

The Legend of Evan Goneman

By Derek Zhang

Preface

This novel was written and dedicated to Sophie Hsieh. I wrote this novel because of a running joke between me and an old companion, Evan Scherer, when he would infamously leave his computer for extended periods of time. This earned him the ad hoc alias "Evan Goneman", whom I decided to craft into the Ghost of the West, a notorious legend known exclusively for—you guessed it—being gone. I put a strenuous effort into this story, and I believe it is my proudest creative work. Without further stalling, please enjoy the Legend of Evan Goneman.

Chapter 1

Life in the Arid Valley is tranquil. There were never any gunshots, or commotions, or the dreadful noise of the bank vault being raided. There was only the bustling townspeople, and the subtle scent of sweat in the spring sunshine, and the gentle munching of the horses in the town stable during feeding time. This town, renowned for being unremarkable, a forgotten settlement, only held together through permanent residents. Browntown never found visitors. Once upon a time, it was booming, and immigrants from all directions came to find a new life. That time has passed. Now, even a shout from a mischievous lad or a shriek from a wildcat would disturb the peaceful atmosphere in the uneventful streets. Scythes cut into stalks of corn, plows ran through fertile ground, seeds were scattered left and right into carefully dug soil. This town had all that it needed to be successful. Situated with many an acre of impossibly forgiving dirt and gravel, which bore food like no other farm, as well as a town barn filled to its capacity with chickens, sheep, cows, and scurrying rodents, there was no worry to how many mouths were fed by the day. Hay bales were stacked up high to the roofs of the fine maplewood houses. Dozens of horses lined the stable, each one given a special name to display their purpose and skill. Barrels, wheelbarrows, and crates lined the streets, and a wavy cobbled path had been carved into the ambered sands. No man here owned a gun, save the sheriff, who always carried a silver-lined revolver in his leather holster. He'd never drawn that weapon. Everyone hoped he'd never have to. The town, despite being merely a few hundred feet in length, and a few more hundred feet in width, had more space than it even needed. The residents here included only several family names. Of them, the Altersons were the most prevalent. One man owned most of the farm plots, and his wealth was abundant compared to the typical run-of-the-mill banker or bartender in Browntown. This was Gerald Alterson, a proud father and a long-time cultivator who built his assets through decades of effort and perseverance. Today, especially, was a big day for Alterson. He would be celebrating his eldest son's birthday. Townspeople went to and fro, many of them preparing gifts to give to the young boy, some others unbothered by the occasion. On this fateful event, Seth was carrying the hay bales to the big barn near their home.

"Dad, I reckon this may be the last one we need to bring in," Seth calls as he catches his breath. For a man turning 19 today, this frail teen was being awfully overworked. He didn't mind. Every day brought in more blue-collared chores, and if it meant helping out his father, Seth would help out in any way he could.

"Well done, Seth," Gerald gives two good pats on his sweaty son's thin back. "Let's get inside and have supper."

The boy gave a reassured smile, and walked tiredly home beside his dad. Seth was a hard-working honest boy, and even when he was little, at an age younger than 5 years, he wanted to follow in his father's legacy. Whether it was farm work, animal feeding, or watching over his younger siblings, he could do them all, and he did do them all. He had never even left Browntown. He'd get on his beloved horse, Betty, and gallop the outskirts of the sandy dry roads, wondering what lay beyond the dusts and winds of the valley. Life was comfortable here, where food was plentiful, the climate was rarely punishing, the steady chattering in the saloon made the town sing by day and hum by night. It was believed that past the valleys, there was only cactus and deadbush and rattlesnakes for hundreds of miles. It was Arizona, after all. This cozy people and bundle of houses was all that Seth knew. He'd often dream of one day inheriting the farm that his father broke his back nurturing for years. He'd have nightmares, too. Nightmares of rogue horseback thieves ransacking the village. Nightmares of his family being slaughtered by the smoking barrel of a deafening gun. Nightmares of having to leave this warm place of Browntown behind. He'd wake up in cold sweat, wondering whether any of it really happened. It never did. Nonetheless, he still feared that day that could end his life as he knew it. He wanted to find a bride, create a little batch of young running children, die in his bed in the company of all the townspeople. This day was yet to come. Seth relished this future, this future that was all he wanted or needed. He shook his head, returning to what was presently at hand. He was sitting in his pine wood chair, the center one among a finely furnished table that had been scrubbed clean, among ten chairs of equal proportion yet none had the special boy sitting atop the seat, staring keenly at the strawberry cake decorated with an assortment of raspberries, blackberries, blueberries, even cranberries. The thin, slender

red wax candles were already lit. Seth watched the kindled flames wave gently, then looked up to see the whole house of Alterson gazing back at him. He felt a smidge nervous. Today was his big day.

"Make your wish, son," Gerald whispers, amidst Mrs. Alterson, John, Hellen, Markus, Micah, and a cooing toddler called Mary. Seth closes his eyes, and wishes that this life could last forever. His mud-brown eyes then come open again, and he fills his lungs with cool dusky spring breath before blowing away the fragile sparks laid on his cake. The room grew dim, and Mrs. Alterson drew the window blinds apart to allow the sunset's golden brown rays into the dining room. Everyone cheered and clapped. John, especially, shook Seth's shoulder playfully.

"Looks like my big brother's gettin' even older," John remarks, a firm, callused hand resting on Seth.

"Yeah. I can drink now," Seth replies with a chuckle and a sigh. "Though the taste never gets any better." The family, or rather, the dear siblings of Seth Alterson, take up their terracotta-stained ceramic plates and silver forks. They were peckish creatures, these ones, and the sweet waft of cane sugar in the cake was endearing enough to make a grizzly bear drool. Seth took up his trusty pocket knife, which he'd held closely in his belt since he received it from his uncle five-or-so years ago, and sliced up the strawberry delight into eight neat pieces. They each took up their own share, with Gerald taking the second-to-last portion and Seth enjoying the final remnant of the dessert. Mary was the loudest in this room, screaming ecstatically like a child getting presents. The others were older, and simply enjoyed their fraction of the treat while licking their stained lips.

"Mom's cookin' never gets any worse," Micah chimes, sticking his four-pronged utensil into his layered spongy slice. Mrs. Alterson grins cheekily. Flattery was always one of her weaknesses.

"Aw, well, y'all's are forgettin' this is my oldest son's birthday here. I put in lots o' time makin' that cake, even borrowed some fresher berries from ol' Uncle Jeremy!"

Seth looks somberly at his warm, loving family. He'd already finished his slice of cake. As was family tradition, it was almost time for presents. Gerald glances over at an idling Seth. He was still munching on a good bite of strawberry cake,

but he quickly swallowed and put the plate down. Seth's father calls everyone to listen.

"Let's simmer down, lads," he shouts softly. "The gift opening will begin soon."

Seth chuckles softly to himself. He looks up at his father, who is currently licking delicate crumbs off of his thumb and fingers.