

## Strays

I dint see nothin', the kid kept saying to anyone who might be listening, only no one was.

A couple of times he tried to stop and explain but they just pushed him ahead of them, cussing and kicking him when he stumbled, meanwhile thanking their lucky stars it wasn't them squashed into those size sevens.

Tell at to the captin, Parker told him just prior to giving him a stiff-armed shove that almost toppled him. The kid started to blubber, wet, ratcheting sobs that were so pitiful they hit him just to make him quit.

It was still an hour before daybreak so most of the camp didn't take kindly to the commotion. They pitched and yawed in their bedrolls as the storm broke in their midst and soon the scuffles and moans really did wake the dead, deep dreamers who fumbled at wakefulness, clutching at its sharp edges. Somebody threatened to shoot them unless they shut the hell up.

They congressed before a battered trailer hitched to a half-ton poxy with rust. Parker banged on its side a few times, metallic thumps that echoed in the dawn's early light.

Move it or lose it, came from inside.

Captin, we got ourselves a situation out here, Parker bellowed, think you'd better come out and have a looksee.

A threadbare curtain was pulled aside, revealing a sleep-stuck face, fierce, bloodshot eyes. Take care of it, Parker. That's what you was hired for, far as I can recollect.

Nossir. We need yer, Parker smirking like a big cat, expert advice.

A muttered oath from inside, then the door banged open and the captin was there, buck naked except for warpaint. The kid was jostled forward and tripped to the ground.

This young 'un here, Parker explained, had hisself a l'il shuteye while he was sposed to be mindin' the flock.

The captin rolled his eyes, petitioning the heavens for sanctuary from idjits. Dock him a week's wages, fer Chrissakes, and lemme get some--

Parker was shaking his head. Like I says, I caught him nappin' an' after I licked him good I did me a quick head count. Even the sleepyheads were listening now, wiping their eyes so they could hear better. An' we're three short, least by my reckonin'.

The captin swore and jumped out of the trailer, his pecker shrivelling like a burnt grape. In two strides he reached the boy, fisting his hair, hauling him to his feet.

Ain't you jes' the one, he hissed, ain't you jes' the sorriest fucker I ever set eyes on. He punched the kid, a short, brutal blow that split his lips and unbucked his teeth. Luckily for the kid, he keeled over in a dead faint so the captin could only snarl and throw him aside like a picked bone. How long they got on us?

This directed at Parker who was trying his damndest to keep a silly-ass grin off his ugly face. Can't say fer sure. Two, mebbe three hours. He don't know hisself and right about now I don't figger we need bother askin' him agin.

Was they rustled or--

Naw, Parker demurred, the injun says there's only three sets o' tracks. They jes' got the lonelies, cap, and now the silly-ass grin wouldn't be denied, they's a pinin' fer the green, green grass o' home.

Well then, the captin scratched himself thoughtfully, that ain't so bad, is it?

Not as bad as it could be, Parker agreed easy enough, but there's jes' one other l'il thing: one of them strays is the bay.

The captin groaned and looked like he was fit to scalp the kid still bleeding onto the brittle ground in front of him. Which maybe he would have if he'd thought it was worth his while.

Right you lazy bastids, he roared, up and at 'em! Socks and jocks, boys, we got us some ridin' to do.

The camp erupted in a flurry of activity, the men laughing and joking as they saddled up, bowed legs scissoring modified dirt bikes and squat ATV's, wristing their throttles, waiting for the word. The captin got a lusty cheer when he declared a bonus for whichever one o' you no-account sonsabitches what catches up with those nags.

The tracks be headed southeast, Parker screamed, and at the captin's signal they roared up the shallow side of the coulee, chewing up speargrass and flinging lethal divots of thistle.

The rest of the herd, spooked by the racket, started bawling and stampeding from one end of the corral to the other, banging against its sides, white-eyed and frothy-lipped. Not a prime bunch by any standards, scrawny, sway-backed mounts swollen with dropsy, afflicted by parasites and chronic mange. Once the search party was out of earshot, they bellied up the bars, clamouring for their first and only feeding of the day. But the men left behind paid them no heed. If the cowpokes returned and grub wasn't waiting for them there'd be hell to pay. Those dumb critters would have to wait their turn.

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It was the captin who spotted the injun first. He was hunkered down in a field of wild rapeseed about a half mile from the camp. He stood and waved to make sure they

saw him and waited for them to slash their way through the wide, bright yellow to reach him.

What say you, injun, the captin asked, betraying a kind of grudging respect.

The injun took his time, like always. He liked to play the part. He dusted off his hands, sniffed the air while they raced their engines and picked grit out of their teeth. Easy signs, he said finally, won't take long. Then he was loping away, covering ground in long, easy strides that made it look like he was walking on air. Southeast, he called back to them, keep goin'.

I jes' hope they don't get theyselves all cut up, the captin bitched, that bay alone is worth her weight in silver dollars.

With a wave, he sent them off again, skirting a narrow band of trees, the captin chaffing because of the time lost and fretting about dogs and cougars and anything else that might be wandering around these parts that's belly was empty and disposition poor.

But it sure enough was a glorious day to be alive and knowing it. Whorls of ground-hugging mist rising and dissipating, the lightening sky clear, the chill of the evening almost gone. The captin was bent over the handlebars, ass stuck up in the air, laughing like a madman and he knew without looking that the others felt the same.

Somehow the injun always managed to stay ahead of them, maybe because of the shortcuts he took, going places they couldn't, or maybe he knew secrets they weren't privy to. Maybe he was actually three injuns. Whenever they looked, there he was, gazelling through the tall grass, evaporating into the trees, a tireless runner, a bronzed ghost.

Less than an hour later they sighted the injun again, waving them on, shouting something they couldn't hear as they veered toward him, heeling the ground. Then the man nearest the captin was pointing and following his dirty finger the captin saw the strays.

They looked like they were on their last legs. The bay was practically dragging the others along but the chase was over and they all knew it. Two of them gave up without further struggle, cramped and exhausted, gulping air. The injun stood over them, talking to them, trying to keep them settled. But the bay wasn't having any of it. She broke away again, limping across the field, legs buckling, lungs threatening to burst.

Yippee ki yi, the captin hollered, slipping his lariat off his handlebars and making to cut her off. The others whooped encouragement but hung back, knowing it was his show. They contented themselves by circling the other two, skidding dangerously close while the injun stood nearby, shaking his head and laughing.

The bay did her best, bobbing and weaving, but she was too done in and the captin too good. His first toss settled over her shoulders and he hung on with one arm as he steered the bike away, pulling her off her bloody feet and dragging her a ways to take some of the fight out of her. But she had enough left in her to *hate*, showing her teeth and growling at him and he thought again what a prize she was.

He dropped the bike on its side and collected the rope in loops as he approached her, so full of himself that he almost lost a chunk of his leg when she lunged at him but he was just as quick and she only bit air.

Easy there, girl, he told her, chuckling, giving the rope a few vicious yanks just to remind her who was on the business end. Led us on a merry run, dint ya, he remarked, trying to keep it friendly.

You got no right, she started to say.

Yep, yep, I do, he answered back smartly. I gots the right and I gots the might. Slapping his leg, enjoying the joke on account of it being on her.

You gotta take us back, she panted, you got no right, she repeated and, again, all he did was laugh.

Reckon I won't--take you back that is. Then he pulled on the rope, tugging on it until she was standing. Git a move on now, helping her along with a boot to her bare backside.

They didn't give the strays much time to get their wind back. They were expected at the city stockyards by mid-week and maybe, just maybe, there was enough time left in the season for one more roundup. They drove the three ahead of them, whistling and rebel-yelling, even firing a few shots in the air until the captin made them quit. The bay led the way and, Lord, she looked proud, unbroken. A real thoroughbred, that one.

The corral was open and ready for them when they got back, the herd bunched together in one corner, mewling and squealing in fright.

*Git! Git! Git!* The strays were chased inside and the gate banged shut on their charges, all of them huddled and whipped except for the bay who stalked around the pen, churlishly refusing to eat any food, savaging the others when they tried to comfort her.

The cooks had biscuits cooling and bacon blackening in the skillet and fresh, strong coffee that scalded their insides. Afterward everyone was in such good spirits that Shorty felt compelled to favour them with a tune or two, the rest of them joining in on the bawdy parts, a few sneaking looks at the corral even though they knew it wasn't allowed to even *think* such things.

Well, a man can dream, can't he? These were strange times and maybe not even good times but at least the old urges were still there, reminding a man that he was still a man. And who knew? Maybe after a few more successful runs like this one they'd be able to afford mares of their own.

It was time to break camp. The roughnecks collapsed the corral, the prefab sections folding up as neat as napkins, and stowed it on the flatbeds faster than the injun could skin a rabbit.

The captin took point like usual with the injun, who didn't think much of noisy contraptions, trotting along beside him. The herd fell in behind, chaperoned by trailing riders who roused any stragglers, goosing them with prods if they got ornery.

The drive proceeded at a good, steady pace across a seemingly endless panorama of golden prairie, a burnished plain interrupted only by patches of scrubby chapparal and lonesome stands of poplar and spruce.

They were still at least a three days' ride from the city but the men's spirits were as high as the sky was wide and though the trail was long and the day hot and dusty, never was there heard a discouraging word.

End

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