

## The Birthday Gift

Paul Tanner was going to get his daughter that birthday pony no matter what, god damnit. He'd done bad things before, spent some time in jail, but he was in over his head today. He shook his head at the thought of what Lacey'd say to him, too feverish to get out of bed but not enough to shake her head and say 'oh daddy.'

He leaned into the crest of the pony, stroking the scared beast's neck. He could feel the capital A of the brand scar under his calloused hands. Even scared, exhausted and carrying too much weight, Amesly had the pony trained well.

Paul returned to his ramshackle shed by the river; the spirit man Wild Feather sat in front, smoking a cigarette.

"It is done," Wild Feather said. "Her spirit is bound, and calm."

"And the sickness?"

"That is a sickness of man, not the spirits, Tanner. She will need medicine."

"But what you did, the ritual, that'll make things better, right?"

"Hard to say."

"God damn it, man, just give me a straight answer!"

Dust cloud from a pack of horses kicked up in the distance. Wild Feather stood, stomping out the cigarette. Paul nodded to him, and he headed back into the shed. Soon, the mob had surrounded Paul, most armed with cudgels, some with pistols. Amesly, with a fresh black eye, sat on a horse, a Winchester rifle held at the hip.

"Tanner, I'm disappointed," Amesly said.

"You can go to hell, Amesly."

Wild Feather stumbled out of the shack, the color drained from his face. Murmurs chained through the crowd when they noticed a viscous black ichor, like pitch, staining his arms to the elbow. Wild Feather had the walk of a man too drunk, but he maintained his balance, and he was babbling like a child.

"What's gotten into him," Amesly said, dismounting. Wild Feather fell to his knees, twenty paces from the nearest man, eyes shut.

Amesly stepped closer, shouldering the Winchester, "What in the bloody hell, red man?" Wild Feather opened his eyes and black pitch bubbled out. Amesly jumped back, dropping the rifle to his hip and fired.

In the distance, blackness seemed to spill out of the shed, swallowing the light. An arm appeared, bracing a figure against the door.

"Lacey, get back inside," Paul shouted. "Get inside!"

Lacey staggered out of the shed, her gown black and wet.

"Get your girl inside, Tanner."

"Lacey, you get back inside, damnit!"

Amesly turned his back. "Where's the god damn doctor?"

She came closer and something was wrong. Even in its loose fit, irregular protrusions and joints stuck out from under the gown. She seemed to not hear their shouting. When she got to Wild Feather, they could see all of her.

Railroad spikes stuck out from her eyes sockets, which held up the shorn skin of her face. The skin fluttered, its jagged edges stained with blood, sticking in various spots to the head of the creature. Below its nose, a gruesome set of two jaws, opened wide like a snake, and then snapped shut, over and over again. The speed of its clicking increased and it moved its jaws side to side, as if trying to pop it back into place.

Amesly lowered the rifle, but was too slow. All Paul could hear was the flapping of the soaked night gown as it hit skin. He closed his eyes and pretended that it was the sound of Lacey flapping out his wet shirts from when she could still do laundry by the river.

The sound of rending flesh, that was just antelope being skinned for jerky. The gurgling of men dying in their own blood, just the river moving over smooth stones. The screams, the screams he couldn't pretend were something else. Paul didn't know how long things had been silent; it was the pony tugging at him that finally broke him out of his trance.

Around him, he counted the bodies. Some had escaped, but not Amesly. His hands still clutched the Winchester, his face torn from left cheek to the crown of his head. Bone and muscle exposed, blood glistening in the sun. Paul pried the Winchester from the dead man's hands. "Come on girl," he said, pulling the pony with him.

Paul came upon the creature by the river. It seemed skittish, skulking up and down the running water. It turned to him, the railroad spikes trained directly at his face. He felt his soul being

pierced by its gaze.

“Easy, easy now baby,” Paul said. “I got you your pony. You always wanted a pony.”

The pony pulled at the reins, its composure cracking, Amesly’s training giving way to natural instincts. The creature came forward, hunching, its fingers cracking and bending in unnatural ways. “Go on, baby, it’s your birthday present.”

Before the pony could rear back, the creature had its arms around its neck, teeth sinking into the throat. Paul dove to the side as the pair crashed to the ground. The bleating sounds the pony chilled him more than the screams of the men and he felt guilt that he sympathized with the beast more than the townspeople. Soon, the pony had stopped struggling.

He watched the river move and he wondered where they would go now. Wet, smacking sounds drowned out the river as Lacey ate. A snap of the pony’s tendon made Paul alert again. He stood, looking up and down the river for any coming dust clouds. He pat the back of the creature, the skin rumpling into folds.

“Don’t you worry, baby. Everything’s gonna be all right.”

The creature with Lacey’s face started to gibber, its jaw clicking back and forth. Blood ran down the cracks in the skin, dripping off the chin from beneath the loose skin. Paul bent down and kissed its forehead.

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you,” he whispered as the creature with Lacey’s face continued to eat.