

## Blood's Thicker'n Water

A cold beer—I'd give my left nut for a cold beer, but right now any such libation was a good three-day ride away, and my tongue is rattlin' round in my mouth makin' more racket than a pissed off diamondback. Hell, now that I think about it, the sound's likely coming from the pebble I've been sucking on bangin' against my teeth. It's a trick I picked up from a friendly Navaho I met on the trail 'bout a week back to keep my mouth from drying out. It's been working too, until now.

I let my horse have the last of my water yesterday—I think—though it might have been the day before. This blasted sun's got me addled, but I can't stop now.

My brother, God rest his soul, never was much account, but he was blood by God, and blood's thicker'n water.

I've been looking after my brother Jake ever since the Comanches killed our ma and pa, and he's always been a handful for damn sure.

Pa's kin back east—Boston if I recollect—had always considered him the black sheep of the family on account of the fact that he never fit into their highbrow way of life. He weren't much on schoolin' and was forever down at the dives on the dock raisin' hell. They finally sent him off with quite a stake after I started showin' in ma's belly. You see, ma came from the wrong side of town, and they couldn't have their eldest son disgracing the fine O'Chauncey name by marrying some floozy from the docks.

Pa dropped the "O" from his name when he came west, and after he staked his claim on a spread north of Lubbock, folks for miles around simply knew him as Chauncey, the owner of the C bar O Ranch. Pa used to get a kick out of telling Jake and me the story of his family back east, and he'd damn near bust a gut when he got to the part where he came up with our brand, the C bar O.

"The joke's in the brand," he used to say, "C minus O."

That was as much of the three "R's" as he was likely to teach me and Jake, and if you asked him, all we needed to know. Ma didn't share his lowly opinion of learnin' and she spent many an hour teaching us readin', 'ritin' and 'rithmetic though I can't say as it done much good.

I was seventeen when the Comanches came, and Jake was a just a week shy of his fifteenth birthday. Pa had us out rounding up strays when we heard the shots back at the ranch. We rode hell-bent for leather, but by the time we got back, it was all over.

We buried them side-by-side on a small knoll that overlooked our ranch, and then took off after them damn Comanches.

It probably weren't the smartest thing I ever done, but like I already said, blood's thicker'n water.

We caught up to the Comanches four days later, and rode through their camp with guns a blazin'. By the time it was all said and done, the world was lighter by eight raidin' Comanches, and we hadn't picked up nothin' that wouldn't heal. Gotta give Jake his due, he got three of the bastards on his own, but I think that's where his trouble really started.

You see, Jake was lightning fast with a six-shooter—and he knew it too—but he was too fast to be any good. Oh, he could shuck iron so damn quick you had to pinch yourself to see if'n you was dreamin', but the boy just couldn't hit diddly squat.

Me, I was a mite slower than my little brother, but when I slapped the trigger the bullet always followed my eyes. Fact is, I'll be damned if I can recollect the last time I missed.

Anyways, like I was saying, Jake always was a handful, and forever lookin' for trouble. Back in Durango, he found it, and then some.

We'd just driven a small herd of long-horns north to Denver and were tyin' one on a'fore we turned our ponies south. We'd sold the herd for more than I'd hoped, so I was buying for my small crew. We was six strong when we left the ranch, but only five of us stood at the bar on that starless night.

We lifted our first shot of whiskey to the memory of Frances Clayborne—Clay as we called him. He was one of the finest brush poppers you was ever likely to see, but one of our meanest steers caught him a'foot—pants down to boot—and the damn critter ripped him open pecker to gullet.

It was Jake who done found him, and he put a bullet into Clay's noggin purely out of mercy. That's just the sort of man my brother Jake was—surly as a sidewinder when he had a belly fulla' whiskey, then damn near a saint when he sobered up. Sure he was a cocky bastard, but like I done told you, it was mostly for good reason.

But, on that night, Jake was in rare form. We were chasing our shots with cold beer, and by the second round Jake had his eye on a pretty young thing sittin' with our crew. Rare was the woman who could resist Jake's charm, but this little filly was one of the few. She'd set her heart on our foreman, Taylor McCoy, and she weren't about to take no for an answer.

McCoy had been the foreman on our ranch for as long as I could remember, so he weren't no spring chicken, but after seeing him finish his business in the privy a few years back, I can damn sure tell you the man was hung like an Appaloosa. This here barfly had heard of his reputation and she planned on giving the Texas stud a taste of her spurs.

As for me, I'd stepped out back to take a piss, so I didn't see what happened, and I'll forever curse my weak bladder. The rest of the boys told me the story clear enough, but if I'd only been there, I might have stopped the foolishness.

You see, Jake called McCoy out; the same McCoy we'd growed up with, and all over some two-bit hussy.

I think I already done told you McCoy weren't no spring chicken, but age aside, the man was nothing but rawhide and barbwire. He tried to talk to Jake, but my little brother weren't having nothing of it.

I heard the shots, and barely took time to shake my dick before I stuffed it in my britches and ran back into the bar.

Jake was on the ground holding his chest, doing a piss poor job of keeping his blood off the sawdust floor. I heard a horse galloping off into the darkness and looked up to see the saloon's batwing doors still swinging.

McCoy had quickly figured the odds, and hit the dirt running. Foreman or not, right or wrong, he'd spilt Chauncey blood, and he knew what that meant.

I took the time to give Jake a proper funeral, and then lit out on McCoy's trail before it was too cold.

That was two weeks ago, and right now, I was beginning to wonder if I'd ever see Texas again. Over the past couple'a weeks McCoy done run me up the crick and over the mountain.

He's a straight shooter too, and I know that doin' what I got to do ain't gonna bring me no joy.

I know he's got that Henry rifle he favors, and I've watched him nail a crow at near a quarter mile with it, but he weren't the type to bushwhack me even though I'd damn sure given him plenty'a chances to do just that. He even made sure he left water for my horse and me when he came on one of the desert tanks. Like I said, he's a real straight up hombre—and I'm proud to call him a friend.

My damn eyeballs are so dry they're making more noise than a gate with a rusty hinge every time I look side to side, but they still seem to be workin' fair to middlin' and unless I'm seein' things, those buzzards over the next ridge have found their supper.

'Course they're still circlin' mighty high, so whatever they're fixin' to eat must not be quite dead yet.

Rumor at the last trading post was that some young Apache bucks were ridin' the war-path here 'bouts, so I rolled out'a the saddle to take cover between a pair of fair sized rocks.

I stayed put for a good couple hours and those damn buzzards were still hangin' high in the sky, so I figured I'd saddle up and move in for a closer look-see.

I slipped the thong off my Colt and checked to see that I had a round chambered in my Winchester. I knew I did of course, but a body can't be too careful, 'specially with a passel of Apache's running amok.

When I made it just below the crest of the small ridge, I stepped out of the saddle and left my horse ground hitched while I belly crawled to the top—being ever mindful of the fact that damn near every livin' thing 'round this here God forsaken country had claws, thorns or fangs.

It took me a few minutes, but I finally spotted the buzzard's future feast. It was McCoy's buckskin, and from here the poor Cayuse looked like a damn pincushion—it was that full of arrows. Left afoot in these parts a man was as good as dead, Apaches or no.

I couldn't see McCoy from where I was hunkered down, but my guess was that he was pinned between his dead horse and a decent sized boulder a few feet away. So far I hadn't seen hide nor hair of any Apaches, and that's what really had me frettin'.

McCoy and I might have a score to settle, but I damn sure couldn't let those redskin's get his hair. I slithered back down the ridge to my horse and quickly mounted up. The sun was fixin' to drop outta the cloudless cobalt sky and I figured McCoy could use my help sooner rather than later. Mostly the Apaches wouldn't attack after sundown—on account of the fact that they figure any brave killed in the dark is forever doomed to wander the hereafter in some kind of limbo—but then again, you never could tell with young bucks.

I gave the spurs to my horse and cut loose with the Colt at every bush I thought might hold an Apache as I hightailed it down the ridge. McCoy—God bless him—heard me coming and started slingin' lead to cover my approach.

My horse was good stock, and when I reined him in behind the dead buckskin, he rolled to the hard-packed dirt with me. I put my gloved hand over his eyes and whispered into his hairy ear, "Easy boy, stay down now." And he did just that.

My hat was sittin' kinda funny on my thick skull and when I took it off to see what the problem was, I was surprised to see an arrow still stuck in it.

"Damn you heathen injuns! I just bought this hat in Denver!" I yelled, and then stood up and let loose with a few shots from the Winchester.

I dropped back down and felt something smack me in the butt. I filled my hand with my Colt, and then realized it was just a half empty canteen. Though I was sorely tempted to take a quick swig, I soaked my bandana and offered the first few precious drops to my horse. After I'd made sure he'd wet his whistle, I took a small sip myself, before turning to toss the now almost empty canteen to McCoy.

"Mighty obliged," I said.

"Took you long enough," McCoy replied.

And that was that. Our business would keep until we got outta this here fix—something my dear ol' ma woulda' likely called a predicament—if'n she was still alive and kickin' that is.

We spent the night shootin' at shadows, but them Apaches left us alone.

"Think they're gone?" I finally asked when it was light enough to see.

"Nope."

"Me neither."

"You fired me yet?" McCoy asked.

"Why in the hell would I fire the best damn foreman west of the Mississippi?" I answered.

"Then you're still the boss," he said.

"Reckon so."

"Whatch'a wanna do boss?"

I thought for a minute before answering, and I didn't like where my mind went.

"How many rounds do you have?"

"Donno. Not many, we've been burning power purdy steady most of the night," he said.

"A thinkin' man might be of the opinion that them injuns can count."

"You mean they're trying to wait us out? Why those dirty sons a' bitches!"

The way I had it figured, sitting here in the sun was just playin' into the Apache's hand. It was time to call or fold, and I weren't nowhere near to tossin' in my cards yet.

"We might could make it back to the fort, but if'n they've a mind to follow us, it'll be tight," I said.

"You get mounted up boss, and I'll keep their mangy heads down."

So I done just that, and when I was sittin' firm on the hurricane deck, I turned back and gave them Apaches another taste of my lead to remember us by.

I gave my horse the spurs, not that he needed much encouragement mind you, and reached down to hoist McCoy's lanky ass up behind me. And just like that, pretty as you please, we was outta that there predicament.

We was ridin' like a bat outta' hell and I was feelin' might full of myself when the brave came up out of the sand in front of us with his lance all ready to go to work.

Him I could handle, I just thumbed back the hammer on my Colt and let'er rip; but I never seen the other brave off to my right.

McCoy tried to warn me, but it weren't no use, my ears were all full up with the roar of my revolver when he yelled.

I watched out of the corner of my eye as McCoy did a damn fool thing—the bastard reached out and tried to stop the blasted arrow with his hand. Like I said, it were a damn fool thing to do 'cause the arrow went clean through his hand and then into my side.

And the next thing ya know, we've got ourselves in a 'nother one of those there predicaments on account of the fact that my foreman's hand was now pinned to my side, and my head was startin' to spin somethin' fierce.

"This is gonna hurt me a heap worse than you hoss," I said, "So you'd better hold on tight."

"Well do what you gotta do, and let's get the hell out'a here."

I took the time to lash my left hand to the horn, and then reached down and pulled the arrow out of my side and his hand. It felt like I'd just been gutted with a dull knife, and then the lights went out.

The next thing I knowed, I was laying in this here bed, clean sheets and all, with nary an idea of where the hell here was.

I tried to sit up and my head started to spin like it does when I've had a mite too much rot-gut, and my side seemed to be blazing hotter than a Texas brush fire.

I heard a voice, off in the distance like, and wondered at the words, "The fever's done got him now. It's gonna be touch and go for a spell."

But right now, I think I must have passed the worst of it, 'cause I'm feelin' fit as a fiddle.

I sat up and swung my feet off the bed only to feel that spinnin' start up again.

"You 'bout ready to quit your lollygagging'? I been waitin' here the better part of two weeks now and it's getting' mighty tiresome," McCoy said from a nearby rocking chair.

"What in tarnation are you flappin' your gums about?"

"I'm getting' too damn old to be runnin', an' I want to settle this here and now. I figure you've got a hole in your side, and my gun hand's still mighty stiff, so's I reckon we're 'bout as close to a fair fight as I'm likely to get."

"Chasin' you all over God's creation *was* startin' to wear on me," I said.

"Course it was. You forgettin' who the hell taught you to track? Only thing is, I didn't teach you everything I done learned after all these years."

"Fetch me my six-shooter then, and we can get this here show on the road."

"It's right there on the bedpost."

"What the hell do you think you're doing young man? You get back in that bed this instant!" a portly gray haired spinster scolded as she burst into the room with fresh linens.

I have to admit, I was a mite put out. I was almost twenty years old for Pete's sake, and that sure weren't young in my book.

"Sorry for the trouble ma'am, but I done laid here in this fine bed long enough, and if you're the one that's been tending me, I'm mighty 'bliged. Fact is, I'd like to pay you for your trouble."

“Hummph. I’m just the housekeeper, and the Don wouldn’t think of taking a cent for being a Good Samaritan. He’d tell you himself, but he’s off in Tucson on business.”

“Just the same, I’d feel a bit out of sorts if’n I weren’t to leave something for your trouble,” I said as I hitched up my britches.

“I got ya covered boss. Don Romero was telling me how hard it is to come by good breeding cows out here in the desert, and I gave him my word that you’d bring him some prime stock come spring.”

“Ya done good then. Ma’am, we’ll be beggin’ your leave now.”

“A fool’s errand you’ll be off to then, and good riddance,” she snipped as she swished out of the room.

“Boss?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve got some pay comin’ and I’d like you to give it to widow Holstead.”

“You sweet on her you ol’ dog you?”

McCoy just turned all red ‘round the ears.

“Been thinkin’ every time my fool head came up for air,” I said.

“Boss, I don’t mean no disrespect, but you know damn good and well that stove up or no, I’m no match for you with a six-shooter, so let’s just step outside and dance. I done made my peace with my maker, but you should know that I’m mighty sorry ‘bout Jake.”

I ignored him, “I’ve heard tell that when an Injun wants to bring a white man into his tribe, they both cut their hands and then shake so’s the blood can mix. It makes the white man a blood brother or some such thing, and a bona-fide member of the tribe.”

I figured Ma would be proud of my two-bit word.

“Those redskin’s are a heathen bunch for damn sure,” he said.

“The way I got it figured, your blood got all mixed up in mine when we got stuck with that Apache arrow.”

“Boss, quit beatin’ round the bush.”

McCoy might have been ready for a trip up to glory, but it weren’t gonna be me that sent him on his merry way.

“I reckon we’re kin now, and you remember what my pappy used to say?”

“Blood’s thicker’n water.”

“Damn straight. Come on, we got us a ranch to run.”