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# The Old Sheriff

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Swirls of dust followed the stagecoach that was moving along the old tote road. The driver, sitting high up on the front, held the reins loosely, letting the four horses travel at their own pace. They had left the last station hours before and the horses had settled into a steady trot. His partner sat next to him holding his shotgun between his knees. Their long brown hair, trimmed the same, closely cropped beards, narrow faces, and deeply sunken eyes identified them as brothers. The heat of the morning was already oppressive and tiny beads of sweat clung to their brows, half hidden by the shadows cast by the wide brims of their hats.

Inside the carriage, the temperature was barely tolerable. The old man, his long white hair and scraggly beard both unkempt, leaned into the corner of his seat. His head bobbed up and down gently almost in sync with the regular joggling of the coach on the rough trail. The wetness of his shirt was comfortable against his skin. His buckskin jacket, fully buttoned, felt heavy and uncomfortably hot now, but it would keep him warm during the cool night.

He watched the other travelers through half-opened eyes. The young woman facing him, her red ruffled dress cut low in front to emphasize her generous breasts, made him wonder if she was a dancer moving to a new job. The small multicolored paper fan she fluttered in front of her face seemed only to speed the fine rivulets of sweat that traveled down her cheeks. A middle-aged man in a dark suit carrying a holstered gun around his waist sat next to her. He took an occasional swallow from the silver flask he kept in his jacket pocket. He'd offered the old man a drink but Calvin had declined. Maybe a gambler, Calvin thought.

He looked down at the youngster sitting next to him, his light brown neatly cut hair matched the color of his canvas pants and his blue eyes the color of the new denim jacket his mother had made for him. Jeremiah was a good boy and Calvin was proud to have him as a grandson. For a moment he wondered what the two of them were doing on the stagecoach. Then he remembered. He'd been living with his son but his frailties were more than his son could handle. It was more than arthritis and more than his ever-present

tremor and slowness in getting chores done. He was becoming forgetful and he'd gotten confused a couple of times and wandered off. Calvin's two kids had decided that Emma, his daughter, had more time to look after him. She had sent her son, Jeremiah, to travel with Calvin to the ranch she and her husband ran. His children had decided Grandpa needed a companion for the trip.

Calvin didn't like the idea of depending on his family. It had always been the other way around. He felt much more comfortable looking after them. Besides, he'd spent his life as a lawman, taking care of everyone. He hadn't wanted to retire as sheriff but his health had dictated the decision. He missed being a lawman, but hardest for him was his difficulty remembering. At first it had just been names of old friends, but then he began forgetting tasks he was supposed to do and mislaying belongings around the house. He knew he was in trouble the two times he got lost.

Looking out the open stagecoach window he could see waves of heat rising from the parched earth that stretched to the blue horizon. He wondered how the few scrubby trees survived the perpetual dryness. He smiled thinking about the many times he had ridden across this arid terrain chasing rustlers and bandits. This was the first time he had traveled it in a stagecoach. He preferred doing it on horseback.

"How you doing, boy?" he asked his grandson.

"Fine, Gramps," he answered, "but it's hot."

"I think I got us some water," Calvin said. "Don't quite remember where I put it."

"It's under the seat," Jeremiah said, pointing to the small space.

Reaching his hand down, Calvin found the canteen and handed it to the boy. Jeremiah took a long swallow.

"Maybe you should unbutton your jacket, Gramps," he said. "It might make you cooler."

"Yes, you're right," Calvin answered, sitting up straight and fiddling with the top button.

The rumbling of the coach was suddenly interrupted by the sound of gunshots coming from a distance. Looking out the window, Calvin could see a new cloud of dust.

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“What’s that?” Jeremiah asked.

“Dunno—could be a bunch of outlaws, but then again, maybe not,” Calvin said.

At the same moment, they could hear the driver snap the reins, urging the horses forward.

“I guess they’re outlaws,” the gambler said.

“Think we can outrun ’em?” the woman asked nervously.

“I hope so,” he answered.

“Are we close to the next station?” Jeremiah asked.

“Hard to say,” Calvin said.

“What’ll happen?” Jeremiah asked.

“Well, I hope the guy riding shotgun can hold ’em off,” he said, “but most of the time they got that figured out and there’s usually a bunch of ’em.”

The chase didn’t last long. It was only minutes before the firing ended and one of the outlaws grabbed the reins and stopped the coach. Moments later, the door next to Calvin was ripped open by another outlaw.

“OK, everybody out,” he said, his words full of bravado, “and drop your guns on the ground.”

That one’s just a boy, Calvin thought, seeing the softness of his cheeks beneath the fine lanugo hair of his thin scraggly beard. Calvin remembered it all from years before, teenaged boys masquerading as tough men in their newly acquired adult bodies. Bursting with misdirected energy and aggression, they were always getting into trouble.

“I said get out now,” the young man said, louder this time, “and drop the guns.”

The dancer climbed down from the carriage. Lifting up one side of her dress with a dramatic flourish, she pulled out a derringer from a small black leather holster attached to her calf. The gambler followed, dropping his holster and gun on the ground. The boy came out next and then reached up to help his Gramps out. Getting up, Calvin felt off balance and almost fell. The gambler rushed over to help steady him. Once standing, the old man held up his hands to the outlaw, the fine tremor easily visible. The scrawny stranger nodded at him.

The passengers and the bearded brothers huddled together, the hot sun searing down on them, while two of the gang pulled off all the cases from the roof and then the belongings from inside the carriage. The third bandit kept a shotgun trained on his prisoners. The two men inspected the inside of each bag and case carefully.

The other two ain’t much older than the first one, Calvin thought. He felt glad that Emma kept a tight rein on Jeremiah. The boy would grow up to be a good man.

Looking inside a large case, one of the outlaws shouted, “I got the bank gold right here.”

It was what they were looking for. Calvin nodded knowingly to himself. There must have been an accomplice—an informant—who had tipped them off about the gold shipment. He remembered from the old days.

One of the other gang members yelled, “Get that bunch back in the coach.” He appeared to be the leader.

The driver helped Calvin get in and the other passengers started to follow as the three outlaws clustered together, watching and talking.

“What are they talking about?” the dancer whispered.

“Probably about whether to steal the horses,” the driver responded softly.

They watched the men move in unison toward the horses. They began cutting the reins.

“Hey, you can’t do that,” the gambler shouted at the men. “You took our water and it’s roasting out here. We’re gonna die.”

The gang members looked blankly at the passengers, some still climbing into the carriage. One of the outlaws shrugged his shoulders.

“Are they gonna let us die?” Jeremiah asked.

“That’s exactly what they’re planning to do,” the driver said.

“But I got to get home. My mom told me to take good care of Gramps and get him home safe,” Jeremiah responded, tears welling up in his eyes.

Calvin put his arm around the boy’s shoulders. Yep, and I got to get him home safe to his mom, too, he thought.

“You can’t leave us here to die,” the dancer screamed.

“Lady, shut up or you’re gonna die right now,” one of the gang members shouted back, waving his gun. The three moved together toward the wide open carriage door as the last passengers took their seats inside.

I got to get us to Emma’s place, Calvin again thought. Me and the boy are not gonna die out here.

Calvin felt the bulge on the left side of his chest underneath his jacket. For the last 20 years, since he retired, he’d gotten into the habit of wearing a shoulder holster. After all those years as a lawman, he felt half dressed without a gun.

His pistol had saved his life more than once. Usually just his holding it was enough to have his adversary step down, but when alcohol and youthful bravado were in the picture, someone always got injured or killed. He had usually tried to wound them but sometimes that didn’t work. If they were local boys it was especially hard having to tell their mothers.

He’d never used the shouldered gun in all those years since he retired. His son had chuckled more than once, watching him cleaning it carefully and then putting it on every morning.

He wondered if he was still any good with a six-shooter. I guess I shoulda practiced once in a while, he thought. I wish there was another way to get this done. Besides, I hate for Jeremiah to witness this.

He carefully opened the top buttons on his jacket. The darkness inside the carriage hid the slow tremulous movement of his hand reaching inside.

He held the gun out with both hands for only a moment, aiming with well-remembered skill. One hand was all it ever took before but right now the gun felt steadier with two. I hope I do this right, Calvin thought.

“One, two, three,” he whispered to himself. It happened without warning to the outlaws—three shots rang out in rapid succession and three shouts followed. The others in the coach looked outside and then turned toward the old man inside. Acrid smoke filled the small space.

“Look,” the boy whispered, his eyes bright shining globes in the dark shadows of the carriage. The old stories about Grandpa were true. He pointed out the open door. All three outlaws lay on the ground. Two were grabbing their legs, the third was still.

“We do sure owe you,” the gambler said, taking a deep breath and looking at Calvin.

“Me and my brother will get the horses and load everything up again,” the driver announced. “You all tend to them fellers and see if you can get them up onto the top of the coach. They look like they’re in a bad way but we’ll treat them better than they would have treated us.”

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*Neurology* 2014;82;2142-2144  
DOI 10.1212/WNL.0000000000000501

**This information is current as of June 9, 2014**

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