

Bad Man's Horse
By: Jeff Reylee

It was a cool breezy morning. Ominous thunder clouds loomed off in the distance. It would be hot soon. Donnie rolled over onto his back and looked up at the sky. Already he could feel wisps of warm air mixing with the cold air he had endured throughout the night. The sun was rising, but was blocked by the huge clouds. He had little energy and it took a bit of effort to even sit up. He rubbed his face and yawned, noting this was the beginning of day six with nothing to eat. He stared blankly at the glowing orange clouds. "Iron Wood falls couldn't be far off," he thought frustratingly to himself. He stood up and looked about. "I must have wandered off course. Hell, I could be anywhere." He raised his arms and tried to stretch out the kinks in his back and neck. Five nights sleeping on the ground were taking its toll. He lifted his shirt and noted three more welts on his side. Spider bites he presumed. "What to do, what to do, what to do," he murmured under his breath. To travel by day or by night? It was just getting too hot during the day. He decided to continue until it was too hot, hunker down in the shade throughout the afternoon, and continue during the evening. Seemed like a sound plan under the circumstances. He clutched his canteen contemplating whether to take a drink. He knew there wasn't much left. He was lucky to have it at all being he had to run for his life five days ago. He had no gun, no knife, no blanket, and no food. No horse. And, his right boot had formed a small hole in the bottom. But, at least he had a canteen. He chuckled to himself, and resisted the urge to take a drink. It didn't work. He found himself lifting the canteen. Two gulps. Empty. His thirst was quenched for only a moment. His stomach soon cramped and his head felt light. He now realized he was in trouble. He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. A sense of panic began to come over him, but he shook his head and refocused. His next thought was to look carefully at the landscape. Any sign of water. His eyes scanned slowly, deliberately. He spotted a few clusters of trees a few miles off. Nothing that suggested a river or stream. He kept scanning. Scanning. Then, something. Eyes focusing intensely, an object caught his attention. Could it be? A structure of some kind. Something was there. Perhaps he had been suffering from delirium, but there it was. Or maybe it was his imagination, but it sure looked real. Without hesitation he began walking towards it. The terrain was uneven, and a direct line was difficult, but he dared not allow it to leave his sight. It was quite far away and seemed changeless as he walked. The sun finally peaked above the clouds behind him, and the structure seemed to dim. He kept walking. For a time it seemed to disappear, but finally appeared, this time larger. It was a barn of some kind. He had been traveling for about two hours and it was hot. The dryness in his mouth and cramping stomach kept him motivated. He stumbled down a ravine and struggled to ascend the demanding hill, but as he reached the crest the barn came into clear sight. He stopped to catch his breath. A distinct joy came over him. He realized it may not mean water was in his near future, but it meant something. A patch of trees presented themselves before him hiding the barn, but when he emerged it lay before him. There was an old fence marking a boundary. He stopped at the fence and looked carefully for signs of life. Nothing. No sounds, no cattle, no horses, nothing. Thirst led him over the fence. He approached the barn and stopped at its entrance. "Hello. "Hello, is there anyone in there?" Nothing. He entered the barn. Nothing special. A loft, hay bails. He noted the supply of hay seemed about half used meaning there had been activity. He contemplated whether to wait for someone to come along or move on. Water was now the priority. He looked about. A bucket, a well, a trough, anything! Nothing. The place was dry. How could that be? In a moment of agonizing frustration he went back into the barn. He'd had enough. He found a bed of hay and lay down, as if to die. He made his peace and closed his eyes and fell into a dead man's sleep.

His eyes opened. There was no bright light welcoming him to heaven, only something jabbing his side. He reached under his lower back and pulled up a hay spade. The light had changed. It was early evening. He stood to his feet with no feeling of renewal and a mouth as dry as the hay he had slept on. A short walk outside revealed a dirt path that led away from the barn. There was urgency in his steps as the barn disappeared behind him. It was a lonely path hidden under oak trees boasting no signs of civilization. His steps became stumbly as his progress slowed. He was at the end of his rope. Collapse seemed inevitable. He stopped. There was a slight breeze howling in the trees that seemed peaceful enough to be his final memory. He sought a good place to die. It became important at that moment to find an appropriate final resting place. He looked around him intent on choosing his spot. It was utterly quiet save for the breeze.

Suddenly his eyes popped wide open. To his right the path rolled downward and emitted the unmistakable sound of a brook. The joyful trickle of water filled his ears as a symphony drawing him like a magnet down the slope. Crashing through the thick brush guarding this miracle he arrived with panting breath and beheld his salvation. It was a brook, and its water danced playfully offering life. Somehow he found the strength and presence of mind NOT to jump into the water. He had heard stories of parched men drinking too quickly and sickening the stomach. He sat down next to the water and cupped his hands. Indulging in a small sip he only moistened his mouth which was so dry that the water stung the cracks in his lips. A second helping of water crashed upon his face, then a second, and a third. After a few small sips he immersed his canteen, filling it about half way. Leaning back he smiled and offered his dying body a long guzzle. He was almost instantly renewed. It was as if lightning had struck him. He laughed as a child, splashing in the water and reveled in it as if it were gold. He saw no reason to leave this spot which a few moments ago would have been his deathbed, now his Garden of Eden. An hour went by as he drank to his content. It was getting dark as he lay back, alive, and ready for his finest sleep. It was a sleep with no interruption, an unconscious bliss that healed his body, his soul, and his forgotten hope. A close call to say the least.

Donnie awoke to gusts of high morning wind. Seeing to it that his canteen was full and lapping up an excess of water he walked back up the path. A storm seemed to be coming. He kept to the path for a good half mile, seeing no houses. Then, the road split. The path continued to his left and a wider road took to the right. The wider road seemed more inviting. As he walked the terrain became more forested. Logic told him at some point this would lead to some sort of civilization. Finally, to his great relief a ranch appeared, then another. He saw men on horses off in a distant meadow. The road winded down and connected to another even wider road revealing a vast valley. This road showed signs of fresh horse and stagecoach tracks. His pace quickened. Off in the distance he could see a town! His stride became exuberant. There was no need to ration his water now. Half the content of the canteen was soon down the hatch. Winds began picking up resembling more of a wind storm than rain, and then a distant sign appeared. As he approached the sign, it read, "Welcome to Iron Wood Falls, Population 232." A great sigh of relief.

This town bore the usual feature of one main street running the length of the town with buildings on either side. There were, however, several smaller streets running parallel that served as small neighborhoods. There was also an unusual feature in the middle; a giant flowing fountain with sitting benches around it. As the wind storm increased a lone weary figure emerged at the town entrance. Donnie's pace slowed as he entered the town. He saw no one. It was early. The first building to his right was a saloon, "The Seaside." Unusual, an ocean themed saloon out in the desert complete with fishing nests draped across the walls, buoys, a carving of a pirates face above the entrance, and wooden seagulls mounted on the porch banister. He could only imagine what it looked like inside. It looked closed. He continued down the street passing a shoe shop, a small restaurant called "Ma Belles," and a building made of bottles that seemed to have no purpose. Then, another bar. "Will's Fills." He walked up the steps and peered through the saloon doors. He didn't see anybody so he sat on a bench outside. There was a barber across the way and he could see someone moving about inside. The first sign of life. He took another gulp from his canteen. He heard some ruckus inside and looked once again into the bar. It was the bartender. A middle aged balding man scurrying about at some unknown task. He entered. "Mornin," the man blurted out. He sounded friendly enough. Donnie approached the bar and took a seat. "What can I get "cha," the man asked, drying his wet hands. "Oh, I'm not a customer, Sir. And, I don't mean to bother you, but"... The bartender took on a concerned expression and leaned in closer, "But what, sonny?" He could now see that the young man in front of him looked a bit off. Donnie shifted in his seat. "Well, I ain't had a lick to eat in six days. I was wondering if I could do some work for you for something to eat." "Hmm, we don't serve food here, but I got some bread in the back, if ya sweep the porch you're welcome to it." "That's sure kind of you, mister." The bartender handed Donnie a broom. A bit of kindness.

Sweeping the porch proved a bit futile with the gusty winds, but Donnie did his best, anyway. The bartender could see he was trying and came out and stopped him. He handed him a half loaf of bread and told him to come back tomorrow morning and finish the job. He thanked the man and assured him he'd be back. Not knowing where to go he sat on the bench in front of the saloon and started eating. It was the first sustenance since the awful events that took place six days ago at Gavin's Ranch. What he didn't know is how the news had traveled, and how big the story was. Despite the high winds, activity began to emerge

on the street. Store owners were opening shops, and cowboys scurried up and down the street. Across the street a couple doors down from the barber an oriental man swept the porch of his restaurant, The Pot Belly. The bread was delightful, but the aroma coming from that direction was mesmerizing. A plume of smoke wisped from atop its roof. Whatever he was cooking in there he wanted some, but he had no money. He felt discouraged. He had no idea what to do at this point. Despite the bread he had a lowness of energy. He still needed a good meal. He drank some more of the brook water in his canteen. It would not be long and he'd have to refill it. He looked around. The fountain down the street seemed like a possible source. He gave out a big sigh. Just then three men on horses stopped at the saloon. Tying their horses the men walked up and entered- the third pausing and giving him a stinky eye. Donnie looked away. They looked rough. They reminded him of the kind of men he worked with at Gavin's ranch. The kind of men he had grown to despise. "They're everywhere," he spoke under his breath. At that moment he noticed two men walking up the street to his left. One of them was distinguished in that he was tall and carried himself with a swagger that denoted a man of importance. Then he saw the badge. It was the sheriff. His deputy was presumably the man walking with him. Donnie kept himself still trying not to draw attention to himself. No luck, the big man started heading right towards him. He made no eye contact with him until he had walked right up to him. At that moment he heard someone in the distance say, "morning sheriff," at which he turned and replied back in a friendly manner. The distraction was a bit uncomfortable as Donnie waited to be addressed. "Good morning." "Good morning," Donnie replied. "New in town?" "Ah, yes sir, just came in this morning." There was a pause as the sheriff looked up, noting the winds. "What brings you to Iron Wood?" "Looking for work," he quickly replied. "You mind telling me where you came in from?" The big man with the badge was too intimidating for Donnie to handle. In an instant he reasoned that he had nothing to hide, but he was not interested in getting caught up in the issue. He realized it may be unavoidable. Calmly he replied. "Levitt," sir. The Sheriff cocked his head slightly, "Levitt, you say. Isn't that where the ruckus took place on the Gavin Ranch?" "Ah, yes sir, I believe so." The Sheriff backed up a bit and stood up tall, "you wouldn't mind stepping into my office? I have a few questions for you."

Donnie walked in front of the lawman and stepped inside. He was instructed to have a seat and the door was closed. He sat down, clearly nervous. He could see three jail cells. His heart began to pound. "I'm Sheriff Michel Stanton, and I can see you're nervous, but as of right now you aren't in any trouble- I just want to talk to you." "Yes Sir." Stanton's initial impression of the young man before him was not the trouble making type, and he had no interest in alarming the lad. The sheriff sat heavy in his desk chair and offered Donnie some coffee. He accepted. Stanton took a few savory sips before speaking. "Now, let's see. You say you just came in from Levitt?" Donnie nodded. What's your name son?" "Donnie Richards." "Any relation to Keith Richards?" "No sir." "Figured not, he's a fiddle player out in Warmington, owns a goat farm now." Taking another sip of coffee Stanton sat back and asked, "Do you know anything about what happened out there?" "Yes. I was there. Old man Gavin got killed, burned alive in his own house. "Well, that's what we heard around here. You wouldn't have had anything to do with that." "Oh, no Sir. I was just a ranch hand. The men that did it threatened me and I took off runnin. Kept going till I got here. Almost died of thirst along the way." "I see." The Sheriff leaned in close. "Now, you wouldn't lie to me about something like that would you?" "No I would not. Those men back there are the worst men I ever met. Evil if ya ask me." The Sheriff stood up. "Mr. Richards, you're not under arrest, but I'd like to ask you to stay a while whilst we figure things out. Word has it that the men who did this are on the run and may be heading this way. "You mean you want me to stay here?" "That's right. Don't worry, we won't lock you in. Besides you'll get a free meal, and you look like you could use it." Donnie agreed. What choice did he have? He calmly stepped into the first cell on the left and sat on a rickety old stool next to the bed. The Deputy escorted him in and closed the barred door, but did not lock it, leaving it an inch open. Stanton walked over. "Don't you worry, I'll have Ma Belle bring you up a plate. "Understand son, I'm just trying to protect my town." Donnie just sat there rubbing his eyes and nodded slightly. Stanton sat at his desk for a few minutes shuffling through some papers and sipped his coffee. He had never been in a jail cell before. About an hour passed and he heard someone enter the office. A heavy set woman greeted the Sheriff and approached the jail cell. She opened the cell door and set a large plate on his lap. The cell had no table. "Hear you go deary," the woman said to him in a sweet mother-like voice. She left him with an awkward, yet friendly smile, and set the door back to its original position, then spent a few moments making small talk with the Sheriff. Donnie gazed upon the plate, marveling at what he beheld. A large leg of chicken was the centerpiece with mashed potatoes, baked beans, and green beans

encircling it. A mushy piece of pie lay careless between the green beans and potatoes. He dove in. He decided early on that this was by far the most satisfying meal he had ever had. Without noticing the woman returned with a tall glass of milk and a second piece of pie, which turned out to be peach cobbler. "Mmm, thank you", he said to her, taking a moment to compliment her cooking. He could not finish it all; his stomach had shrunk over the last six days. He placed the unfinished portion on the stool, and laid down on the cot, which sagged considerably as he gave it his full weight. Belly full he prepared himself for a nap. "Things could be worse," he thought to himself as he began to drift off. Then, he heard a low booming voice break the silence. "Mr. Richards, could you come out here please."

Donnie had entered sleep enough that the Sheriff's voice gave him a startle. He rose promptly and sat in a chair across the Sheriff, the desk seeming larger than necessary. Reaching for a cup Stanton gave a spit of tobacco and leaned forward, both elbows on the table. "So, can you tell me what happened at the Gavin Ranch?" Donnie was silent. Ratting those men out seemed frightful. Stanton's face turned to stone, "It's important, son." Donnie looked down to his lap and nodded. With a sigh, "Well...Mr. Gavin got burned alive in his own house." "Do you know who did it? Did you see who did it?" "Yes, I did." Stanton shifted in his chair. "Why don't you tell me what happened. Donnie hesitated. With a gulp he stated: "There were three men involved, that I know of, and I saw them do it. It was just after dark. The men walked up to his house and pounded on his door." "Where were you?" "I was across the way in the stable." "What were you doing there?" "It's where I slept." Stanton looked at him suspiciously, "Why is that?" "Well...that's where they made me sleep." "Who's we?" "Everyone." "Even Gavin? The man you worked for?" Donnie nodded shamefully. "Go on." "Mr. Gavin opened the door, and they talked. Then, there was some yellin. Mr. Gavin didn't seem happy with them, and told them to get off his property." The Sheriff asked, "do you know what he was unhappy about?" "No sir", Donnie answered sternly. "Do you know these men?" "In a way." The Sheriff's eyes narrowed, "Go on." "Well, I knew them mostly from going into Levitt running errands for Mr. Gavin. You see, I was never much of a ranch hand so I ended up the stable boy, and ran errands for him. "What kind of errands." "Mostly picking up supplies, and sometimes to deliver notes to people, including those men." "What kind of messages?" "That I do not know, I never read them." Stanton sat back searching for his next question. Donnie continued, "I hated going into town. Those guys were never nice to me. They were abrasive, ruffians, and cruel. They picked on me something terrible. "Did you report this to your boss?" Donnie raised his voice slightly, "of course not. Mr. Gavin saw me as a weakling, and wasn't much better than they were. But, I had nothing to do with what those men did to him." "Do you know their names?" Donnie froze. There was a long silence. Sheriff Stanton sat like an oak, silent. More silence passed. Donnie began to fidget in his chair. Stanton continued his silent gaze which finally broke Donnie's willpower. His voice cracked as he spoke, "Rizzo. I think he is kind of the leader. Another they called Billy Bill. The third I did not recognize. The Sheriff shuffled through some papers and presented them to Donnie. "You mean these fellers?" They were wanted posters. It was them alright. Except one. Donnie pulled one aside, "this ain't Billy Bill, but these other two are them." Stanton nodded. "Well, they are wanted by the law. When they are caught we may need your testimony. I know you're scared, but I need to know what you saw." Donnie continued, "Mr. Gavin slammed the door on them. They walked away but stopped at the ranch gate and talked for quite a while. They went back towards the house and yelled out to him, "this is your last chance Gavin!" They said that a couple more times. Then they left. I lied down and figured it was over. Then, about an hour later they came back." Stanton asked, "You didn't talk to Gavin after they left?" "No. Figured it was none of my business. Mr. Gavin was always arguing with people. The only way I got by around there was to just keep to myself." "What happened when they came back, Stanton asked?" "They were quieter this time. I was able to peek around the stable corner and I could see they had a container of some kind. I just decided to stay hid. Next thing I knew I could hear the flames. I got real scared. Then I heard them coming my way and they started burning the stable. Once I saw the smoke I ran. I guess I panicked. I grabbed a canteen hanging on the back wall of the stable and ran. I tried to stay out of sight, but they saw me. They chased me into the darkness, but I got away." Stanton looked at him with disapproval and asked, "you didn't even try to help Gavin?" "What could I have done? I don't have a gun. They-da killed me." Stanton stood up and gestured to him to stand up as well. "Mr. Richards, I appreciate your testimony. I think for your own protection I'm gonna need to keep you here. The Marshall's going to need to hear your testimony as well. Might be a few days. I think you are telling me the truth, so you're not under arrest, but I want you to stay here. I'm simply detaining you." Donnie agreed, but part of him wanted to get out and keep running.

“They will kill me, Sheriff.” Stanton assured him he would be safe there, and led him back into the cell, door un-locked.

Life inside was not so bad. The food was terrific, and a few niceties were provided which included two books and a pouch of chewing tobacco. He was also allowed to sweep the bar owner's porch, keeping his commitment. The Deputy, Nate Parker, came in to talk with him from time to time. One morning the Sheriff informed him that the Marshall had been delayed and had requested written testimony. Apparently, there was a man hunt taking place looking for the men. Donnie obliged and did his best to recall his experience at the ranch. With that he was released upon the agreement that he stay in town. Being that he had no job or money a local ranch owner, Bill Sumner, offered to take him in and help him get on his feet. He walked out of the jail around ten in the morning and was instructed on how to find the Sumner's Ranch. The ranch was nearby. Right down the street, in fact. Making his way to the fountain, and going left, down Oakbranch Street, the ranch entrance was readily visible. It was a pleasant stroll. It was a neighborhood. Houses on each side of the street, well groomed yards and great big oak trees everywhere. He had not seen anything like this in this part of the desert. The street was not particularly long and he soon reached the end. There was a big gate, which was open, and a prominent wood sign hanging atop the entrance stating, “Sumner Ranch.” Entering the property there were no signs of structure, just a sloping dirt road that led around a bluff. Coming around the bluff the ranch became visible. There was a large dirt lot with an old broken down wagon as its center piece. To the left there were two horse corals. To the right what looked like guest houses. Small. In the center was the ranch house and next to that, what looked like some kind of shop. Donnie approached the house with an ere of self consciousness. His approach would be clearly visible. The Somner's should be expecting him. As he walked up the house he noticed it was a well groomed front yard, lots of flowers, and plenty of yard ornaments. A low fence guarded its entrance that led to an elevated porch. As he got to the house he heard someone whistle at him. He looked to the left and saw a man wearing a leather shop bib emerge from the shop, wiping off his hands. “You that Richards fella?” “Yes Sir,” Donnie answered with enthusiasm. Despite his attempt to clean his hands there was considerable gunk on them, and when the man extended his hand Donnie hesitated, but reached out to shake it. “The name's Drake. Mr. Sumner is out, and I was instructed to put you to work. Being we got plenty of help 'round here there ain't much to do at the moment, so I'm gonna send you to speak with the Mrs's, but she went into town for a spell. You can head over to your guest cottage. It's round the corner, in the back. Number four. I'll holler if I need you for something. Donnie thanked the man and walked around the house. To the right was a well tree'd area with six identical cottages. Number four was in the back row. The door was unlocked. He let himself in and was pleasantly surprised at its interior. Well appointed, it featured a bed with linens, a table with two chairs, a small wood stove, a small set of dishes and utensils, an oil lantern and some candles, curtains on the two small windows, and towels hanging on the wall. He sat on the bed. The mattress was of good quality. It was in fact, the finest bed he had available to him in a long time. The prison cell mattress was awful. Before that he had slept for almost a week on the ground, and before that he slept in the hay inside a horse stable. He did not know what he did to deserve this, but for now he would take advantage of this opportunity to get some rest. After trying out the chairs inside he opened the door and sat on a chair on the small porch in front of the cottage. It was shady and a comforting breeze blew through the giant oaks surrounding the cottages. He figured if he stayed inside he would end up falling asleep so he sat outside waiting for Mrs. Somner to return. Moments later he was asleep on the chair. A much needed sleep began to set in. In that sleep he entered into a disturbing dream with the terror of a man burning alive, and the prospect of evil men doing him harm to him. The dream awoke him briefly. As he drifted into a more relaxed sleep, a distant whistle snapped him awake. He rose quickly and walked around to the front of the house. Drake was standing outside the shop and motioned him to go inside the house. A carriage was parked in front. He stepped up to the front door which was adorned with a wreath of fresh cut flowers and knocked. A few moments passed and he considered knocking again. He raised his hand to the door as it opened. A woman answered. “Oh, you must be the young man we've been hearing about, please come in.” Donnie followed her and they sat down in a living room which faced the front yard, curtains open. It was a beautiful home. Perhaps the nicest he had ever seen. He felt too dirty to sit on the couch. Mrs. Sumner noticed his hesitation and assured him it was ok. They sat down and she got right down to business. “So, the Sheriff told us the whole story and asked if we could help out. He's my brother. He told me keeping you busy would be a good way to help get you back on your feet and keep you here in town. As she spoke to Donnie she felt

relaxed, seeing he had an honest face and good manners. He did not seem like the others. She also knew her brother would not send somebody over that he did not trust. "I take it you have met Drake?" "Yes Ma'am. He told me there wasn't much work at the moment." "Oh, don't listen to him. He's a grumpy 'ol coot. He will warm up to you. Tell you what, I could use some help around here. Seems like all the help works around the ranch, but I never get any help. What do you say?" "Whatever you want me to do," he answered. She led him to the back yard. To his surprise he beheld a lush garden. Not the kind of thing one expects to see in this harsh climate. She gave him the tour. It soon became clear that Mrs. Somner had a fondness for flowers. She put him to work in the garden and had him do some household chores as well. She kept him busy. It was easy work compared to being a stable hand, plus she fed him. She instructed him to report for work at 9am, payday is on Friday. She was a nice lady. Her kindness was a welcomed change from the sorts of people he was accustomed to. Three days passed. He was looking forward to getting his first pay, and had made himself at home in the cottage. He had become acquainted with some of the other workers, including Drake, who was starting to give him some tasks. Overall it was fairly easy work. One evening after chow, he settled in the cottage reading a book. A familiar sound broke the silence. Cowboys. The men must be back from the cattle drive. He was tempted to go out and see what was going on, but he already knew. His heart sank realizing he was the new guy, and the new guy is always made to feel like the new guy. Everywhere he had ever worked this had been the case. Why should this be any different? He chose to stay inside because there would be plenty of opportunities to deal with it tomorrow. He sat back in a chair and leaned against the wall. He began to think about his desire to one day rid himself of life around a ranch. He had other plans. One day he'd buy his own little bit of land and just keep to himself. The thought fell heavy upon him. The stomping of horses and shouts of men slowly gave way to silence. Then there were voices. Someone was coming. Up until now he was the lone cottage inhabitant, but not anymore. Several men had arrived to take refuge, and judging from the overall tone they were typical of their breed. He felt vulnerable. With a sigh he made every effort not to draw any attention and listened to the ruckus tones late into the night.

A rooster's crow woke him. Activity sprang to life as the cow hands started their day. Knowing his day started at nine, he afforded himself a few more hours of sleep. Not knowing exactly what to expect today brought on a sense of hesitation and non-enthusiasm. Donnie knew what lay in store. He knew he would not fit in and dreaded the inevitable discomfort. He felt boxed in. He was not allowed to leave town because of something he had nothing to do with, and was placed in an environment he wanted no part of. Donnie made a resolution that he would endeavor to find a way to rid himself of situations like this. His mind focused on buying his property. Someday. Unlike the last three mornings there was much activity. There were horses being broken in the corral. A small herd of cattle were marching across the front field—good looking cattle, a beef herd no doubt. The pounding of steel emanated from Drake's shop, and a few clusters of cowboys engaged in unknown discussions. He made the short walk to the side gate of the ranch house. Despite his attempt to keep a low profile he noticed a few heads turn. He entered the gate. Normally Mrs. Sumner was there to greet him, but this morning she was nowhere to be seen. Waiting a bit it became evident she wasn't there. He went to talk to Drake. He entered the shop and found him pounding away on a horse shoe. He stood at the door trying to be polite and wait for him to finish up. Drake all but ignored him. Finally Drake stopped what he was doing. Donnie spoke, "Hey, I don't know what I should be doing this morning." Drake scratched his forehead. "Go see Mr. Sumner, he's around here somewhere." Donnie had never even seen the man, but went off looking for him. It didn't take long. Across the lot a short portly man wearing new clothes with a giant silver belt buckle half visible under his belly came walking out of the barn with two other men who were visibly his subordinates. "Must be him," Donnie thought to himself. He wanted nothing to do with him. He reminded him of Mr. Gavin in some ways— in that he was shrewd, rude, and held no reservations about throwing his authority around. "Is there some factory somewhere that spits these people out," he spoke under his breath, giving himself a chuckle. Donnie wanted to just walk away, but he needed a payday. He could hear Mr. Sumner yelling at the men, who looked rude and shrewd in their own right. The boss man began stomping across the yard mumbling under his breath. He rustled up some courage and intercepted the man. "Excuse me sir. I'm Donnie Richards. The Sheriff sent me here to work." Without missing a step and only briefly glancing at him Mr. Sumner waved his hand indicating that he should follow him. Donnie walked behind the man and followed him between the house and shop out past the backyard and up a small bluff. "Can you mend fences?" "Yes, Sir." "Good. This fence runs about a mile and needs tending. You can find the materials in that shop

down there.” Sumner then gave Donnie a look over as if measuring him in some way. “I’m doing the Sheriff a favor. I expect you to give me my money’s worth.” Donnie nodded confidently. He felt a bit relieved. At least he’d be working alone. It was a long fence, though. As fast as he had appeared the chubby man walked away. Donnie stood surveying the landscape in front of him, then walked down the bluff and entered the shop. Drake was not there. He looked about, but did not see the materials he needed. Puzzled, he began to look around and found a back area. There it was. Rolls of barbed wire, p-line, clippers and gloves. He then heard some commotion behind him and a voice that rang out, “what are doing back there!” “Oh, Mr. Sumner told me to do some fence mendin.” Drake paused, “You best get started,” his tone denoting a weak sense of authority. He realized he was smack-dab in the middle of the all-to-familiar world of the “pecking order,” and as usual he was at the very bottom.

Donnie dragged himself up the bluff with a large roll of barbed wire over his shoulder and dropped it down next to the fence. He began to walk along the border and noted that the fence was in pretty bad shape. He had done this sort of thing before. “Nothing to it,” he said to himself. About a hundred feet down the line he realized he needed a post driver. Some of the posts needed re-seating. He had to walk back to retrieve one. About half way through the day he realized getting to the end of the fence was not realistic. He contented himself knowing the work was being done right, but not necessarily fast. He was not told that he needed to reach the end of the fence today. By the time he heard the dinner bell, which was quite faint, he had made it about three quarters the way. He gathered his materials and made the walk back. After putting things away he could hear chatter coming from the mess room which was adjacent to the shop. The aroma that filled the air made his stomach ache just a bit. There had been no lunch bell, not that he had heard anyway, and his canteen was empty. Needless to say he was hungry. No one had told him he was welcome to partake in the collective dinner, but reasoned he was. Entering the room it became clear he was a late arrival. The eyes of about ten desert hardened men cast their gaze upon him, filling him with anxiety and communicating to him the silent language of hierarchy. The unavoidable moment had come. Donnie was too hungry to care and walked to the food table and filled his plate. He had played this game before and knew the importance of NOT looking uncomfortable. He knew any sign of weakness would be exploited. Without hesitation he took a seat at the very end of the table, looked up, gave a respective nod and began eating. Appearance was everything. Being overly or underlie sociable would be inviting trouble. Now, conventional wisdom dictates that one must adapt to the laws of the jungle when among animals. One might presume humans would have evolved beyond this level of existence, but past experience had taught him this was far from the case. Life in the west was really a life in the jungle. Donnie ate his meal quietly and waited patiently. It would come. Nothing happened. For an instant he entertained the idea that perhaps this bunch was different, perhaps. He casually looked about the room. Nope. Same thing as always. This group was no different. He learned to pick ’em out. The two guys across from him were followers. They would not start the trouble, but once it started they would join in. The guy sitting across him in the middle of the table was the problem. They almost always sit in the middle. It’s some kind of power move making them appear in the center of things. He was a rough looking feller with a note of intelligence in his eyes. While problematic these types can be reasonable. It was the one next to him that Donnie knew was the real problem. Obviously the partner to the intelligent one, this man was equally rough looking but had the tell tale lifeless eyes that make these types most dangerous. They have no heart. No soul. Predictably it was that man that was staring at him. The rest of the guys seemed fairly docile. It was the guy sitting to his right that spoke to him first. “Names Randy.” “Donnie.” The two men shook hands. Randy’s hand was dry and cracked, and squeezed with a thundering force. “I heard you was held up in jail for a spell.” “Ya, that’s right, a few days,” Donnie answered matter of factly. “Well, welcome aboard, that’s Trevor and Kyle, (he pointed to men in the middle), then he introduced the rest, their names he quickly forgot. Randy stood up and went for seconds. Kyle, the soulless, continued his stare. Donnie understood the purpose of this custom. It’s an age-old ritual designed to test the new recruit, one that requires an antagonist. The idea is to antagonize the “fresh meat” into producing a reaction, thus evaluating his character. It gives the group a basis on which to place the new person into the hierarchy. If you are strong and stand up to yourself you stand a much better chance of gaining respect and position. It weeds out the weak and justifies the necessary bullying that serves as a kind of sport for the stronger members. It also gives the semi-strong a stage in which to prove themselves to their superiors. This method works well in prisons, pirate ships, mining camps, ranches, anywhere men work together. It’s time tested and in reality works quite well. Well enough to build, odd as it may seem, a civilized world.

Donnie weighed his options. He could react with a customary “what are you looking at,” or “can I help you with something,” or even the dreaded “do you have a problem?” Or, he could take on a more passive approach and simply ignore the man, OR, try to speak to him rationally. He had found none of these approaches worked particularly well for him. The last time he tried to stand up to himself he ended up with a pair of broken ribs. Another incident got his horse stolen. Passiveness, while generally protecting him from harm, only led to things like having to sleep in the stable and never being promoted. Before he had a chance to choose his tactic Kyle broke the tension. “Hey, you that jailbird we been hearing about.” Donnie fought for an answer, but the man continued, leaning forward and taking on a clearly sarcastic tone, “was you the one that set that man's house on fire?” There was silence. Everyone in the room remained quiet, awaiting Donnie’s response. He held his tongue. Kyle sat back, “nay, you ain’t the type. Word is that you went off runnin.” He then looked around the room and announced, “looks like we got us a coward boys!” The room filled with raucous laughter. Donnie’s heart was pounding as he struggled to respond. If he were a man, a strong man, he would issue a challenge. The theory is that even if you lose, it proves you're tough and earns you some respect. Under different circumstances he might have done so, but considering he did not really want to be there in the first place, essentially being forced to be there, he hadn’t the motivation. Instead, Donnie went back to eating his dinner. Kyle was about to say something when Trevor stepped in, “can’t you see jail bird just wants to enjoy his meal? Kyle looked over at his partner and stated, “Why, I think you're right. We wouldn’t want to make him mad.” He then gave out a condescending laugh and walked out of the room raising his voice, “come on Trevor, we got a poker game to attend!” Trevor smiled, “don’t look so glum son; he just wants to be friends.” With that, he left the room. Donnie felt small, but acted like it didn’t shake him. Randy sat back down and told him not to let them bother him. “That’s just how they are. “I know the type,” Donnie said grimly. He finished his food and made a quick exit. Pecking order...

He was angry with himself. A list of “should have done's” grew in his mind. What did it matter? The truth is that strong people are respected, envied. The difference is that there are strong people who use their power ethically, and those who abuse it. The abusers seem to outnumber the ethical, especially in these lands. Taking refuge in the cottage he enjoyed the comfort of a bed and a mouth full of tobacco. It helped soothe the sting of indignation he was feeling. He swept the floor and tidied up until the tobacco lost its flavor and lay down. He managed to keep things in perspective as he drifted off to sleep- he had a job, he had a roof over his head, and he felt relatively safe, being there were tyrants on the loose who would likely kill him if they saw him. It was not long before his sleep was interrupted. Now that the men were back from the cattle drive the other cottages were inhabited and the unmistakable activity of drunkenness filled the air. Typically ranch hands are held to a “no drinking” policy during the work week, which is to say, “No getting drunk.” Getting drunk should be reserved for days off, if you can get one. He could hear what sounded like a couple men lurking around in the dark. He faintly heard the words “jail bird.” Apparently they were trying to determine what cottage he was in. He pretended to ignore the threat hoping it would go away. It worked. He woke up again much later in the night and found only silence. No matter how bad these guys were they were not likely as bad as the men that burned down the Gavin ranch. In that sense he was not particularly intimidated by these men, he had seen worse. Determined to earn his keep and make some money he finished his slumber.

A couple of weeks passed and Donnie earned some money. He was being underpaid, but he kept quiet about it. He had expected to hear from the Sheriff about his order to stay in town, but up until now there was no word. Donnie reasoned that if he could just earn enough to buy a horse and a few supplies he could ride out of here soon. It’s not that Iron Wood Falls was not a nice town, but he had other ambitions. His plan was to ride to Clarks Bluff and try his hand at gold prospecting. It had become a hotspot and prospectors were doing well, at least for now. It seemed a good way of (maybe) getting the property he desired. His mind was set on it, and it served as motivation to keep working at the ranch. Things were getting difficult, however. Most of his labor was going into Mrs. Somner’s garden which earned him the new nickname “flower boy.” He grew to resent the term. Everyone got made fun of around there, it was part of the needling which the guys exchanged, and it was a normal thing. This new name was more than he could bear, and one day he lashed out. One of the “lesser” cowboys was going on and on with the term and Donnie shoved him. A fight ensued, which he lost, unable to land any significant blows. It was an embarrassing performance, and in the end he took a shot to the nose that made his eyes tear up so bad he could hardly see. He was then thrown to the ground, knocking the wind out of him. In the end he was

forced to eat dirt and was ridiculed. He got nothing good out of the exchange, and nothing changed. He resolved to just put up with it a few more weeks until he could buy a horse. It wasn't just the horse. He needed everything: a saddle, rope, reins, and at least a rifle, and enough food to get him to Clarks Bluff, a distant ride. He was saving all his money, but decided to go into town one night to get a beer. He walked through the neighborhood and stopped at the fountain. There were a few bars to choose from. It was a Saturday night and each bar was full. He thought better of going to those places, so he went into "Pot Belly." A fella by the name of Yin owned the place. The place was not busy and besides having great food also offered a small bar. Delighted to see the place was nearly empty he entered and sat at the small bar. Only one other guy was sitting there, at the far end and obviously drunk, talking to himself and just as happy as could be. Eager for a drink there was no sign of the bartender. Unlike the saloons across the street this was a restaurant with a bar. He counted six tables with quite fancy oriental table cloths that when new must have been top quality, now faded and over used. Most of the wall decorations bore the same quality. Two couples occupied the eating area with near cleared plates. One gentleman was in the process of lighting a cigar and could not find a light. Donnie waited. After what seemed an eternity the guy at the end of the bar yelled out, "hey Yin, I need another drink." A moment passed and a man emerged from the back room and poured a glass of what looked like whiskey and slid it down to the drunken man. It was not a shot glass. Yin turned his attention to Donnie. "What you need?" "I could use a beer," Donnie answered with a note of desperation. "You in luck, we still have some left." A foamy mug of golden delight was soon set in front of him. It was a long awaited moment. Like magic the mug was empty. He ordered another. This one he sipped, savoring it with obvious relish. Yin seemed uninterested in speaking to him. One of the couples had finished their meal and left, leaving the man with the cigar, who had found a light, sitting with his spouse, and speaking quietly amongst each other. The guy at the end of the bar sat with his head down, most likely passed out. Music from the saloons could be heard along with the appropriate commotion of cowboys letting off steam. It struck him at that moment that it was likely someone from across the street would wander over. He felt like a sitting duck. He thought for a moment to get out of there and head back to the safety of his cottage. He decided to take his chances. The beer was too good. Not really. It was lousy, actually, but who was he to complain. His mind drifted as the couple got up and left, thanking Yin for another, as the man put it, "humdinger" of a meal. Then it hit him that something to eat would surely hit the spot. He had decided not to spend any unnecessary money, but now that he was out, and giving the powerful aromas emanating from the kitchen, he changed his mind. He was the only one in the room so he called out, "hey, is your kitchen still open?" A voice came from the back, "what you want?" Yin walked slowly out from the back and walked up to him ominously. "You new here?" His face contorted with a look of suspicion. "Yes, Sir." "Then you not had my famous egg soup, then." Donnie just answered, "Yes.....and no." His face lit up, "this your lucky day," his forefinger pointing at him. He disappeared into the kitchen and soon returned with a rather large bowl and chunk of bread. He set it down with a "clap" and took one step back. "Now, you tell me that not the best soup you ever had." "I will let you know," Donnie said gleefully. It was good. Real good. As he ate, notes of carefully picked seasoning caught his attention. He soon realized Yin was a skilled chef. Yin came back out with a towel over his shoulder. He looked at Donnie with anticipation. "Mr. Yin, this is the best Dang Gum soup I ever had!" Yin gave him a wink and started wiping down the bar. Then he stopped, "You got money, right?" "Yes Sir." Yin leaned up over the bar, "you know how many cowboys come in here and stiff me?" Donnie shook his head. Yin did not answer, the silence speaking for him. He finished his meal and ordered one more mug of beer. The room was empty. Yin finished up whatever he was doing and seated himself in the restaurant and enjoyed his own meal. Donnie noted a cigar box behind the bar and thought it would be a nice cap to his evening. He was tempted, but decided not to spend any more money. His mind began to drift once more to the idea of riding out of this place and trying his hand at gold panning. As his mind was fully engulfed in the fantasy a man entered the room. Donnie thought for just an instant that he had stayed too long and his evening was about to be ruined by a drunk cowboy. To his delight the man was Nate Parker. "Donnie! Fancy meeting you here." Parker took a seat next to him. "How the hell are ya?", the Deputy asked with a slap on the shoulder. "Good Nate, how about ur-self?" "Oh, Can't complain. How come you aren't across the street yukking it up with the boys?" Donnie looked at him with a scalding expression, "not my cup of tea." Nate sat back, "ya I know. You seem a little out of place around here." Donnie agreed and asked, "You on duty?" "Sort of. The Sheriff likes me to be on "stand by" on nights like these. I usually sit over here and wait for the action to start. Donnie knew what he meant. "Ya, the

alcohol will kick in soon and I'll have to go break something up, through someone in jail. The Sheriff leaves the small stuff to me. He only shows up if there is gun fire." The two men had a small laugh together. "Yep, it shouldn't be long..." The two engaged in light conversation for the next hour. Donnie admired Nate. He was tall and possessed the grit necessary to handle the men who inhabited this land. Nate decided to have a drink. "Seems quiet enough tonight, but don't you go telling nobody." "I won't." Nate bought two cigars and they adjourned to the front porch. The Deputy had a good vantage point. The saloons were roaring and the two puffed away on the cigars. Donnie was a bit intoxicated at this point. The night air had become very pleasant and neither seemed in any hurry. From amidst a long silence Donnie spoke out, "what makes men like that?" Nate made no attempt to answer. "What makes them so vicious? Greedy. So wild. Why do they want to fight all the time?" Nate looked upward contemplating the question. Donnie was not expecting much of an answer, but was surprised when he spoke. "It's human nature, my friend. You see, when people are left to their own devices, and live in a world without order; those people will revert to their animal instincts. Add to that the fight for survival, which is common out here in the West; an untamed land where the only strength prevails, you have a situation where one must fight to live, and people turn savage. What you get is a "Code" that folks have to live by, a set of rules that dictate behavior. That's why the law is so important. What we must do is establish a civilized society. But, the bad guys outnumber the good guys and so we struggle to tip the scales in favor of order, thus "Taming" the beasts and rewarding the civil. Sometimes it seems more like a war. Donnie, there is more than one form of strength. You are not weak, you are civil. You are stronger than you think, and it is up to you to find your way." Donnie looked at him speechless. "Don't ask me to repeat that," Nate stated with a smile. Just then a fight broke out across the street. "Well, duty calls, I'll catch ya around." Nate got up and walked across the street and disappeared into the saloon.

Donnie tried to process what he had just heard as he walked back to the ranch. He decided not to stick around town; things were bound to turn unfavorable for him. As he walked through the neighborhood a thought began to form in his mind. It was something Nate had said. You are stronger than you think. There was more than one type of strength. You must find your own way. The ranch gate was closed so he climbed over it and made his way to his cottage. It was quiet on the ranch. He sat calmly on the tiny porch and re-lit his cigar. The thought he had formed began to develop and began to resemble a plan. But, when to act on this new plan? Earning pay was too important to do anything rash. On the other hand, the thought of continuing to work around here seemed almost unbearable. He crawled into bed, thoughts racing. One thing was for sure, he needed a horse. Just a horse. The rest could wait.

Another day broke in the Sumner Ranch. Donnie overslept. Working in the garden would be fine, but the whole "flower boy" thing had gotten out of hand. Realizing that he needed a few more weeks of work to buy his horse coerced him into action. Begrudgingly he made his way to the garden hoping that's where he would work today. With relief he found Mrs. Sumner in the back corner, only her head visible. She stood up to greet him. Before he could speak she told him that they needed him in the stable today. He hid a sigh of disdain and walked around the side of the house and across the front field. The sight of the cowhands made his stomach turn. He approached Luke, one of the "higher ups." "Morning flower." His casual tone made it clear that the name had been firmly established. Donnie looked visibly upset. "Don't get your saddle in a bunch, I need you to ride out and let Stimey know he needs to come back. I sent him out to find a stray, but we already found it. He's out past the South hill somewhere. Take that one over there. Don't ride her too hard, she's got a sore leg." Donnie was not a particularly skilled rider, but he managed to mount the nag and head out. About a half mile across the plain he realized he had no canteen. It was too late to turn back, besides "real men don't need water, right?" He was not sure exactly where to go, Luke just pointed in this general direction. There was a rather large hill in front of him and it seemed safe to assume it was the south hill. He rode to the top of the hill and gazed across the landscape. The top of the hill had a set of large boulders jutting out of the ground and the valley below was moderately forested. He looked and listened. He saw nothing. It was getting hot. Forgetting water was foolish. After a few more moments of searching from atop the hill he slowly rode down the slope. After searching through a few small prairies and oak groves it became clear this was a fool's errand. "He could be anywhere." It occurred to him that he may have been sent out here as a joke. He continued the search and grew anxious trying not to get lost. He didn't know this county. He doubled back a few times in an attempt to stay familiar with where he was. No Stimey. Who is Stimey, anyway? In what seemed like minutes, hours passed. Finding a shady hollow he stopped to rest and think. The horse he was riding, which he

began to call Daisy, was starting to limp just a bit. This chore seemed foolish at this point. He'd be in trouble one way or the other. The horse was limping, so he dismounted and found a rock to sit on, and tried to clear his head. It was shady and fairly cool. Thirst set in. He looked around for signs of water. A familiar scenario. "Not this again," he thought. A feeling of hesitation came over him, an unwillingness to return to the ranch. The "plan" he had been forming the night before crashed to the forefront of his mind. In essence his idea was to live off the land. Alone. Away from everybody. The idea of owning his own land was not feasible right now, so why not just live "out there" somewhere, like a nomad. From his childhood he had heard stories of mountain men who lived in a similar manner. The thought was becoming more and more attractive. He looked around again and pictured himself living right where he was at present. It was a shaded area thick with oak trees, and tall boulders that provided cover. He walked about surveying the area. Somewhere like this would be perfect for a short stay. All he would need was a water source and some game to hunt. He could construct a shelter or have a tent of some sort. More ideas formed as he calculated the feasibility of such a lifestyle. He could be self contained and travel to any area he wished without the worry of fitting in and subjecting himself to the discomfort of cruel people and their "nature." Then it hit him. A horse. Right there in front of him. Daisy. Why not take her and ride off? Would they come after him over one horse, especially a lame one? He would not be able to come back around here again. He'd be a criminal. On the other hand, he felt he had been underpaid and taking the horse seemed a reasonable compensation. But, stealing is stealing. Then again he felt he was far enough out that he could get a nice jump on them. Then again, not with a limping horse. He sat a while contemplating the situation. It soon became obvious that stealing the horse was not the answer. It wasn't just about having a horse; it was the other things he needed as well. Still, it was a nice thought and he committed himself to the idea. He needed to get back. In spite of being thirsty and the day getting later, he gave the area a last look for Stimey, whoever he was. The trip back was slow due to Daisy's gimp. As he neared the ranch his stomach sank. He had no desire to be there and it was getting more difficult to do so. Assuming he would be yelled at he entered the corral. There were a few men leaning up against the corral gate. It was subtle, but he could hear them talking and their tone was that of jest. Donnie ignored them. If Luke was not there he just assumed put Daisy up and went straight to his cottage. No such luck. Luke came out of the stable holding a bucket of paint. "There you are. Where the hell you been?" "I was lookin for Stimey." "Did you find him?" "No." "Of course you didn't, he's been back for hours." Luke didn't seem too angry. Luke handed him the bucket, "back wall needs paintin, work till sunset." Donnie obeyed and found the wall. No paint brush. He didn't feel like asking so he looked around. Nothing. He then started walking towards the shop but was halted by Luke's voice, "brush's ain't in the shop, look behind the water barrel around the side." Donnie looked and found a crate with a few old brushes, all of them hardened with dry paint. His head sunk into his chest with a sigh. He fiddled with the bristles trying to get one to soften up. Was this another joke? Was this how they painted things around here? If he used one of these brushes and put it away the next guy to use it would think he put an unwashed brush away, and that would surely get him yelled at. Shaking his head he went looking for Luke, who was doing something over by the well and visibly agitated. Donnie walked across the front field. Luke lifted his head up and looked at Donnie with "short temper" written on his face. "Do you have any good brushes?" Luke stood up; his towering frame eclipsed the sun. He took the brushes. "Well, these ain't no good, now are they?" There was actual humor in his voice. He wiped his brow. "Someone done forgot to wash these off. Bunch of idiots around here." Guess you ain't paintin today. O.K. You can help me here." He instructed Donnie to start digging around the well. Apparently there was some sort of leak. He was relieved he didn't get his head bit off, and his faith in humanity was restored, at least a little. He worked till sunset with Luke, who started asking questions. Questions about what happened at the Gavin ranch. Donnie actually found it easy to talk about it. He gave a detailed account. Luke seemed interested. Very interested. The sun began to set and Luke stopped and leaned on his shovel. "You know they're out looking for those guys." "Ya, I heard they are wanted." Luke continued, "Did you know a posse went out after them and got all shot up. I heard they are on the loose again, and nobody knows where they're at. What if they come lookin for you?" Luke was just trying to scare him. "Well, Donnie said matter-of-factly, I'm sure the law will find them, and if they don't I'll just have to kill them myself." Luke let out a chuckle and looked at Donnie curiously. "Seriously, what would you do?" A chill ran through Donnie's spine. He spoke calmly, "like I said I'd have to take 'em out." What was he supposed to say to that? "Best they not come 'round here, then," Luke said with obvious sarcasm. He instructed him to pick up the tools and put them in the tool shed out behind

the stable, and told him to go get something to eat. Men were gathering in the mess room. Donnie was not sure, but he may have just earned a few respect points with Luke. Doubtful. He was surprised to hear himself say that, but he did. The thought of those men coming after him had been haunting him since he escaped, but he hadn't really thought about what he would actually do. It got him thinking. Heading towards the mess hall the aroma of dinner dominated his thoughts. He really did not feel like dealing with the guys, but hunger overpowered his resistance. "Get in, eat, get out," he told himself. Then an idea. Wait until most of them have eaten and go in just before the cook puts things away. His gut told him that was the way to go, but it made him feel like a coward. Against his better judgment he went inside and headed right over to the serving table. By the time he had served himself the taunting began. Flower boy this, flower boy that. It seemed fairly harmless and he just ignored them. He took a seat, again, at the end of the long table and kept to himself. It seemed the whole crew was in there. Kyle and Trevor were sitting at their usual spot but to his surprise they seemed uninterested in him. After a few moments a voice came from clear across the room. "It looks like flower boy is awful hungry tonight." Another voice answered, "ya, I guess planting flowers is such hard work." A few laughs and jests followed. Donnie didn't look up. He knew ignoring them was probably the worst thing he could do. It was likely that they would push until they got a reaction out of him. That's exactly what happened. "Looks like flower boy forgot how to speak!" "Looks awful yellow over there." Deep down inside Donnie knew this is just how they are, but he had grown tired of dealing with their "nature." In his head he thought it best to ignore them and eat fast and get out, but his mouth had other plans. Without thinking he blurted out "why don't you say that to my face." Oh, no. That was the last thing he wanted to do! The room filled with "oos." He did not look up but could hear a pair of boots walking towards him. He looked over. He did not know who the guy was, in fact, he had never even seen him before. He was of average build with greasy stringy hair. Donnie pretended not to notice him. The boots stopped just behind him and just to his right. The man leaned in towards him. He knew if he was smart he would strike early catching the man off guard. He found himself unresponsive. The man leaned in close to his ear and stated, "you look yellow." "Is that right?", Donnie said. "Ya, that's right. The room went silent. "Well, you're ugly." "Is that so?" Donnie didn't answer. "Why don't you say that to my face?", the man said looking up seeking approval with the others. "I can't," Donnie finally said, "you're too ugly." More "ooo's" followed. Donnie understood that this was just part of the game. It was unavoidable. If he did not stand up for himself now, this would never end. Being that he was sitting and the other guy was standing, he was at a disadvantage. He had to act quickly. Without thinking he turned and began to stand, and in the process shoved the guy (hard) as he rose. He surprised himself as he watched the guy fall back and fall on his ass. He knew he had to get right over and strike again. If he let him stand up it would turn into a toe to toe fight. He lunged, fist clenched, elbow cocked. Just then he heard a booming voice, "knock it off!" It was Mr. Somner. Donnie stopped and turned. "What the hell is going on here?" No one said anything. Donnie felt relieved. He had taken action, but kind of got saved by the bell. Hopefully the fact he took action would prove something to the men. The thought was short lived. "Take it outside!" he ordered. The guy stood up and walked past Donnie bumping into him forcefully and walked outside. Before Donnie could react most of the guys walked out. Donnie walked out with Mr. Somner behind him and found an already neatly formed circle of men. The fighting pit. He exited and took position in the center, his opponent facing him. If there is one thing people love it's a fight. The men became animated. The two squared off. Donnie was a bit disappointed that Mr. Somner was allowing this, but for all intents and purposes this was the only entertainment around a place like this. Donnie instinctively thought to try and talk his way out, but it was way too late for that. "Kick his ass Dane!" Well, at least he knew his name. Dane looked ready- jumping up and down and performing some kind of pre-fight ritual. Donnie stood still rubbing his hands across his thighs. Donnie had not been in many fights like this, but what experience he had flashed into his thoughts. He recalled how the mind starts thinking quickly as it seeks a strategy. For one, Dane was only slightly taller, and seemed to have a bit of a reach advantage. He also appeared more aggressive and ready for action. It was intimidating, but Donnie calmed himself and stepped forward. He couldn't decide if he should strike first or wait for Dane to make the first move. They squared off, the men chanting. He observed that Dane did not make any immediate move; he just shuffled back and forth saying, "Come on flower boy, come on." His mind shut down. A calm came over him- and then rage. All he wanted to do is eat his supper and get out of there. He then had the sensation of being out of control and made the first punch. It landed. He felt his opponent's cheek fill his fist, followed by another. The punches felt strong.

Dane's head snapped back as did his legs. Donnie felt it was important not to relent and give Dane a chance to respond. He lunged forward and attempted to strike again, but his assault missed, his arm overextended and ricocheting across the side of his greasy head. He looked clumsy. Just then he felt a fist sink into his gut. He gasped. He could not draw any air. He stepped back, and reeled forward. Then, at the moment he was able to stand tall a fist caught his cheek. Then another. Then another. Then another. He put up his arms attempting to block another shot but to no avail. He took a shot to the nose, then the mouth. He could barely see through watering eyes and could only take in a shallow breath. More punches landed each producing flashes of light in his eyes. He made a futile attempt to swing back but nothing landed. The next moment he fell to the ground. The world went silent. All he could see was a pair of boots coming towards him through swollen eyes, his field of view tilted as he lay on his side. He clenched expecting a kick to the gut, but someone stepped in-between them. He heard the faint voice of Mr. Somner say, "Alright, alright, he's had enough." Donnie made every effort to stand, but fell back down. Someone helped him up. All he could hear was the jestings of men, their tone spoke of disappointment. Donnie reflected that he had not given the crowd a satisfying performance. He was led to a bench outside the mess room where he sat and caught his breath. By this time he could start feeling the pain the blows had inflicted and he noticed his left eye swell shut and his lip expanding. He looked to his right and saw Trevor standing next to him. "You need to learn to fight, dude." Donnie nodded his head. Trevor gave him a couple good slaps on his shoulder and walked away. Mr. Somner appeared and instructed him to go inside the house and let Mrs. Somner clean him up. He felt a distant sense of satisfaction as he entered the house knowing that at least landed some good blows.

Donnie was led to the washroom and took a seat. Mrs. Somner hovered over him examining the damage. "Oh, what happened to you?" she said with a mother's sympathy. He didn't answer. She dabbed at his face with a wet cloth. He noted that there was not much blood which indicated it was perhaps not as bad as it seemed. His left eye was now completely swollen shut. "What happened, Donnie?" Her tone was stern. "They were making fun of me, again, and I did something about it." "What were they saying?" "They have been calling me flower boy." "Oh, for heaven's sake. Why, because you help me in the garden?" "I suppose so." "Oh, it's all my fault I suppose. Those brutes. I'm sorry Donnie, I should have known." Donnie shrugged his shoulders, "It's o.k. Mrs. S, that's just how it is," his voice muttered through his swollen lip. She did her best to clean him up and offered the spare room to him. He assured her he was ok, thanked her and made his way to his cottage. Luckily, he did not run across any of the "pirates" along the way, but he could hear them in their cottages. He went inside, lit the lantern, and looked at himself in a small mirror hanging on the wall. He looked pretty bad and he could see his lip split wide open and still bleeding. He grabbed a towel and nursed the lip. Sitting back on the bed he gave out a small laugh, "I didn't even get to finish my dinner." He attempted to take a drink of water, scooping a cup from a bucket on the table, but it stung too much. He made a second effort noting how dry his mouth had become, and fought through the pain. He lay back on the bed reflecting on what could only be described as a "hell of a day." His right eye, which was only half swollen, became heavy with sleep. He ran his fingers on the knots under each eye. Soon he was in a dream state and visions of a peaceful grove with a gentle stream trickling, full of gold, lulled him off to a dead sleep.

He slept without waking once throughout the night and only the glow of dawn aroused him. For a moment the memories of the day before eluded him, but the odd feel of his fat lip reminded him. He groaned as he sat up to face the day. His left eye had begun to open a little bit, but was caked with dry fluid that stung as he tried to open it. He got up and looked in the small mirror. He looked like a guy that had his ass kicked. With a heavy sigh he laid back down. He could hear the sounds of the ranch coming to life in the muffled distance, but reporting for duty made his gut turn. Maybe it was just the emptiness in his stomach. Facing his peers was the manly thing to do, but he didn't feel much of a man at the moment. He felt small and ashamed, but he didn't care. He didn't want to be there. That was all that mattered. He owed nothing to these people. It became clear that he needed to talk with the Sheriff and try to work something out. He made the decision not to report for work. Why should he? He drifted back to sleep wondering if he should have just taken Daisy and rode off.

He woke to the heat of the day which had crept into his cottage. It was hot. He got up and took a few much needed gulps of water. He opened the door in an effort to circulate the air, and sat down on the porch. Despite the shade the summer air made itself evident. Judging from the sounds in the air the cowboys were busy breaking horses. He did not want to be seen, nor give these people one more minute of

his time. He took up his canteen and a scarf. He still had no hat so he tied the scarf around his forehead. He was a man of few possessions. In the interest of stealth he snuck through the grove the cottages occupied and hiked over the bluff that led to the ranch entrance. As he walked through the gate he found a pocket knife! He stooped down and picked it up and continued down the street passing through the neighborhood and stopped at the fountain. He took a few moments to enjoy the calming sounds of slapping water and the cool mist it created. The urge to get out of this desert and head up to a more forested region fell heavy on his heart. Despite the comfort of the fountain the direct sunlight became overbearing and he headed down the street towards the Sheriff's office. Even at a distance one could see he had been in a fight which seemed to arouse the interest of the few people sitting on porches as he passed. In a strange way it made him feel kind of tough and he walked tall as he walked up to the Sheriff's door. He knocked. "Come on in" a voice rang out. Donnie entered. Nate Parker stood up from his desk as Donnie entered. "What the hell happened to you?" Donnie helped himself to a chair and sat down, "it would appear the guys at the ranch are not too fond of me," he stated sarcastically. "Who did this to you?", Nate asked with genuine concern. "I ain't no snitch. Don't matter. I was hoping I could talk with the Sheriff. "Sheriff's out of town, left this morning." Donnie ran his finger lightly across the split on his lip, "I need your help Nate. I'd like to move on, but I've been instructed to stay here in town, but I'm just not interested in working at the ranch." Nate leaned back in his squeaky chair and took in a deep breath. "I can see you are in a situation. As far as I know the Sheriff wants you to stick around, in fact he left this morning to join the second posse, the first one did not go so well, three men were shot and killed and the wanted men escaped. Until they are caught and tried I think you are still on the hook." "Look, I don't see why I should be forced to stay here, you have my written testimony." "Donnie, if there was any way I could clear you to leave town I would, but all I can do is uphold the Sheriff's wishes." Donnie looked down at his boots, "I understand," frustration quaked in his voice. A brief silence. Donnie continued, "Well, I'm not going back to the ranch, and if I am to be forced to stay here I would like the freedom to at least choose how I spend my time." "I don't think there's a problem with that, but I am concerned with how you would stay constructive, that's why we put you at the ranch. But, I can see we have a problem. What happened out there?" Donnie gave a brief account, and made a point of not indicting the man he grappled with. "Donnie, sending you to the ranch was supposed to be a good thing, but if you're not comfortable with it, I see no problem with you getting out of there. What I do have a problem with is you taking such a beating over something so small. Facing ridicule is one thing, getting your face beat in for standing up for yourself is another...but, if I call attention to it the problem may get worse, so I'm going to let it go, this time." Donnie agreed. "So what do you want to do?" Nate asked. "As far as I am concerned I just assume be left alone until I am cleared to leave." Nate thought about that and told him that would be fine, "as long as you stay out of trouble and don't loiter." Donnie nodded, accepting the premise. "But, where you gonna sleep, Donnie?" "I don't know right now. Do I have to actually be in city limits? "How about this; as long as you check in every morning to this office, and I mean EVERY morning, I don't care much what you do." "Fair enough," Donnie agreed. "You sure took a beating last night, you might want the Doc to take a look at ya." "No thanks...I'll be fine." "Well, you stay out of trouble, ya?" "Will do," Donnie assured him as he walked out. He turned back just before the door closed and said, "thank you Deputy." With that the door closed and Donnie felt a great relief. He stood there a moment wondering what to do next. He recognized that he had three problems at the moment. First, he looked like hell and did not want to cope with people at the moment. Second, he had very little money. Three, it was hot. He would have been happy just sitting at the fountain for a while, but the direct sunlight was too uncomfortable. He wanted shade, and somewhere to be alone. He also needed to be off the main street. A theory quickly formed- Maybe he could find a really cheap horse. For that he would need the Livery, which as far as he could tell was not on the main street. He knew it was not along the south entrance of town, and since he had not explored the north end of the street, it must be that way. Armed with this logic he began walking the way he came, and passed the fountain. The entire length of main street was no more than about a thousand feet so it couldn't be too far. As predicted, not far past the fountain a small sign came into view, reading "Langer's Livery." Most Liveries he had seen just said "Livery," but this one had a name. "Must be special," he thought. It was down more of an alley than a street. Arriving at his destination he soon found its attendant, a heavy set man with grey beard and at least a six gallon hat. "What can I do ya for stranger," the man said cheerfully. "My name's Donnie and I have a bit of a problem." "Ya, I know who you are. You're that feller that came in a couple weeks ago, something about the Gavin Ranch incident. Sheriff tells

me you were an eye witness.” “Word gets around quickly, I see,” Donnie said. “That it does. Say...you look like you just walked out of a rattlesnake pit.” “Well, you should see the other guy,” Donnie jested. The man just looked at him with a puzzled expression. So what can I help ya with?” Donnie was relieved he didn’t press him for more details- about the Gavin Ranch or the fight. “Well, I have a bit of a problem. I need a horse, but have little money. Was wondering if you had something I might be able to afford. “Well, I mostly board horses, but I do have a few for sale around back, what were you thinking price wise?” Donnie looked down at the ground, hesitated and scratched his head, “about ten dollars.” The man stood frozen and looked up as if contemplating a math equation, “no...no, I don’t think I got nothing that cheap. Shoot, I don’t think I could sell you a mule that cheap.” “How about a donkey?” Donnie asked sarcastically. The big man gave out a chuckle, his belly giving a visible jiggle, “son, I’d give you a donkey if I had one.” Donnie was only kidding, if he were caught riding a donkey around town he’d really be asking for it. “You wouldn’t need some help around here, would you?” “No, can’t say I do. Tell ya what, if I get a packhorse in I’ll let ya know.” “Much obliged, mister.” Donnie walked back to the main street, looked around, and had a sudden feeling of frustration. He was faced with a decision; hang on to what little money he had and hope he could find a horse, which was silly anyway because he needed a riding horse, but that would cost way too much. A pack horse or mule would do him little good, even if he could find one. Then again, a pack horse would be better than nothing. He did have enough to feed himself, at least for a while, but if he spent any money on food it would cut right into his horse money. What to do? He had nowhere to go to sit and think on things. It occurred to him that he could go back to the cottage. He wasn’t gone very long. It was tempting, but he decided he’d rather starve than go back there, which at this point seemed a likely possibility. He made a split decision. He headed back down the street towards the general store.

The general store was located near the fountain which meant that he did not have to pass the Sheriff’s office. That seemed important at the moment. He did not want Nate to see him wandering around town. As he entered the store he cautioned himself not to be tempted to buy things. Being a man of almost no possessions he would likely see many things he needed. He was there for a bag of jerky, or a loaf of bread. Either one or the other. That was it. It was a small store, but it was packed with goods. His eyes were immediately caught by a hat display. Despite his policy not to be tempted, he gave them a look over. The cheapest one was three dollars. He was about to try it on when a voice rang out, “what can I help ya with?” It was the store owner, a middle aged man who looked like he had seen better days. “Got any jerky?” The man didn’t say anything, he just pointed to some barrels across the room. Donnie looked at the selection. “I’ll take fifty cents worth.” “Coming right up,” the man said cheerfully. He placed two handfuls on a big scale behind the counter, trimming a few pieces off and placing what was left on a rag and wrapped them up. “That will be fifty cents- Say, you look like you tangled with a bear.” “I did matter of fact,” Donnie stated plainly paying the man. He looked around the store, his resistance declining. There were blankets, hats, gloves, knives, and even a display case with guns. There were boots! “How much for the boots?”, he asked. “Them’s over there are \$3.75, and I’ll even throw in the souls for free!” Donnie reflected for a moment that he probably tells that joke to everyone, and he gave a polite smile. The hole in his boot had become so big it was almost worthless, but he resisted. “Maybe later,” Donnie answered and started walking out, but turned and asked, “you wouldn’t know where I could find a \$10 horse, would you?” The man put his hand to his chin and thought on it for a moment, “Na ...no I don’t think so.” Donnie pressed the issue, “are you sure you don’t know someone who has an old horse they could part with?” The man duplicated his thought process, “you could try Mr. Somner, he might have something.” Donnie smiled, “I already tried that.” “Well, I guess the answer would be no, but good luck to ya, come again.” Donnie thanked the man and tucked the roll of jerky down the back of his shirt and headed back down the North end of town and continued walking without breaking stride.

The road leading out of town began to make a gentle turn to the left and before long, when looking back, it was no longer visible. To his left the terrain sloped mildly upward leading to a large meadow that gave way to a small mountain range. To the right a vast desert valley with another lower set of mountains. The larger mountain range to his left (West) he believed was called the Iron Wood Mountains. Cattle ranges could be seen on either side. He needed a place to camp. The West side of the terrain seemed more suitable for it was more heavily forested featuring clusters of oak trees. He discovered bluffs and hills that bordered the road into town and spotted what appeared to be a shady grove. It wasn’t a far walk and upon reaching it he was able to find a good sitting rock in the shade. It was exactly what he was looking for. He

took a sip from his canteen, which he took the liberty of filling at the Ranch, then examined the jerky he purchased. It looked to be just over a pound's worth. It was enough to make him feel comfortable getting through the next few days. He also figured he was on someone's land, but he had not seen any "No Trespassing" signs. It seemed appropriate to keep a low profile just the same so he positioned himself in the middle of the trees and laid down, his head resting on a small boulder. Looking up at the tree tops he began to ponder the situation.

About an hour passed and he heard the patter of horse hoofs in the distance. He slowly raised his head over the boulder and spotted a rider about a half mile away. It looked like he was heading towards town. He noted the relative stealth of his position. Soon the horse faded off in the distance and the grove became quiet, only a gentle breeze ruffling leaves. A wave of contentment came over him as he imagined he had a piece of land like this. If only. The afternoon lingered slowly, hot yet peaceful. He passed the time whittling on some wood with his newly acquired pocket knife. As the sun approached the top of the mountains he began to think about what he would do about the night. As the sun set he reached for a chunk of jerky, which he had avoided, with great difficulty, and indulged. A couple swigs of water and his dinner was complete. It got dark. He thought about how the men were feasting at the Ranch mess room, and waiting for their favorite distraction to arrive. He found it somewhat satisfying that he was taking the privilege from them. Still, the thought of a full plate of food had him second guessing himself. After his six day trek through the desert he didn't feel much like going through this again. However, if he had the proper supplies to survive in this environment, maybe? Once it got dark the temperature dropped and without a jacket or blanket it felt uncomfortable. It never really got too cold, but he found it difficult to sleep. Overall, by morning he got very little sleep. Upon waking he felt his face and found it hadn't healed much. He could open his left eye almost all the way. His lip was better, but was still throbbing some. A tooth was also a bit loose. Donnie took a careful look around and got up and walked back to the road and made the short trip to town. He went straight to the Sheriff's office. He entered and found Nate Parker sitting at his desk. "Just checking in," he said. Nate, not looking up said, "Donnie, take a seat." He sat down and waited for Nate to finish whatever he was doing. He seemed busy this morning. Nate looked up, "Where'd ya sleep last night?" "Just outside of town", Donnie answered. "You do know that all the land around here is owned by some one, I hope you weren't trespassing." "I slept right near the road." Nate shook his head smiling. "Normally I would advise against that, but right now we have more important things to worry about." Donnie's face took on a look of concern, "what's going on?" "Well, I received a telegram this morning. The Sheriff has advised that we be on the lookout for the men they have been tracking, seems they may be heading this way." Donnie's stomach dropped. "From what I understand the group of three men has grown to a dozen. On top of that it would seem that these guys are rather talented at both fighting and evading the posse. Seven men have been killed so far pursuing them". "That's terrible," Donnie responded. Nate stood up and continued, "I'm putting together a citizen's patrol just in case they decide to come around here, and I have a special assignment for you. Donnie's stomach dropped again. "Oh?" is all he could say. "Here is what I have in mind; since you're basically "outdoors" at the moment I figured I'd have you go on "look out" for me. We'll get you set up on the edge of town so you can be on watch. I'll have you and another guy keep an eye on each entrance into town, do you want the north or south?" Donnie had trouble answering, but blurted out north. "Fine then, I'm going to set you up with a horse and rifle, on loan of course, and some supplies. Sound good?" "Ya, I suppose," he answered with a flutter in his voice. Donnie followed Nate out the back door which led to a small stable, the Sheriff's stable. There were five horses lodged there. He pointed to the one in the back, "that's yours, go ahead and saddle her up and meet me back inside." Donnie approached the horse with a hesitation and discovered the saddle area which was an enclosed room appointed with all the necessary supplies. He found three saddles perched on stands. He didn't know which one to use, but they all looked the same so he picked the one closest to him. He threw a blanket across the horse's back and got it nice and centered making sure there were no folds. The horse was a bit nervous around him. He had forgotten how horses picked up on the emotions of its rider. He tried to maintain a confident demeanor. He then took up the saddle and hoisted it on its back. He had also forgotten how heavy saddles were! He got the saddle buckled down and bridled her up. He gave the horse a couple of pats and went back inside. "How are you with a rifle?" "O.K, I guess." "Good, take this one." Donnie took the weapon making sure the muzzle faced upward. "Did you see the rifle holsters back there?" Donnie nodded. "Good, go holster it up." Nate was all business. The two men went back to the stable. Nate's horse was already saddled and ready, Donnie found a leather

holster and tied it on, his motions awkward. He had never used one before. Nate had already opened the stable gate on the side of the building and was walking his horse out. Donnie struggled to keep up and was not sure the holster was attached correctly. He followed him out of the gate and the two walked their horses across the street to the Saloon. Apparently Nate had already been organizing this thing - there were six men waiting for him in front of the Saloon. Nate tied down his horse but told him to hold off. He then addressed the men: "Gentleman, give me a few minutes, help yourselves to a drink, I will be with you shortly." He then motioned Donnie to follow him. Nate led him to the General Store. Donnie lashed the horse and followed him in. "Sam! Set this man up with supplies to camp for a spell." Nate gave Donnie a good slap on his shoulder and told him to meet him back at the saloon when he was done. He looked at Sam unsure what was coming next. Sam walked around the counter and stood in the middle of his store, "what do you need, lad?" Donnie cleared his throat and asked if he was expected to pay for this stuff. Sam explained that he was told to give him what he needed. Though tempted to secure some extras Donnie felt he should only take what was absolutely necessary. He picked out two blankets, a flannel jacket, a hat, a pouch of tobacco (Obviously!), two pounds of jerky, and three cans of peaches. He thought about a new pair of boots, but decided against it. He wrapped the goods in one of the blankets, secured it to the back of the saddle, and walked the mare back to the Saloon. He noticed a couple more men had joined the group. He was offered a beer and leaned against the Saloon wall. Nate was waiting for more guys to arrive, but after a few minutes started without them. He made sure he had everyone's attention and began: "Alright gents, news has it that the "Rizzo" Gang is on the run and may be heading this way. Seems someone wants to make a name for themselves and up till now is doing a pretty good job of it.....So far these guys have killed or wounded about a dozen men. From what I have gathered the second posse has been ineffective." Nate paused his speech to emphasize the seriousness of the situation. "Has the federal marshal gotten involved yet?", one man spoke out. "Apparently he is one the way, but as far as I know he is not present yet," Nate answered. Donnie felt deeply impacted. He knew Rizzo and saw him commit a crime. He felt fortunate to have gotten away from the Gavin Ranch in one piece. Just then three more men came walking down the street and joined them, Mr. Somner, Trevor and Kyle. They noticed Donnie, but reacted as though they had never seen him before. Donnie was content with that. Nate welcomed the men and continued. "Now, we don't know if this gang is going to show up here, but it is our duty to prepare ourselves. Sheriff Stanton, in case you didn't know, has joined the posse and has instructed me to take steps to protect our town." Donnie stood marveling at the intelligence of this man, he had never heard anyone who talked so well. "What about him?", a man spoke loudly pointing at Donnie. "Don't you think him being here is putting us in jeopardy?" Nate fired back, "No. He is not. He's been ordered to stay in town by Sheriff Stanton, and he is going to help us keep an eye on things. That is the long and short of the matter." Some of the men look unpersuaded. Nevertheless, no one said anything else about it. What struck Donnie was that word must have gotten out about his connection to the Gavin Ranch incident. That's the last thing he wanted. Nate continued: "Now...I'm going to post some men to patrol the South and North entrance to town. Hopefully they will give us an early warning if they come anywhere near here. "What do you want us to do if they show up?" a man in the back of the gathering asked. "Gentlemen, these men are wanted dead or alive so don't hesitate to protect yourselves. He continued before anyone could respond, "I don't want any of you to get the foolish idea of trying to collect reward money because there isn't any." Nate stepped down from the porch. "All I want you to do is be aware of the problem and assemble as best you can if something should happen. The meeting place is in back of the Sheriff's office, there is a gate around the side you can use, some of you are familiar with it. The signal will be three shots in the air. If something is going on we will try to warn everyone beforehand, and the signal is three shots in the air- Any questions?" Many questions were raised, but Donnie could only hear a blur of chattering as his mind began to drift. He grew fearful. The reality of the situation seemed to be sinking in. This was not his town. What did he owe anyone here? If he had an invested interest in this place he might feel different. It may have been noble to offer his services, but he was not feeling very noble at the moment. Then, another thought occurred to him. Being around others gave him safety in numbers. His urge to get out of there might not be a great idea, just yet. He would be out there alone. What if he ran into the gang? He seemed to have a dilemma. A shout from Nate brought him out of his thoughts, "Donnie, come with me." He gave Donnie a wave and they started walking over to his horse. "Got everything ya need?" "Ya, I think so." Donnie asked, "Am I expected to pay for this stuff?" "Consider it payment for your services," Nate answered dryly. "O.K., I want you to wait here. I'll be back. We're going to take a little ride."

An hour passed. He could see Nate Parker speaking with the men down the street. Apparently they still had questions. At last the Deputy rode over him, and they started heading out of town. They didn't ride long and Nate stopped. "This is your area, and you will be patrolling it day and night. "See that range?" Donnie looked out upon a great valley floor that held a mid-sized mountain range running along its East horizon. He could see a winding line of trees that suggested a river. "Yep", he answered. "That is yours, too. I don't want you riding out there; I just want you to keep an eye out. If you see anything that looks like our band of outlaws, you come tell me. Mostly I want you to keep an eye on the town entrance." Nate led him a bit further down the road. "That bluff over there. You can get a good look at things from up there. That's where I want you most of the time. Two or three times a day I want you to ride down the road and take a look around, I'll show you." The two men went riding further. After about a half mile they came upon a fork in the road, an old barn sat nostalgically at the crossroads. "This is the end of your boundary. There is no need to get much past this spot. Take a look and get back to town." Nate paused and looked Donnie in the eyes, "Donnie, I don't mean to make you feel like a prisoner, cause you're not. I just need your help." He paused again. "And, when you're done helping me out I am going to talk to the Sheriff about cutting you loose." Before Donnie could answer, he continued, "I know you might be tempted to ride on out of here, but I would advise you not to." Donnie answered as sincerely as he could, "I won't ride off, Nate. "You're not gonna make me come chase you down, right?" his head tilted downward and eyes raised, with half a grin. "I won't make you come chase me." "Alright then," Nate answered, seeming satisfied. They rode back to the "lookout" bluff and Nate led him up to the top. He was right, there was a good view of the valley. It amused Donnie that he was not far from where he spent the night. Nate continued with his instructions: "Here is where you will be most of the time: you're Post. Keep your eyes peeled and let me know if you see anything unusual. There's a trail right behind us that leads back to town. If you can't find me, go tell the bartender at the "Will's Fill's, his name is Grant, he'll know what to do. Also, if for whatever reason you can't get a message to us in time, take the three shots in the air, BUT...only if absolutely necessary. Are we clear?" "Yes Sir, Donnie answered confidently. "Make sure you come into town and get something to eat and Ma Bells, just make it quick when ya do." Nate led him down the back trail that led to town, and once Donnie recognized where he was he gave Nate a wave and rode back to his post.

He situated himself atop the bluff. Two medium sized trees poised conveniently served as a place to tie the horse off, and offered a bit of shade. A row of boulders offered themselves as a place to sit. He found the most comfortable one and made an effort to get comfortable. He found himself making extra effort and stood up, at which time he let out a giant sign. Remembering his task he took a long survey of the area. He shook his head and reasserted his effort to get comfortable. Another day crept slowly on, and the sun began to get lower in the sky, and a few strips of jerky were quickly consumed. The day was warm, but this time of year the nights were still a bit cold. He thought about the cottage. A wave of anger came over him. His mind drifted as he imagined getting out of here, which he became determined would be sooner than later. He promised he would not ride off, and he had no plans of doing so, but the thought entertained him for a moment. He soon resigned himself to the fact that this was going to be boring, and that was good because if it wasn't boring it meant the outlaws had come around and he didn't want that. He noted that the sun was going to start setting so he got on the horse and rode down to the crossroad. By the time he got to the old barn the sun had set. He took a moment to look and listen. The idea that someone could be hiding in the barn prompted him to ride up close. He sat silent staring at it, eyes focused on missing slats, wondering if he should dismount and look inside. A faint wisp of fear came over him as he imagined the outlaws hiding inside, and how he would be terribly outnumbered. He chuckled to himself and headed back. It was starting to get dark when he got back to the bluff and the aroma of supper filled the air, no doubt Ma Bell was cooking something. He wanted to make a quick run over there, but decided not to. He stayed put and feasted on peaches and jerky, then as best he could, rolled a cigarette. He could hear faint sounds coming from people in town, the saloons to be more specific. He paid them no mind although a frosty mug of beer would sure hit the spot. It got dark. Parker had told him specifically not to make a fire, which at the time didn't seem like a big thing, but now it did. Only a few hours into his watch and it became clear that he had got a raw deal. It wasn't particularly cold but it was entirely boring. It seemed ridiculous. What made anyone think those guys would even come to this town, and even if they did they would probably sneak in. Wouldn't they? Why would a gang of wanted men come marching down Main Street? He felt trapped.

Backed into a corner with no options. His mind began to wander again. Thoughts of roaming free and finding good fortune swept him away and occupied his mind.

Hours passed and he awoke abruptly. The moon had risen low in the sky and was smothered in an eerie haze. It must have been very late for it was silent in town. It was very silent. And cold. He had two blankets. One over him, and the other a makeshift pad between his back and a boulder. The sacrifice had to be made, so he covered himself with the second blanket and leaned against the bare stone. After about twenty minutes this arrangement became unbearable so he got up and grabbed a saddle bag and used it as a pillow and lay down, and attempted to fall back to sleep; to no avail. He was wide awake. Frustration set in and the thoughts of fortuitous freedom turned to escape. After a long night and the coming morning he had pretty much convinced himself that he was going to get out of there the next night. He occupied his mind cooking up a plan. A simple plan, really. He would wait until it got good and late and just walk away, up into the mountains where Nate would not bother chasing him. He even considered leaving a note for the Deputy explaining that he would let him know where he was and that he would come back if they really needed him to testify. "Stupid idea," he thought as he rose, grunting, and made an early patrol down to the old barn.

It got colder than he had expected last night. He welcomed the rising sun which was continuously eluding him as he headed towards the barn, for it was located in a meadow that was surrounded by low lying hills. By the time he reached the barn the sun was shining everywhere except the barn, and him. He looked around, didn't see anything. The path that lay beyond the barn was lined with huge oak trees and was too inviting to pass up. Nate had told him not to go "much past" the old barn. Surely the leash he was on could stretch just a little bit. He proceeded slowly and relished in his daring move, yet buried the temptation to just "go." He was hoping for a field or a valley, or something. The path seemed to stretch on and on, and soon he got the distinct feeling that he had gone too far. The leash tightened. He stopped for a moment and took in a deep breath relishing what for the moment felt like freedom. He headed back only walking the horse. He was in no hurry. He still had not felt the sun because of the oak trees, but when he got back to the barn it was sunny. He stopped a while admiring the old barn and imagined who might have worked around here at one time. Suddenly he felt vulnerable. What if the outlaws showed up? He'd be caught off guard. He realized what he was doing was important. He gave out a "click" from his mouth and brought the horse up to a light gallop and made his way back to his perch. He sat on the small boulder that marked his camp and clutched his rifle. He figured he should be ready should the enemy arrive, as unlikely as it was. He reached for his jerky and wondered if Parker would come by to get a report. His stomach growled. He didn't feel much like going into town, but the thought of breakfast overcame him, besides he could smell it. Ma was a-cookin'. He took a quick survey of the area and felt satisfied all was well. Time to eat! Then, just as he was entering town he noticed a ruckus. There were a handful of men gathered in front of the Sheriff's office. Something was going on. Donnie was tempted to go over there, but he stopped short and went inside Ma Belle's restaurant. Surely it was none of his business. No sooner did he enter the room Ma Belle herself and a waitress ran right by him out the street. Now he knew something was going on. He walked out and peered down the street from the porch. Now there were at least twenty people standing outside the Sheriff's office. A grim feeling came over him. The outlaws must have been sighted. A sense of duty came over him, and he returned to his lookout. He'd find out what was happening sooner or later, but for now he felt he better stay focused. He sat nervously as the shouts of people could be heard off in the distance. He kept his eyes busy and his profile low. He could imagine a gang of dirty mean riders storming past him any minute. He checked his rifle in anticipation of firing the three shot signal. About twenty minutes passed and the town became quiet. He really didn't know what to do. Staying put he began to ponder his situation. Just what did he think he could really do if the bad guys did show up? Assuming he saw them in time and got the signal shots off, he would be giving away his position. Would it be wise to hold his position and fight, or should he retreat down the pathway that Nate showed him? Fear was starting to grip him when two men rode by. Donnie shouted out a question, "what happened?" They continued without any hesitation and he heard one reply, "Sheriff was killed." Donnie froze. For a moment he could not form a thought, and then his heart began to pound and sink, all at once. He felt sick and sat down on his boulder. He wanted to flee, up into the mountains. With no control over his body he began to ready the horse. Just as he was about to mount up, he stopped. Nate. He needed to talk to Nate. An hour passed. A few more people passed along the road, but he didn't take the opportunity to ask any more questions. Nate would surely be along sooner or later. He would wait. "Wait for Nate," he kept repeating

to himself. He waited and waited. Another dreary day. By late afternoon he still had not eaten. Nothing significant anyway, just some jerky. Under the circumstances he felt he should remain vigilant. Then, just as dusk was setting in he saw a man on a horse coming down the road.

Nate Parker looked grim as he reached the bluff. He dismounted and looked up at Donnie. "Mind if I join you," he asked dryly. "Sure, come on up." Nate came up and found a boulder to sit on. He let out a heaving sigh and rubbed his eyes. Neither of the men spoke for quite some time. Donnie finally broke the silence, "I heard." Nate looked disturbed. "Remember what we were talking about. The evil of men?" Donnie nodded. Nate continued, looking at him, his face grimacing, "you didn't hear what they did to him, did you?" "I just heard he got killed." Nate paused for a moment. "You didn't hear what they did to him. They didn't just kill him, they tortured him. Nate leaned back and looked up at the darkening sky. Donnie just waited for him to speak again. "Maybe you don't want to hear this." Donnie shook his head, "no, tell me Nate." "All right. Apparently they shot him first, in the shoulder, and then beat the tar out of him. They cut off some of his fingers. They gouged out one of his eyes. They burned him. Then they drug him behind a horse. He had an arm torn off, and he got nearly decapitated. Donnie couldn't speak. Finally he said something. "Where is he?" Nate stood up and paced. "They brought him in about an hour ago. I never did see you, were you up here?" "Ya, I heard all the commotion, but I kept my watch." Nate smiled. "You're a good guy. That's what I wanted. I appreciate that." Donnie scratched the back of his head, "so what are you going to do?" "I really don't know. Everyone who goes after these guys gets killed. My first concern is keeping this town safe. "Do you think they will come here?" Nate's demeanor changed as he explained, "ya see, they've been hiding out mostly, in-between robberies, and raid towns for supplies. I don't think they're too far off, so...ya they're probably gonna come around." "How many of 'em are there?" "We think around a dozen. Maybe more. Donnie thought to ask why the posse couldn't get them, but he thought better. "What are you gonna do Nate?" "Form another posse," he answered matter-of-factly. Donnie's eyes widened as it occurred to him he may be asked to be part of it. Nate noted Donnie's expression and assured him he would not. "You're free to go, if you want. These are wanted men and your testimony isn't necessary now, however, it might be safer here...I don't know, it's up to you. I would like to ask you to finish up your watch tonight...If you wouldn't mind." Donnie agreed. "Well, I better be getting back. Did you get something to eat?" "No, not much." "Why don't you get over to Belle's. I'll cover your post. I need to think, anyway. Just make it quick. Donnie wasted no time grabbing his meal. The restaurant was full and the conversations were mostly about the Sheriff. He sat alone at a window seat and ate his dinner- fast. No one made any efforts to converse with him, nor he with others. Soon he was back on the bluff, alone. He felt uneasy and had trouble sleeping. He just wanted to get as far away from here as possible, yet he did feel a little more connected to the town. He did feel a sense of obligation to help out. Mostly he wanted to leave. If Parker was right and they did show up he wondered what good he could really do. One guy at the end of town with a rifle? He was getting scared. If it did come down to shooting he wondered how far he would stick out his neck. He felt loyalty for one person, Nate. It was the folks that lived here who needed to take a stand. It made him feel like a coward, but he also felt justified in his own self preservation. Plus, he still had no horse. Was fleeing on foot wise? The dilemma pestered his mind. Somewhere in the middle of the night he fell asleep, and woke to a fog bank that had set in.

Fog And Fury

It was cool and moist as he sat up, groggy. Apparently he had got a good deep sleep, evidenced by the difficulty he had fully waking up. He felt an odd feeling in the pit of his stomach. He got his wits together and took a good look around. There wasn't much to see, the fog was thick. He could not see any part of the town, nor much of anything. It was dead quiet. He observed it was still very early. Somehow he knew. He cocked his rifle and got down low. He didn't know how or why, but he knew- those men were here. Then, as if scripted several fog obscured riders slowly crept by him heading towards town. Keeping low and dead still he hoped beyond hope that his horse-on-loan kept quiet. If she made even the slightest noise, he'd be finished. He counted six of 'em. In the lack of visual clarity he wasn't completely sure it was them. His gut said it was. He let them pass. He was not about to fire the warning shots too soon, lest he'd be discovered. What he did not know is that a group of riders were also entering the other end of town, and a few from the side. Once they had disappeared into the fog he determined he would fire the shots. He

raised his rifle and prepared to pull the trigger, three times. He had no thoughts on what he'd do after that. Taking no action was not an option; he had to warn the town. At that moment he heard a twig snap behind him. He turned and saw a gruffly figure looming in the fog with a posture that suggested a pistol was pointed at him. He had no time to react, a shot was fired. He had been shot! Or, had he? He didn't know. Without a single thought he fired back. Did he hit the man? He didn't know that either, he just rolled backward and tumbled down the bluff, banging his elbow in a stone and coming to an abrupt stop. He wasted no time and ran across the road and took cover behind some tall brush. He fired three shots into the air and retreated further into the brush. Fearing he was being trailed by the outlaw he took a moment to examine himself. He did not appear to be hit, nor was there any sign of being followed. The sun was starting to rise and the fog was already burning off. He was indecisive about what to do next, but then all hell broke loose. Shots fired! He could hear the shots coming from different angles. Men were yelling, and dying. The firing continued as Donnie moved involuntarily towards it. He had reached the edge of town and made his way between two of the town's buildings, the noise level intensifying. He peered around a corner. He noted that he was surprisingly calm. At first he did not see anybody, just the bang and smell of gunfire. Then, he saw men scurrying about, running low and crossing the street. In the remaining fog, dust, and gun smoke he could not make heads or tails of things. Smoke appeared. The town was being set a-fire. Sensing it was not safe to stay where he was he retreated and nestled down behind a small shed. He could hear what he assumed were town's people running off away from the scene. It reminded him of the events at Gavin's Ranch and how he had run off. By now there were huge black plumes rising into the sky. The gun fire continued. His calm had left him. He sat shaking. Some from fear, some from rage. A part of him wanted to sneak up on them and wipe them out. He thought better. The shed he was hiding behind lay behind one of the town stores which was now on fire. He was forced to move. He was spotted. A voice yelled out, "There's another one." He ran, keeping low, but was flushed out into the street. He stopped, stunned by what he said. Dead bodies lay everywhere. To his dread he ran right into plain sight of a group of the outlaws. He recognized a few of them. He saw the Gavin ranch killers. Donnie's heart rose to his throat. "Freeze boy," was all he heard. The man that had flushed him out was standing behind him. He was done for. He dropped his rifle. One of the men started walking towards him, pistol raised. "Well well well, what have we hear," he stated playfully. "I 'member you." It was Rizzo. Donnie knew the jig was up. He prepared to die. There was no way out of this. In an instant he raged inside about the cruelty of such men, and then he closed his eyes. Suddenly, there was a bang. A shot was fired. He was sure that the shot had been fired at him, but he did not fall. He heard a thud behind him. Then another shot. Rizzo was down. He looked behind him and saw that man down. Then, he saw Nate, badly shot up, taking one last shot, to save his friend. Nate lay lifeless on the ground. The shot that got Rizzo came from an unknown gunman. Just then two horses ran by blocking him from the outlaws across the street. In an instant-reactive moment he grabbed one of the reins and mounted the horse. This horse was obviously a product of the chaos and he rode down the street. He heard a man yell, "get him!" He kicked his heels into the side of the horse which prompted it to run faster. It was a good horse, strong. Bullets flew past him, one whizzing close to his ear. By the time he passed his "look out" spot the horse was at top speed, and he noted that he had never been on a horse this fast, which was a good thing because when he looked back he could see two riders after him, the burning town a grim backdrop to their pursuit.

Donnie rode as fast as he could, arriving at the fork in the road Nate had told him not to go past. He went past, veering right beyond the old barn. He kept on for a half mile or so, at full speed. He could hear the horse breathing heavily and starting to slow very slightly. Urgency prompted him to push the horse. He looked back from time to time and could see the pursuers, who had fallen back but were still following. They were tracking him now, preserving their horses, waiting for his to become exhausted. They would soon be able to slowly catch up to him. He knew he was being hunted and it was now a matter of strategy. He allowed his horse to slow to a gallop. He looked back and could see them coming in full stride. He was forced to make his horse run again. They were clearly better at this than him. They were closing in. To make matters worse, they had guns, he did not. He continued and the terrain began to slope down into a ravine, the path took on an "S" curve, and he crossed a small creek. There was no doubt they would catch up to him. Without giving it much thought he stopped the horse and dismounted. He slapped the horse's rear end causing it to continue running, without him. He ran down the creek and hid. About twenty seconds later the men arrived at the creek. They slowed and looked around. To his surprise they continued on.

Donnie waited, and took a few sips of creek water. He knew they would catch up to his horse and figure things out. The creek was small and offered little cover. He didn't feel safe there. He noticed a large outcrop of boulders up creek and decided that would be a better place to hide. Was this the right decision? He could only speculate. He ran in the creek attempting to conceal his track and made his way to the outcrop, then began climbing up into the boulders. The boulders were like a gauntlet which would give him better odds. He did not want to get in too deep. His idea was to hide, but still be able to see the trail. He found a good spot and stopped, attempting to catch his breath and calm his thumping heart, to no avail. He felt faint. He sat, and listened. A few moments passed. Then, a few more. Perhaps he had given them the slip. His heart sank even further as he heard the patter of horses. He peeked around the rock he was hiding behind- It was them! His face winced. He cursed. Looking upon them and could see them pointing at the rocks, and began to head that way. He had no idea what to do so he began to carefully climb up higher. When he neared the top he found a spot that gave him a clear view below him. There he waited. He had become terrified, but tried to listen. Every now and again he could hear boots scuffling. They were definitely looking for him. "How do they know I went this way," he thought to himself. He heard one of them say, "come out come out, we know you're in here." He gulped. "Why don't you come out and make this easy on everyone." They were getting closer. He held his position. It grew quiet. Suddenly, one of them appeared below him, making his way along a would-be path between the rocks. The man was about twenty feet below him and had his pistol drawn. Donnie searched about and saw a rock within his grasp, about the size of a loaf of bread. He took the rock and quietly held it out. Timing would be everything. The man continued walking, slowly, and passed right underneath him. The rock slipped gently from his hands. There was a thud. Somehow he had made a direct hit. The man gave out a grunt and fell to the ground. Everything inside of him wanted to go down there, to make sure he was dead, and take his gun. It was risky. It would be kind of a long way back down to get to that spot, but he figured it was his best choice. Just then, he saw the other man, and he spotted his companion. The guy walked up to the dead man and looked up. Donnie, forgetting the urgency of the situation did not duck his head back before he had been spotted. "Son of a bitch," the man shouted. "I see you up there," is all he said. Donnie dared not peak his head over the ledge. He could hear the man walking along, and waited just a moment and took a look. The man was on the move. Donnie walked along the edge of the boulder he was standing on and could see the man, from time to time between boulders, his back turned. He picked up a rock that fit snug in his hand and followed the man from above. When the moment was just right he saw his chance. He threw the rock- Hard. Once again he hit his target. The rock hit the man somewhere on the back of his head. He yelled out in pain, turned and fired two random shots. One of them nearly struck Donnie in the foot, missing and whizzed off with a ricochet and a small poof of dust. The man sneered in pain, and disappeared. Donnie looked about and analyzed his options. Logic told him to flee in the opposite direction. Doing so forced him to climb higher, and he reached the top, which opened up to a small flat area. He soon found that there was no easy way down from there. The only sensible option was to head towards the danger in hopes that he could outrun the man before he got too close. It was too little too late. The man had reached him, pistol drawn and closing in. He was, however, clearly disoriented. The man had been hit hard by the stone and was seeing double. He fired four rounds at Donnie, who instinctively raised his legs and shielded himself with his arms. All four shots missed. The man tried to holster his gun, but it fell to the ground. The man then produced a large knife and staggered towards him muttering out some indistinguishable threats. As before Donnie took up a few rocks and began hurling them at his assailant. Some hit, some did not. It did not stop him and he got within range and took a few clumsy swipes at Donnie. Donnie, being smaller and younger, was nimble enough to avoid being struck, and maneuvered past the enraged outlaw, buying enough time to gather up a few more stones. The man turned, clearly intimidated at the prospect of having more rocks thrown at him. Donnie did not hesitate. He focused and launched another. The man anticipating the attack, ducked, and the rock missed. As he stood up Donnie had already pitched another. It hit true on the side of his forehead. He dropped. It got quiet as he approached the man, his belt rung, and his lights out!

The Conversation

When the man awoke he found himself heavily bound in rope. Donnie had retrieved one of the two men's horses, gaining their supplies, including guns and ammo. His horse was long gone. Once he had the horse secured, he returned to the top of the outcrop and attended to his prisoner, who was clearly in pain from the injuries he had sustained, but was calm. Blood from his forehead had caked heavily into his left eye. Donnie had him tied up real good. Both his hands and feet tied as well as a rope around his arms and chest. Plus, a single knot noose around his neck with about ten foot of rope tied to a small stump. It was overkill but he wasn't taking any chances. It looked to be around noon and the sky was becoming cloudy. His main concern was the outlaws coming around looking for their missing members. The top of the outcrop was rather flat with a large pitted area that clearly gathered rainwater at times. There were also a couple old fire pits suggesting people had been up here before. Probably a hide out. He and his captive occupied the pitted area, concealing them from any onlookers. For now anyway, he felt like things were under control. Donnie sat across from the man, about ten feet separating them, took off his hat and the two stared at each other. The man spoke first, "Think you're overdoing this a bit?" "Nope," Donnie answered quickly. The man squirmed for a moment and did his best to blink the dried blood out of his eye. "Well don't you have a hell of a situation here kid?" Donnie stared at him grimly, not looking away. Several uncomfortable moments passed and the man spoke, "you 'fraid of me boy? – Well, I guess so, look at me." The restraints the man was enduring began to annoy him and he started thrashing about. "You can't keep me like this, damn it!" The man burst out in a panicked rage cursing wildly; spit ejecting from his mouth, fighting in vain to free himself. "And, damn it, my head hurts." He gave out one more boisterous outburst, "let me loose you son of a bitch!" "I'm the son of a bitch?" Donnie retorted with outraged sarcasm in his voice. "I'm not the one that burned down a town and shot up a bunch of folks. How am I the son of a bitch here?" The man calmed and looked at him inquisitively. Donnie continued, "And why come after me, I didn't do anything." The man looked as though he were searching for words but Donnie continued approaching him and was clearly agitated. "Where the hell do people like you come from? What hell hole did you crawl out from? Donnie became more animated, "I....I can't even....I don't understand people like you. Is that all you do is destroy things.....Hurt people.....What, what is it...Why....WHY? He turned away and walked to a small pack and pulled out a pistol- the man's pistol. He sat down across the man with the gun resting on his knee, cocking and un-cocking the weapon nervously. The man had a strange look on his face. He could not read his expression. Donnie tried not to show his emotions, but his eyes teared. "You guys killed my friend. You killed the Sheriff. You killed Mr. Gavin, burned him alive. You burned down a town... A nice town, with good people. Who knows what else you have done." "Hey, don't blame me for all of that," the man stated. Donnie stood up, and he walked behind him. He cocked the gun. The man's eyes darted about. He knew what came next. "Wait! Wait! You're not gonna shoot me from behind, are you?" Donnie didn't answer. "At least look me in the eyes if you're gonna shoot me, damn it!" "You don't deserve that," Donnie answered dryly. "Hold on, hold on...Wait, wait.....before you do this let me say something!" "What? Donnie asked. After a brief moment he spoke, "maybe I can help you out with something." "Like what?" "You asked me what hell hole I climbed out of. Why I'm so rotten, right? I could speak on that...It seems like you wanna know." Donnie thought for a moment. He came back around and sat across the man. "What's your name?" The man glared up at him through blood soaked eye and stated, "Jack". "And who might you be?" Donnie just shook his head. Jack shrugged his shoulders as best he could, "fair enough." Donnie took a seat across Jack, and leaned on a boulder. The man sitting across from him was considerably larger than he with wavy black shoulder length hair, black hat, brown boots that were worn and weathered. He had a mean unshaved face bearing many scars. Everything about his appearance spoke of a man who lived life dangerous, and in his own way. Donnie felt quite intimidated by the man, but he had gained the upper hand and tried his best not to show any fear. Despite his efforts, Jack knew he was afraid. "So....start talking," Donnie demanded. Jack made every effort to get more comfortable. He looked up at the sky and tried to take a deep breath, but found the rope around his chest constricting, and the rope around his neck pulled tight as he did so. "You wanna know why I am the way I am, right?" His voice raspy. Donnie nodded, and took a sip of water from a canteen, no doubt Jack's canteen. Jack watched him drink with murder in his eyes. He thought for a moment and said, "Pain. It's pain that done this to me...and sorrow...and the cruelty of the world. It's wild out here, kid. To survive you got to be wild. Do you actually believe there are ANY good people out here?" "For one I ain't a kid, and yes I do." "Really...how old are you?" "I'm thirty-one, for your information." "Oh, you don't look it," Jack stated with a light hearted inflection. "I didn't know what else to call you." Donnie hesitated and reluctantly told

him his name. "Donnie, eh? That's a kid's name, you know?" "What do you mean?" "Well, a guy named John is usually called Johnny when he is young, and he is called John when he grows up. Folks should call you Don." Donnie looked agitated. "I meant no offense...Donnie." Donnie shrugged it off, "none taken." The two shared a silence. Jack spoke, "if I had to sum it up easy I'd say it's kill or be killed. You know that, right?" "Well, that does seem to be the case," Donnie answered. Jack sighed. "Where you from, Donnie." "Back East." "And, what brought you out here?" "Why should I tell you that?" Jack didn't say anything. Donnie shifted, and spoke as if embarrassed to say, "The Gold Rush. I came out here 'cause of that." "Well there ya go. You're not from here. This is the damn frontier!" "What does that have to do with it?" "Everything. This is a lawless place...mostly. I was born here. As far back I can remember someone was trying to take something from me, or trying to cheat me, or do me harm for no good reason. There is a code one must live by in a place like this." "Code you say?- Ya, I heard about that... Explain it to me. "Well, if someone fights you, you fight back. If someone steals from you, you take it back. If someone disrespects you, you put 'em in their place. Ain't no more complicated than that. "O.K., so you have a code you live by, that's understandable. But, it's more than that, right? You take what's not yours, and you don't care who you have to hurt to get it. Ain't that right?" Jack's stare was unreadable, and he answered slowly, "Maybe at times, yes, but that ain't the whole picture." Donnie did not respond, but his expression begged Jack to continue. "Donnie, are under the impression that people in this territory are a bunch of good natured folks?" "Sure, lot of 'em seem to be," Donnie responded, scratching his head. Jack narrowed his eyes, "How long you been out here?" "Couple years, or so." Jack looked down, nodding, "that's what I figured. You don't really know these people. Me, I grew up here and know how they are." "How are 'they', Jack?" "I hate to break this to you, but they ain't much better than the 'likes' of me." Donnie sat back not looking convinced. "I don't know," Donnie stated, "Maybe I'm not from around here, but I have seen plenty of good hard workin' folks, and, yes I bet some of 'em can get plenty awry at times, but I DO NOT think they are ALL like you." Jack took offense to that and gave Donnie a look that was genuinely frightening. "And what am I like?" Donnie didn't feel the need to mince words, "I think you're plain evil." Jack's face remained calm, but his eyes smoldered. "You don't get it, do you? It's about survival." Donnie countered with a raised voice, "Bullshit!" "Don't give me that. I seen dudes like you all the time.....You enjoy it! "Enjoy what?" "You enjoy hurting people...Demeaning people....Proving how 'Bad' you are." "Is that right?" Jack stated. Donnie compelled him, "Come on, and be honest. There ain't no one out here, just you and me.....tell me the truth." "Why is this so important to you, Donnie?" Donnie paced around a bit, looking up at the sky then said, "Because ever since I got out here I have had to deal with the likes of you, and I'm sick of it!" "Then leave! Go back to wherever you came from! Maybe you ain't cut out for life out here!" Donnie did not like his answer, but there seemed some truth in it. Donnie shrugged his shoulders. Then he asked, "Now answer the question." Jack stared at him for a moment and confessed, "ya, maybe sometimes I do enjoy it....You happy?" "Yes," Donnie answered glibly. Jack began to realize this was turning into a battle of wit and changed the subject. "What happened to your face?"

"I had the tar beat out of me from some of your types." "What happened?" Jack asked. His tone was soft, as if he cared. "What does it matter? I was just minding my own business and someone started needling me. I TRIED to stand up for myself, but all I got was the Holy Crap beat out of me." Jack became animated, "So what!" Do you know how many times I've had the pulp beat out of me?" Donnie figured it was probably a lot. Jack continued, "You got to takes your lumps, man. And, each time it makes you stronger." Donnie didn't like that answer much either, but again saw the truth in it. Jack looked as though he were fishing for something else to say when Donnie asked, "What do you think about guys like me?" Jack looked uncomfortable and smiled lightly, "you may not like what you hear...but, hear me out." Donnie nodded. He could see the man in front of him was becoming extremely uncomfortable in his restraints. "To be honest, I don't think you're cut out for this life. Out here, I mean. You're kinda soft. And, when you're soft you're gonna get picked on. This ain't no place for the weak, not that you are (Jack figured he was, but chose his words carefully knowing the disadvantage he had), but you seem a little...Soft around the edges. Look, this life will cut you down if you don't fight...Just a fact of life.....BUT, now consider this, you were able to stop a couple of mean 'ol dudes who meant you no good will with just some rocks. You brought rocks to a gunfight, and won! So, maybe you ain't so soft after all." Donnie tried to diminish the statement, "Well, I had the high ground, got lucky." "So what! I ain't never seen anyone do a thing like that...Ever! Never even heard of a thing like that." Donnie

accepted some credit, but did not show it outwardly. Donnie took a walk and got a good look at the surrounding area. The clouds were getting thicker. There was no sign of Jack's counterparts. He contemplated on what to do with Jack. He knew what Jack would do. Walking back to him he presented him with another question. "You don't suppose your buddies are gonna come lookin for you?" Jack just nodded. Is Rizzo the leader?" Jack just nodded. "Looked to me like he got shot back there." Jack nodded. "You think he's dead?" Another nod. "What happens if Rizzo is killed?" Jack shifted, "Well, I suppose Floyd will take over. Although he ain't as crazy as Rizzo. "Ain't anybody crazy as Rizzo." "Truth is, right now I have no idea what's become of the group. They may have been shot up, arrested, scattered, or they may be heading this way, and they may figure out where I'm at, which means you'd be a dead man. And, you'd probably shoot me, too, and that would be that." Donnie changed the subject. "I heard your gang tortured Sheriff Stanton, that true? Were you in on that?" Jack hesitated. He didn't want to talk about that. "Come on man, what do you care about it, anyway?" Donnie lay back with his hands behind his head observing the darkening sky. "I just do. It seems...excessive, what ya'll did." And, how do you guys keep warding off posse's?" "To your second question I guess it's cause we're just smarter than they are. We figure out ways to box them in. Riz just seemed to know what they was gonna do, and how, and when." Donnie scratched his head, "Suppose I don't know much about such things. It seems to me they gonna catch y'all sooner or later, don't ya think?" "Maybe. Not unless we get them before they get us." "You see, that's what I don't understand (Donnie sat up quite interested), the posses are just gonna keep coming and getting bigger, it must have crossed someone's mind that they will eventually get you." "I guess so, it's just that it don't always seem that way." "What do you mean?" Donnie inquired. "You see, once you start getting away with something I guess you think you can keep it going, I don't know. What we been doing seems to be working, so we keep doing it." "Sounds crazy to me," Donnie whispered, staring blankly at the sky. "And what about the Sheriff? Was torturing him some kind of an intimidation, or something, or are you just sick in the head?" "Truth is I don't know why Rizzo did those things to that Sheriff, but it does have something to do with intimidation, and sending a message. You have to understand, when Riz tells you do something, you do it." "Or what?", Donnie asked. "Or else he'll have your hide! Plus...you do it to prove to the others you ain't scared. "I see. So, you do it to show the others you "have what it takes" to run with them." Donnie continued, "It's a way of showing how tough you really are." "Ya, that's one way of lookin at it," Jack answered. Donnie spoke: "So you have to be a real tough guy to run with the pack; to prove yourself meaner and badder than the next. You pride yourself, I suppose, on outdoing the other- and the worse you are the better, eh? Thank you Jack for clearing that up for me. I think I get it now...I am soft. I ain't "tough", like you." "What do you want, Donnie?" Jack asked sternly. Donnie didn't answer. Finally Jack said, "Besides, I'm getting tired of listening to you belly ache, oh poor me, I'm Donnie and I can't stand all these bad people mistreating me all of the time, grow up!" "Grow up?...grow up he says," Donnie mumbled under his breath. It got quiet. Jack knew he probably shouldn't have said that. It didn't seem wise to provoke his capturer. Then Donnie asked him a strange question, "Do you like yourself?" Jack looked confused, "W'kind of fool question is that? Donnie repeated himself. Jack thought about it. "Ya.....No.....Hell, I don't know." Jack was becoming visibly uncomfortable. "Could you loosen my hands a bit, I can't feel my fingers." "I ain't coming near you, who knows what you'll do. "Donnie, if you don't loosen 'em up I'll lose use of my hands!" Donnie shook his head. "I can't." "Damn it, I'm cooperating!" Donnie did not respond. "Can I at least get some water?" Donnie didn't answer him. Jack began to panic some. "Hey, hey!" he yelled at him. He struggled frantically. Donnie could hardly bear the sight of it. "Let's face it Mister, you were out to kill me." In his turmoil the man asked, "What are you going to do with me, huh?" Donnie knew he tied his hands extra tight. He had no desire to be cruel, but he knew giving him an inch could be a fatal mistake. He walked away to think on the matter. What did he intend to do? He really didn't know. He saw four options- One: Shoot him and be done with it. Two: Let him die of thirst. Three: Let him go, with a head start and ride away with the horse. Four: Turn him over to the law. He knew the fourth option was probably the right thing to do, but was he up to the task of transporting him to the nearest authorities? Iron Wood Falls was not an option. He didn't even know where the next town was. He was leaning option two. He chanced leaving Jack unattended and hiked down to check on the horse, which was right where he left it, tethered to an oddly shaped dead tree stump. Mounting the horse he led it over to the creek for a drink. He scanned the area carefully mindful of any intruders. All seemed quiet. That didn't mean that someone wasn't hiding somewhere watching him. The thought made him nervous. He determined it was best to get out while he could, so he returned to the top to

retrieve a small pack that had a few supplies in it. He contemplated the option of shooting Jack. It was a humane thing to do. Jack had a look of anger mixed with fear. Donnie tilted his head in fascination. "You scared, Jack? I figured you're too tough for that." "You gonna kill me Donnie, 'cause if you are why don't you just get it over with." "Now that's the Jack I know. A hard man to the core and surely unafraid of death." Jack lashed out, "Horse shit! I'm afraid as any other 'bout dyin, but I ain't terrified of it.....Like you probably are." "Fair enough", Donnie answered calmly. Jack sat like a stone. Then, without looking at him he simply stated, "Good luck Jack," and walked away. Jack said nothing. He made his way to the horse and rode away.

He made his way along the creek for a while, filling his canteen and making sure the horse had its fill. Before long the creek had become thick with brush and he took another direction. He had no idea where he was, and hunger was setting in. The sensation made him think of Jack. He knew what he was doing was cruel. "Perhaps he would free himself, eventually," he thought to himself. The day had become dark with clouds, and looked like it might rain. His pace was slow. A feeling of guilt came over him which sat in the pit of his stomach like an anvil. He owed the man nothing, yet felt compassion for him. "Why?" He thought about the "Code." According to that he should just ride off and forget about it. The feeling began to crush him inside and he stopped. Without any control over himself he began to head back to the outcrop. He hadn't gone very far. Once it was in sight he stopped again, dismounted and sat down, leaning against a tree. Hours passed. Indecision plagued him. He found himself trapped between two thoughts; Shoot a man in cold blood, or ride away and let him perish. The dilemma was torturing him. Finally, he made a decision. By the time he reached the outcrop the light of day started dimming, and there was a slight drizzle. He made his way back up to the top, catlike. He knew how foolish this was. Jack could have freed himself, ready to pounce. Imagining being struck by a rock (The tables now turned), he approached with stealth. He crept up slowly. Jack was right where he left him. Donnie approached him, pistol drawn. When Jack noticed him he just smiled and gave out a grunt. "There ya are, thought ya ran off on me." "I did." "Oh," is all Jack said, looking gravely concerned. "Could you please loosen my"..."CLICK"- Donnie cocked the gun while Jack was in mid-sentence. "Donnie, what are you doing?" "What would you do if you were in my shoes?", Donnie answered intensely. "Hey, whoa-whoa-whoa, you don't know that!" "What are you talking about, of course you would!" "You think I just go around shooting people all the time don't you? For your information I ain't all that you think I am." Donnie looked at him with intense skepticism. Jack continued, "Is this what you really want, Donnie?-Killing isn't what you think it is." Donnie tried to ignore the comment and made an effort to squeeze the trigger. His hand began to shake. "Look Donnie, let me help you out here. No matter what you think of me, taking my life will affect you, a great deal." "I know it will Jack, but I can't live my life looking over my shoulder." Jack started pleading, but Donnie didn't hear what he was saying, he tried once again to give the trigger a squeeze. He couldn't. With a heavy sigh he lowered the weapon. After a short silence he said, "I thought you told me this is what you preferred." Jack answered "I.....don't want to die!" There was sincerity in his voice. Apparently Jack's defenses were starting to break down, and he looked visibly shaken. Donnie sat down, a bit shaken himself. Several moments passed. Jack spoke, "Can I tell you a story?" Donnie shrugged and sat down. Jack tried shifting and cleared his throat. "A few years back I was drinkin with the guys at this bar in a town called South Bend, a small town. I was flyin high and feeling mean that day. After a bit I stepped outside to go to the store next door and get some licorice. There was an older couple that just pulled up to the store. I went inside and the old man followed after me. He even said "good day" to me. At one point while he was in there he bumped into me. That's all he did. While I was walking back to the bar the old man was getting ready to climb into his carriage and I shoved him to the ground. He tried to get up but couldn't. I think the fall hurt him. Next thing I knew his wife was pulling out a rifle and went to aim it at me. I reacted and shot her-dead. I realized what I done, and rode off. "And?" Donnie queried. "And...I never did stop thinking about it. Sometimes I think about how that lady lost her husband for no good reason. I've never told this to anyone, but I've hated myself for what I done. Sometimes I wish I could somehow make things right for her. All he did was bump into me," he said slightly choked up. "Why you telling me this?" "I don't know...I guess 'cause I never met someone I could tell it to." Donnie just nodded and started assembling a small fire pit. Neither man spoke for quite some time. In some strange way Jack's confession moved Donnie, but it only confused him more as to what he planned to do. He disappeared for a spell and returned with a small arm full of kindling. It was nearly dark when he lit the fire. Donnie walked up to Jack and gave him water and threw a blanket over him. The sky remained

stormy, but never rained enough to put out the fire. The two men spoke very little and Donnie eventually fell asleep. Hours passed and he jolted awake, sure Jack had freed himself. The fire was out but he could see his outline in the dark. He raised the pistol and cocked it, assessing the situation. Jack was fast asleep, snoring lightly. He un-cocked the weapon and sighed, heavy. Again, without noticing he fell asleep. This time when he woke the light of morning had broke, Jack was still in his place. He rubbed his eyes, yawned, and thought he noticed something. Jack looked different. He gave him a good look and saw pain in his face. When Jack saw Donnie was awake he began to plead, "I can't take this any longer. Either kill me or help me out, but I can't do this any longer, please." Donnie's heart sank. The restraints he had applied were obviously holding, and quite well. He went around to his back side and examined his hands, they were purple. He went over and got the pistol. Kneeling down behind him he held the pistol to his back and told him not to move an inch. Jack promised. With one hand he attempted to loosen the knot, but it was too tight. "I'm going to have to use two hands, you better not move!" Jack gave him his assurance. Donnie set the pistol down behind him and worked the knot. Jack's struggles had only tightened the knot. He had no choice but to leave it or cut it. Donnie pulled out his pocket knife. Without saying anything to Jack he cut the leather strap. The rope around his chest and arms kept him from bringing his hands around. That rope was extra tight as well, in fact it had made Jack's breathing labored and he was starting to wheeze. "I can't move my fingers." "Give it time," Donnie stated. Soon blood was flowing into his hands and the tingling pain was unbearable. Jack grimaced. "That's all I can do for you, Jack." Jack kind of nodded his head and calmed down a bit. The sun would rise soon and Donnie knew he had to make some decisions. Jack begged for water, but Donnie hesitated. Jack asked him if he was going to leave him there to die. Donnie didn't answer. He began to gather up the supplies he had gained. Jack stopped him by saying, "I've been thinking."

"Oh ya, 'bout what?". Jack waited a good while before answering. "Oh, about a few things.....Eh, for one.....Thanks for not shootin me.....Yet. I don't know there's anyone out here in this land that would not have done that already." "What's it matter?" Donnie inquired. "Well, it does. It's given me some time to thinks some things over. "Ya? What kind of things?" "Namely that.....on account of you getting the upper hand I didn't kill you, and that you turned out to beAlrightYou see I reckon that I have, most likely shot a few decent men, like you, and I'm glad that this time I didn't. "Well thank you Jack.....Thank you for not killing me." Donnie spoke with clear sarcasm. "No, I'm being serious! And, by the way, the answer is yes." "Yes what?", Donnie asked. "Yes, I am afraid of dying. At least like this. Jack continued, "Look Donnie, I know you need to get on your way. But listen, if you're gonna leave me like this I'd like to tell you a few things. "O.K," Donnie said lightly. "I did some thinking last night. You fell asleep. I tried like hell to get loose, but you tied me up too good. You asked me if I like myself. No. I don't. I reckoned that I act like I do as a way of running from what I know to be true." "What's that?" "That I ain't any good. I'm angry Donnie, and I don't rightly know why. Maybe for the same reasons you are." Donnie kept quiet and let him talk. "I seen what you have seen in men. I've been ridiculed. Made to feel small. I was always good at fightin, though. I think it just became my way. "And, where has it led ya Jack?" He pondered the question. "Trouble. Trouble mostly. It's different around the boys." "Different, how?" "I don't know, it just is. It's what we do. Proving yourself makes ya feel like you're somebody, I guess. But, sittin here last night I guess it kind of hit me." "What?" "That it never really leads to nothing good. Deep down I don't think I'm like those guys. "What do you mean?" "You're right, Donnie, most of 'em are cold and heartless, and just mean to the core. Sittin here I think I'm realizing that I have been trying to prove something. "Prove what, Jack?" Jack paused, thinking. "Trying to prove that I'm worth something." Donnie looked puzzled. Jack continued, "I have been treated like you have. Instead of hiding, like you, I think I just go on the attack. Jack stopped talking and his face took on a look of death. "I think I understand, Jack. Sometimes I wish I could hurt those who have hurt me, believe me. I think it because it makes you feel powerful. Jack lit up, as if some kind of revelation had befallen him, "That's it! That's exactly it, Donnie. But, it ain't right....and I've always known it." "Why don't you stop?" "I never really thought to; never really thought I could. It's just who I am." "I heard someone once say it's never too late to change." Donnie stated. Jack sunk into contemplation. Then, after another silence he spoke, "Donnie, no one has ever talked to me like this. I think I'm kinda grateful in a way. And, that I'm glad I met you for some damn reason." Donnie cleared his throat and made a confession of his own, "You know, Jack, I envy you in some ways." "Me?" "Ya. You ain't afraid...you know? You're strong. You know what I mean? You don't back down. Me, I'm mostly a coward. I live in fear. I try to avoid

problems....BUT, at least I ain't wanted for murder. Seems to me you could do better...Do something better for yourself, and others." Donnie gave a little smile and said, "maybe if I was a little more like you, and you were a little more like me, that'd be good." Both of them gave out a chuckle. It was the first time either had laughed since all this began. "I been thinking too, Jack. I think you know I ain't the killin type. And, even though I'm scared to death of you, I'd like to find a way to resolve this peacefully." "Me too." "Do you?, or are you just saying that so I'll let you go?" Jack came alive and said, "No no, I mean it. In fact, I want to help you out." "Help me how?" "For one, I ain't gonna come after you- I know you may not believe that, but I promise you I ain't. Two, take my horse, the guns, everything." "I was planning on doing that anyway." "I know, but I'm giving it to you. Just leave me a knife and a canteen." Donnie thought long and hard. "Well Jack, I'll let you go, but there is one condition. Jack nodded. "All I ask is that you swear to me that you will go out of your way to do one kind thing for someone. Someone you KNOW could use some kindness, and see if it suits you. I will be looking over my shoulder for a long time, but I want you to do that one thing for me, in exchange for your life." Jack set his eyes on Donnie's and said, "I swear it Donnie, for you." "Not for me Jack....For you." Jack swore it. Donnie stood and straightened his hat and said "Alright then, let's figure this out."

The first thing Donnie did was check the horse. She was still where he left her, but she seemed antsy. Returning to the top he laid out his plan to Jack. "I need you to know that I still don't trust you, so I'm not going to cut you free. I'll loosen things up, that's it." Jack agreed. He worked the rope that tied his arms and chest, producing some slack, and then quickly backed away. Jack made no questionable moves. "Do you think you can work yourself free from here? Jack wiggled around and said, "I don't know." Donnie made the rope a bit looser, "I know it's still tight, but I'm giving you a fighting chance...Best I can do." Jack's feet remained restrained. He kept the gun on Jack as he backed off. "Well Jack, I'm gonna go now, and I do wish you the best." Jack marveled at Donnie's sincerity. "Hey, you stay away from all those bad guys, eh...and thanks..... Don." Donnie was hesitant to leave for reasons he could not grasp. Then, he gave him a tip of the hat and retreated. He could hear Jack say, "You're a tough little bastard, Don!" as he ran quickly away, careful not to trip. He made his way down the outcrop and rode off in a hurry, looking back with vigilance. There was no sight of Jack.

Donnie rode at a good, but not hasty pace aimlessly into the wilderness. He didn't know where he was, but it comforted him in knowing he finally had a horse- and a good one at that. He had a rifle, a pistol, and the supplies needed to survive on the trail. He didn't know if Jack would keep his promises, but that concerned him little at this point. He rode, keeping a watchful eye out for trouble, looking to find gold country... On a bad man's horse.