it is for Billy? He might have been put on this earth as entertainment for a rich boy, but hasn’t he always been at the mercy of men with money? And if there is a God, doesn’t He have plans for each member of his flock, Billy included?

“Go on and git,” Dick tells him. “Find the others and make sure they know we leave at four o’clock sharp and that supper will be cold and on the road.”

*
The rescue is miraculously bloodless. Despite some protest on the way in from Billy about McCloskey's loyalties being suspect, McCloskey does his part. He creates an effective diversion by begging on his knees for his job back from Murphy and does an admirable job stroking the old man’s ego enough to keep from being whupped for the trouble.

Nimble as ever, as McCloskey makes a scene, Billy climbs up onto the second-story awning. After a nail-biting handful of minutes, he leads Yen Sun by the hand out of her bedroom window. Josiah and Chavez help the lady down, and in a staggered line they run for the fence where they’ve left their horses.

Easy in, easy out, Dick thinks. But when McCloskey makes the rendezvous early on a horse that’s heaving for breath, he knows their luck has run out.

“You shouldn’t have come for me. You must leave me,” Yen Sun says. She clings to Billy’s waist from her perch on the saddle behind him, but she looks truly afeared at the notion that they might do as she asks.

“There’s no way in hell we’re letting you go back with them,” Josiah growls, and kicks his horse into motion.

They make it into the hills before the shooting starts.

One by one, they pick off Murphy’s men. Even in the light of the moon alone, Josiah’s aim and his Sharps cavalry carbine is a force to be reckoned with. Dick does his best with only a six-shooter, but even after all the other Murphy boys have dropped, the big man—the other guest—keeps coming at them. He takes a dozen bullets with little more than a flinch, and not even Billy’s shooting makes him pause for more than a heartbeat.

Dick is out of ammo when his horse pitches, loses its footing, and goes down hard. The wind gets knocked out of him as he’s thrown into the dirt, lucky at least that he didn’t have a thousand pounds of horseflesh come down on top of him. He’s just catching his breath when he hears the shot and feels the punch to the chest with the spreading wetness that follows. He loses his air all over again, and it’s through dimming eyes that he sees Chavez wheel his horse around and charge the big man. Chavez vaults out of the saddle, knife in hand as he lands nimbly, and a quick viper’s strike leaves a cut striped dark across the big man’s chest.

The guest howls and staggers back, and Chavez follows, delivering a curving upward thrust through the ribs that sinks to the hilt and fells the man. The last thing Dick sees before darkness takes him is Billy’s eyes white-rimmed with terror.

* *

To his surprise, Dick discovers he’s alive. He’s also been tied to a saddle, and out long enough that the sky is turning pink from dawn’s approach. They’ve ridden for even higher ground it seems, and snow lies in patches here and there.

“He’s awake,” Chavez says, ever vigilant. He slows his horse to an even more leisurely walk and leans over to slice through the rope running from Dick’s belt to pin his wrists to the pommel.

Dick shakes away the tingling in his hands and fumbles at his breast, feeling for where he knew the bullet struck. “So, there is a God,” he mutters, pulling out the flask he’d forgotten to return to Josiah. In the center of the cross etched into the metal there’s a bullet hole, and the bit of lead meant for his heart rattles around in the few drops left in the bottom of the flask.
“Where are we headed?” Dick asks, tucking the ruined flask into the pocket of his duster. He stretches, feeling the pull against the bruised muscle of his chest, but no hurts worse than that surface. Getting the wind knocked out of him twice, likely his body had decided he simply needed a bit of rest.

“Didn’t seem prudent to head back to the ranch. Not just yet anyhow,” Josiah says. “And Billy over there is acting squirrely. Seems he didn’t expect Chavez to kill that big fella.”

Dick looks to where Billy rides with Yen Sun a dozen yards off to the right. “What else was he supposed to do?”

“I think Doc means that Billy found it hard to swallow that I could kill that man,” Chavez says. “You saw how the bullets didn’t even pierce his skin.” He points at a bit of steam rising from pools of water gathered in the rock, and suggests they stop for a bit.

Josiah agrees, and they call to Billy, who hesitates a moment before reining his horse in and walking it over to join them.

“Still aiming to head for the border?” Dick asks him. Chavez helps loosen the rest of the rope that’s kept Dick upright, and lends him a hand as he finds his legs. Given a moment’s pause, he recognizes the stretch of mountain they’re on now. They’d come this way more than once to indulge in a soak in the springs. “If so, you’ll want to go thataway.”

With some trepidation, Billy stares off in the direction Dick had pointed towards. He doesn’t look like he wants to strike out on his own anymore than he wants to stick with them. “What are you three going to do?”

“I honestly don’t know. If we’re going to reset like a clock, then it doesn’t much matter. But seems to me like some rules have changed on high. That storm’s still brewing; I can taste it in the air.”

Chavez has found a peyote plant peeking through a patch of snow and slices a button off, splitting it in half as he returns. He holds a piece up to Billy and to Yen Sun. “This can open your mind in a thousand ways,” he tells Billy, and to Yen Sun, he says, “I knew you in another world. In another life. Perhaps you’ll remember.”

Billy accepts the piece and stares at it in his palm. “I dunno about this. I’ve never done psychedelics,” he says.

“Right,” Billy mumbles, then repeats it with more vigor. A bit of spark comes back into him, that wild abandon that had driven him for days. “Fuck it, what’s the worst that can happen? Security is probably going to come get me anyway after what happened to that other guest,” he says, popping it in his mouth and chewing. In part, Dick thinks, in the hope that he might forget what happened to the big man.

Billy grimaces at the taste but swallows, and hesitantly, Yen Sun accepts the other half. She covers her mouth as she puts the piece on her tongue.

“Pick a path and follow it,” Chavez suggests. “Maybe you’ll be collected by your security, or maybe you’ll discover where you are truly meant to go. Maybe you’ll decide to go home, get married, raise fat babies, and live a good long life.”

Solemnly, Billy nods, and he turns his horse to the south. Yen Sun rests her cheek against his back, eyes drifting shut.
“Good luck,” Dick tells them, and finds he means it.

They all three of them watch as Billy’s horse disappears over the rise. Could be they all were wondering if parting ways meant their role was done. Josiah lets out a long breath, and then looks wistfully at the cloud of steam coming off the pool. “Care for a soak?” he asks.

“What if Billy changes his mind?” Dick says. “I for one ain’t willing to risk giving that young lady an eyeful she’ll not be expecting.”

“Even if they come back, before long, she won’t be much concerned with the physical world,” Chavez says wryly. He arches a brow and gestures towards the snow with the point of his knife. “There’s more, if you also want to seek some guidance.”

“You know I’ll drink whatever you put in front of me,” Dick says.

“Famous last words,” Josiah deadpans.

“But,” Dick continues sharply, “I don’t think now’s the time to be chasing visions. I’ve had my fill of that these past weeks.”

With a glance tossed in the direction where Billy and Yen Sun rode off to, Josiah shrugs and throws modesty to the wind. He strips down to his skin and hops bare assed and barefoot across the snow-scattered rocks with his gunbelt in his hand. He leaves his gun in easy reach and cusses under his breath as he steps into the spring.

“You’re not joining him, are you?” Dick asks incredulously, as Chavez more ceremoniously begins to unclothe. “What if Murphy’s men are still on our tail?”

“We can see for miles,” Chavez says with a shrug. He stands his boots next to the neatly folded pile of his clothes and similarly brings his gunbelt with him, leaving it beside Josiah’s as he more gingerly enters the water. Swiftly plunged to the neck, he gathers his hair up into a hasty bun to keep it from getting soaked.

“You’re a pair of fools,” Dick mutters. For all his talk of visions, he isn’t expecting one to take him now. He’s never prepared for the rush of being engulfed by a memory or a glimpse of what’s meant to be, but it’s so much stronger this time, overlaid as it is on the present. It’s like he’s staring through a bottle, thick glass warping the scene in front of him.

Chavez’s head is thrown back in laughter, his hair kept out of his eyes not by a bun but by a wide sash of silk, and he holds a bottle of wine uncorked in his hand. He’s chest-deep in a pool of water, as he is now, and Josiah too, looking a touch morose, but equally in his cups. On the other side of that looking glass there are still guns sat on the grassy ground near them: a pair of flintlocks instead of six-shooters, and beyond those a picnic lunch, half eaten. It’s not the middle of winter, but a fine summer’s day, hot and alive with the sound of insects. In his chest, Dick feels an upswell of emotion, an easy camaraderie coupled with a deeper truth that resonates so strongly it transforms him in the present: He’d die for these two. He loves these men to his very core.

Dick screws his eyes shut, not wanting to become fully lost in that ephemeral otherness. He carefully and stubbornly pieces the affection into the lives they’re living here: a trio of simple cowhands with a few misdeeds sprinkled in their pasts. It’s not that he isn’t curious, but it feels disrespectful somehow to tarry on the idea of a boisterous Chavez and a troubled Josiah when neither conduct quite settles right with the men he knows now. Oh, he can bear to keep the bonds of brotherhood—so much deeper than a few seasons riding the herd—and also the desire, a passion for which he’s grown accustomed to feeling for Josiah, but for which he’s startled to find has flared from ember to flame
when he opens his eyes to look upon Chavez with new eyes.

“Water’s mighty nice!” Josiah calls out. He stretches his arms out along the curving edge of the rock pool, temptation made flesh. “Plenty of room still.”

In the end, Dick relents. What choice does he have, when it hurts his heart to think of anything else? The water is deep and gloriously hot, leaching out the aches and pains from his body as he floats there beside Josiah and Chavez, stewing in his own thoughts.

Lucky for him, neither of them seem to feel the need to fill the air with idle chatter. It’s Josiah who breaks the silence a good hour later, questioning whether or not they ought to make a run for the border too.

“You should go back,” Chavez says. His hair has long since fallen out of its bun, and he smooths it back so that the wet strands stay slick against his skull. Only a few pieces slip free to fall across the angles of his face. “I’ll catch up to Billy and Yen Sun and see them on to Mexico.”

“Why?” Dick asks, trying to suss out his reasoning.

“Regardless of what fate has in store for us once Billy’s story is told, Murphy might come looking for Mr. Tunstall. Charley and Steve will take orders from you, and Doc’s the best shooter in the Regulators. So, it should be me who goes south. Also, I speak Spanish, *pendejos.*”

“I don’t like the idea of splitting up,” Josiah says.

The corner of Chavez’s mouth lifts into a faint smile. He puts a hand to Josiah’s face, and leans in to surprise him with a kiss, slow and soft and longing. “You never do,” he says.

Josiah’s cheeks are flush from heat and from the kiss. He scrapes his teeth over his lip as Chavez steps out of the water, dripping and unconcerned with his nakedness. Chavez skims the water off his skin as he goes to fetch his clothes, and Josiah absently touches a finger to the corner of his mouth.

“He’s right,” Dick says, trying not to look as if he too is thinking solely about the kiss, though he aches at the thought of taking Josiah’s mouth right now in turn, when he’s a touch slack-jawed and flustered.

“How?”

“Mr. Tunstall may need our help, and you’re the best gunslinger we’ve got.”

* The ranch is quiet when they return. John greets them warmly from the shade of the porch and mentions that Charley and Steve have ridden out to check on the cattle and on to fix up and restock the line shack in case a snowstorm comes through.

“No sign of Murphy’s men?” Dick asks.

“No trouble today,” John says. “I’m bound for town tomorrow morning however for a talk with Mr. McSween. The price of sugar’s going up, and corn is growing scarce too. Josiah, would you care to join me?”

Josiah looks poleaxed, but he clears his throat and nods. “Of course, sir. It’d be my pleasure.”

They leads the horses to the paddock, and Dick looks sidelong at Josiah. “You look like you’ve seen
a ghost, Doc.”

“He said those very words to me the day before we met Billy,” Josiah says in a sombre tone. “Seems if the hands of that great clock have been turned back, it’s skipped us over.”

Dick considers the ramifications: What it could mean to ride out tomorrow knowing he’s meant to do his duty and yet, not beholden to it. That he could, at any moment defy whatever great, invisible hand has tried to write the tale of his life.

He keeps mulling it over, even after he and Josiah split to handle the day’s chores that’ve been left undone, and on through supper, which is a simpler meal as there are fewer mouths to feed tonight—just a few thick slices of roasted beef with flour-thickened gravy and a heap of potatoes and peppers fried up in the drippings. It’s good, but he hardly tastes it, too lost in his own his mind.

He’s still wrestling with the far more complicated tangle of what-ifs and what-might-be that morning promises to bring when he’s lain in his bunk, sleepless and staring sightlessly at the ceiling. From across the room he can hear the steady rise and fall of Josiah’s breath, not deep enough yet for him to be asleep either.

“Doc, you awake?” he asks.

Josiah’s voice floats back to him in the darkness. “I am. I can’t seem to stop thinking long enough to sleep.”

Muttering under his breath, Dick shoves aside his blankets and feels around in the dark for the lantern hanging from the post. He finds a match and strikes it, lighting the lamp and turning down the wick to a warm soft glow that spreads to fill most of the room.

Dick perches at the edge of his bunk, palms flat on his thighs. “You know, I never did believe much in God, but I think I used to put a lot more faith in the Almighty.”

“You mean….”

“Yeah….”

“Feels strange, doesn’t it. Carrying a different life inside your head.”

“At the dance,” he begins, and casts a questioning look towards Josiah, “you told me you had more you cared to say to me in the morning.”

Josiah props himself up on an elbow. “It seemed more important in the moment,” he says, softly.

“Well, there’s something I need to get off my chest,” Dick tells him. He stands up and starts pacing, the smooth wood of the floor cold beneath his feet. “It’s about you, and Chavez.”

“If you’re going on about that kiss at the springs, I don’t know what that was all about—” Josiah says.

“It’s not that, well, it is...in a way.” Dick groans and throws up his hands helplessly. Everything’s become so damn complicated. “You might not remember, but I do, flashes of it anyway. And it seems like, so does he.”

Josiah’s eyes track him intently.

“Oh hellfire,” Dick says, and crosses the room to cradle Josiah’s face in his hands. Josiah doesn’t recoil, rather he leans sweetly into the touch, and his mouth parts on a rush of breath as Dick
Josiah’s quiet chuckle fades into a wry smile. There’s a weight in his gaze, a darkness burdening his soul in the lateness of the hour. “Robbing banks isn’t the worst sin a man can commit.”

“A preacher would say that even the worst sinner has a chance to repent. Whoever did those things you don’t care to talk about, it wasn’t you. Might be a part of you, just like your time in Liberty, but you ain’t that man now because you don’t aim to be. You are who you choose to be, Josiah, I can’t bear to think otherwise or else what does it matter?”

“Well, I suppose Mr. Tunstall’s been right all along. Our pasts are like an old yellowed novel. When you’re finished with it, you toss it away and start a new one.”

“Nothing’s written in stone,” Dick agrees. He pulls away, intending to go back to his bunk and leave Josiah be, but Josiah’s fingers clamp down on his wrist and hold him steady.

“You don’t have to go,” Josiah says. “Please.”

Dick’s heart stampedes in his chest, thundering so loud he can hear it echoing in his skull. He swallows, aiming to say something, anything, but his tongue stays thick in his mouth. “Are you sure about this?” he manages, finally.

“Yes, you should’ve,” Josiah murmurs in agreement, and he makes a low, hungry sound before slotting his mouth against Dick’s.

If he could pull Josiah any closer, he would. Dick feels as if the whole world falls away beneath him. He’s anchored here solely by the slip of Josiah’s tongue against his, the hot mix of their breath, and the press of their bodies. His hands dig into Josiah’s back, kneading the strong column of muscles along his spine as he aims to fit them together more smartly, lock and key. The nudge of Josiah’s cock against the inside of his thigh steals the breath from his lungs in a sharp gasp, leaves him panting and desperate. It’s been ages, but he knows what it’ll feel like, from the first push inside to the slow rocking thrust that will seat Josiah in him fully. He craves it, lusts for it wantonly.
Josiah doesn’t seem to need him to voice a plea, it’s writ on his body in a language Josiah reads with claiming kisses and wandering hands. And soon enough he answers Dick’s silent prayers, fingers pressing between Dick’s legs, wet with spit, and Josiah cock a thick and welcome heat to follow. Josiah’s gentler than he expects–than he remembers–a more considerate lover, or maybe, simply one who hasn’t yet grown accustomed to the willingness of a frequent bedmate.

“You’re the most handsome man I ever seen,” Dick says, staring up into Josiah’s eyes. He’s no poet, but he means it from the heart. He’d thought it the first time he laid eyes on Josiah. Perhaps he’d been fated to fall in love with the man no matter the circumstance, or Billy was right that Josiah was meant to turn heads from the start.

“Flatterer,” Josiah says. He mouths a kiss against Dick’s shoulder, his hair tickling against Dick’s skin in the wake of his lips. Their bodies rock together now in rhythm, syncopation falling away when the growing urge for more makes Dick leverage his hips up, aiming both to get his cock to rub against the flat stretch of Josiah’s belly, and to let Josiah plunge ever deeper inside him.

Josiah’s breath carries the trembling echo of a moan, and the steady pace he’d been keeping falters, turning into an erratic snap of his hips. He lever an arm under the crook of Dick’s knee, teeth finding the curve of Dick’s neck in a bite that promises to bruise. The slap of their bodies meeting is nearly lost beneath the sound Dick can’t stop making: the keening pours out of him, interrupted only by the occasional heavy panting groan from Josiah. The noise fills the empty bunkhouse to the rafters, reverberates back to soak into his skin, carnal and tender in turns like the pace of their lovemaking.

When Josiah hits his peak, he doesn’t slow, he fumbles a hand between them, his fingers curling around Dick’s cock and tugging desperately to see him finish in turn, whispering an urgent wish to feel Dick’s seed spill warm and wet between them. A stroke or two more and he’s there, arching against Josiah’s grip and the fullness still seated deep inside him.

Slowly, trading unhurried kisses that are less about tasting one another than simply feeling the slide of their lips, they peel apart, and they lay facing one another until their breathing evens out.

The chill of the air creeps back and with it, Dick’s mind stirs again. The flurry of questions about the future is blessedly dampened by the lingering lassitude that comes with being well fucked.

“This bunk isn’t big enough for the both of us,” Josiah says, twirling a lock of Dick’s hair around his finger. He doesn’t seem in a hurry to see Dick retreat to his own bed however.

“We could push two of ‘em together,” Dick suggests, slowly extricating himself lest he lose the will to move entirely.

“How about three?” Josiah says, throwing a pointed glance towards Chavez’s bunk. Presuming he didn’t run into trouble on the way to the border, it’ll be a few days before Chavez makes it back.

Despite his best intentions, Dick falls into kissing Josiah all over again. “How about three…,” he echoes, marveling at the idea.

* *

In the morning, Dick’s up before first light as he always is. He’s got a crook in his neck from trying his damnedest to prove that Josiah’s bunk was indeed big enough for the both of them. He slips out from under the heavy trap of Josiah’s arm and hastily fetches his clothes, dressing as quickly as he can as his skin turns to gooseflesh in the frosty morning air.
Bundled in his heaviest coat, he leaves the bunkhouse to watch the sun come up. A pack of coyotes howl somewhere in the distance, and he breathes into his cupped hands. The blaze of color that creeps into the sky never fails to amaze him, beautiful in all its variations.

He looks southward, whispers a prayer that Chavez finds his way home safely, and sees that inside the main house, a lamp’s been lit. John’s awake and will be looking to have breakfast ready for him.

The chickens aren’t laying, so Dick goes straight for the woodpile. He’ll heat the stove and start a pot of coffee boiling, a morning routine that’s as familiar as anything. Now that he knows his part, it’s an easy enough one to play.

And later today, or maybe the next, it’ll be no great surprise when John comes home from town with another stray in tow. Another wayward soul that might have more answers in him than Billy did.

After all, waiting around killing time is half the life of a cowboy. And if this is what his story is meant to be, according to Josiah’s rule, as it stands right now, well, it’s one worth telling.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!