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For Sara Ossana
très belle
très claire
très fidèle

Part I

1.

MATILDA JANE ROBERTS WAS naked as the air. Known throughout south Texas as the Great Western, she came walking up from the muddy Rio Grande holding a big snapping turtle by the tail. Matilda was almost as large as the skinny little Mexican mustang Gus McCrae and Woodrow Call were trying to saddle-break. Call had the mare by the ears, waiting for Gus to pitch the saddle on her narrow back, but the pitch was slow in coming. When Call glanced toward the river and saw the Great Western in all her plump nakedness, he knew why: young Gus McCrae was by nature distractable; the sight of a naked, two-hundred-pound whore carrying a full-grown snapping turtle had captured his complete attention, and that of the rest of the Ranger troop as well.

"Look at that, Woodrow," Gus said. "Matty's carrying that old turtle as if it was a basket of peaches."

"I can't look," Call said. "I'll lose my grip and get kicked—and I've done been kicked." The mare, small though she was, had already displayed a willingness to kick and bite. Call knew that if he loosened his grip on her ears even slightly, he could count on getting kicked, or bitten, or both.

Long Bill Coleman, lounging against his saddle only a few yards from where the two young Rangers were struggling with the little mustang, watched Matilda approach, with a certain trepidation. Although it was only an hour past breakfast, he was already drunk. It seemed to Long Bill, in his tipsy state, that the Great Western was walking directly toward him with her angry catch. It might be that she meant to use the turtle as some kind of weapon—or so Long Bill surmised. Matilda Roberts despised debt, and carried grudges freely and at length. Bill knew himself to be considerably in arrears, the result of a persistent lust coupled with a vexing string of losses at cards. At the moment, he didn't have a red cent and knew that he was unlikely to have one for days, or even weeks to come. If Matilda, who was whimsical, chose to call his debt, his only recourse might be to run; but Long Bill was in no shape to run, and

in any case, there was no place to run to that offered the least prospect of refuge. The Rangers were camped on the Rio Grande, west of the alkaline Pecos. They were almost three hundred miles from the nearest civilized habitation, and the country between them and a town was not inviting.

"When's the next payday, Major?" Long Bill inquired, glancing at his leader, Major Randall Chevallie.

"That woman acts like she might set that turtle on me," he added, hoping that Major Chevallie would want to issue an order or something. Bill knew that there were military men who refused to allow whores within a hundred feet of their camp—even whores not armed with snapping turtles.

Major Chevallie had only spent three weeks at West Point—he left because he found the classes boring and the discipline vexing. He nonetheless awarded himself the rank of major after a violent scrape in Baltimore convinced him that civilian life hemmed a man in with such a passel of legalities that it was no longer worth pursuing. Randall Chevallie hid on a ship, and the ship took him to Galveston; upon disembarking at that moist, sandy port, he declared himself a major and had been a major ever since.

Now, except for the two young Rangers who were attempting to saddle the Mexican mare, his whole troop was drunk, the result of an incautious foray into Mexican territory the day before. They had crossed the Rio Grande out of boredom, and promptly captured a donkey cart containing a few bushels of hard corn and two large jugs of mescal, a liquor of such potency that it immediately unmanned several of the Rangers. They had been without spirits for more than a month—they drank the mescal like water. In fact, it tasted a good deal better than any water they had tasted since crossing the Pecos.

The mescal wasn't water, though; two men went blind for awhile, and several others were troubled by visions of torture and dismemberment. Such visions, at the time, were not hard to conjure up, even without mescal, thanks to the folly of the unfortunate Mexican whose donkey cart they had captured. Though the

Rangers meant the man no harm—or at least not much harm—he fled at the sight of gringos and was not even out of earshot before he fell into the hands of Comanches or Apaches: it was impossible to tell from his screams which tribe was torturing him. All that was known was that only three warriors took part in the torturing. Bigfoot Wallace, the renowned scout, returned from a lengthy look around and reported seeing the tracks of three warriors, no more. The tracks were heading toward the river.

Many Rangers thought Bigfoot's point somewhat picayune, since the Mexican could not have screamed louder if he had been being tortured by fifty men—the screams made sleep difficult, not to mention short. The Great Western didn't earn a cent all night. Only young Gus McCrae, whose appetite for fornication admitted no checks, approached Matilda, but of course young McCrae was penniless, and Matilda in no mood to offer credit.

"You better turn that mare loose for awhile," Gus advised. "Matty's coming with that big turtle—I don't know what she means to do with it."

"Can't turn loose," Call said, but then he did release the mare, jumping sideways just in time to avoid her flailing front hooves. It was clear to him that Gus had no intention of trying to saddle the mare, not anytime soon. When there was a naked whore to watch, Gus was unlikely to want to do much of anything, except watch the whore.

"Major, what about payday?" Long Bill inquired again.

Major Chevallie cocked an eyebrow at Long Bill Coleman, a man noted for his thorough laziness.

"Why, Bill, the mail's undependable, out here beyond the Pecos," the Major said. "We haven't seen a mail coach since we left San Antonio."

"That whore with the dern turtle wants to be paid now," one-eyed Johnny Carthage speculated.

"I've never seen a whore bold enough to snatch an old turtle right out of the Rio Grande River," Bob Bascom said. In his opinion, it had been quite unmilitary for the Major to allow Matilda

Roberts to accompany them on their expedition; though how he would have stopped her, short of gunplay, was not easy to say. Matilda had simply fallen in with them when they left the settlements. She rode a large gray horse named Tom, who lost flesh rapidly once they were beyond the fertile valleys. Matilda had no fear of Indians, or of anything else, not so far as Bob Bascom was aware. She helped herself liberally to the Rangers' grub, and conducted business on a pallet she spread in the bushes, when there were bushes. Bob had to admit that having a whore along was a convenience, but he still considered it unmilitary, though he was not so incautious as to give voice to his opinion.

Major Randall Chevallie was of uncertain temper at best. Rumor had it that he had, on occasions, conducted summary executions, acting as his own firing squad. His pistol was often in his hand, and though his leadership was erratic, his aim wasn't. He had twice brought down running antelope with his pistol—most of the Rangers couldn't have hit a running antelope with a rifle, or even a Gatling gun.

"That whore didn't snatch that turtle out of the river," Long Bill commented. "I seen that turtle sleeping on a rock, when I went to wash the puke off myself. She just snuck up on it and picked it off that rock. Look at it snap at her. Now she's got it mad!"

The snapper swung its neck this way and that, working its jaws; but Matilda Roberts was holding it at arm's length, and its jaws merely snapped the air.

"What next?" Gus said, to Call.

"I don't know what next," Call said, a little irritated at his friend. Sooner or later they would have to have another try at saddling the mare—a chancy undertaking.

"Maybe she means to cook it," Call added.

"I have heard of slaves eating turtle," Gus said. "I believe they eat them in Mississippi."

"Well, I wouldn't eat one," Call informed him. "I'd still like to get a saddle on this mare, if you ain't too busy to help."

The mare was snubbed to a low mesquite tree—she wound herself tighter and tighter, as she kicked and struggled.

"Let's see what Matilda's up to first," Gus said. "We got all day to break horses."

"All right, but you'll have to take the ears, this time," Call said. "I'll do the saddling."

Matilda swung her arm a time or two and heaved the big turtle in the general direction of a bunch of Rangers—the boys were cleaning their guns and musing on their headaches. They scattered like quail when they saw the turtle sailing through the air. It turned over twice and landed on its back, not three feet from the campfire.

Bigfoot Wallace squatted by the fire—he had just finished pouring himself a cup of coffee. It was chickory coffee, but at least it was black. Bigfoot paid the turtle no attention at all—Matty Roberts had always been somewhat eccentric, in his view. If she wanted to throw snapping turtles around, that was her business. He himself was occupied with more urgent concerns, one of them being the identity of the three warriors who had tortured the Mexican to death. A few hours after coming across their tracks he had dozed off and dreamed a disturbing dream about Indians. In his dream Buffalo Hump was riding a spotted horse, while Gomez walked beside him. Buffalo Hump was the meanest Comanche anyone had ever heard of, and Gomez the meanest Apache. The fact that a Comanche killer and an Apache killer were traveling together, in his dream, was highly unpleasant. Never before, that he could remember, had he had a dream in which something so unlikely happened. He almost felt he should report the dream to Major Chevallie, but the Major, at the moment, was distracted by Matilda Roberts and her turtle.

"Good morning, Miss Roberts, is that your new pet?" the Major inquired, when Matilda walked up.

"Nope, that's breakfast—turtle beats bacon," Matilda said. "Has anybody got a shirt I can borrow? I left mine out by the pallet."

She had strolled down to the river naked because she felt like

having a wash in the cold water. It wasn't deep enough to swim in, but she gave herself a good splashing. The old snapper just happened to be lazing on a rock nearby, so she grabbed it. Half the Rangers were scared of Matilda anyway, some so scared they would scarcely look at her, naked or clothed. The Major wasn't scared of her, nor was Bigfoot or young Gus; the rest of the men, in her view, were incompetents, the kind of men who were likely to run up debts and get killed before they could pay them. She sailed the snapper in their direction to let them know she expected honest behavior. Going naked didn't hurt, either. She was big, and liked it; she could punch most men out, if she had to, and sometimes she had to; her dream was to get to California and own a fine bordello, which was why she fell in with the first Ranger troop going west. It was a scraggly little troop, composed mostly of drunks and shiftless ramblers, but she took it and was making the best of it. The alternative was to wait in Texas, get old, and never own a bordello in California.

At her request several Rangers immediately began to take off their shirts, but Bigfoot Wallace made no move to remove his, and his was the only shirt large enough to cover much of Matty Roberts.

"I guess you won't be sashaying around naked much longer, Matty," he observed, sipping his chickory.

"Why not? I ain't stingy about offering my customers a look," Matilda said, rejecting several of the proffered shirts.

Bigfoot nodded toward the north, where a dark tone on the horizon contrasted with the bright sunlight.

"One of our fine blue northers is about to whistle in," he informed her. "You'll have icicles hanging off your twat, in another hour, if you don't cover it up."

"I wouldn't need to cover it up if anyone around here was prosperous enough to warm it up," Matilda said, but she did note that the northern horizon had turned a dark blue. Several Rangers observed the same fact, and began to pull on long johns or other garments that might be of use against a norther. Bigfoot Wallace was known to have an excellent eye for weather. Even Matilda

respected it—she strolled over to her pallet and pulled on a pair of blacksmith's overalls that she had taken in payment for a brief engagement in Fredericksburg. She had a tattered capote, acquired some years earlier in Pennsylvania, and she put that on too. A blue norther could quickly suck the warmth out of the air, even on a nice sunny day.

"Well, we've conquered a turtle, I guess," Major Chevallie said, standing up. "I suppose that Mexican died—I don't hear much noise from across the river."

"If he's lucky, he died," Bigfoot said. "It was just three Indians—Comanches, I'd figure. I doubt three Comanches would pause more than one night to cut up a Mexican."

About that time Josh Corn and Ezekiel Moody came walking back to camp from the sandhill where they had been standing guard. Josh Corn was a little man, only about half the size of his tall friend. Both were surprised to see a sizable snapping turtle kicking its legs in the air, not much more than arm's length from the coffeepot.

"Why's everybody dressing up, is there going to be a parade?" Josh asked, noting that several Rangers were in the process of pulling on clothes.

"That Mexican didn't have no way to kill himself," Bob Bascom remarked. "He didn't have no gun."

"No, but he had a knife," Bigfoot reminded him. "A knife's adequate, if you know where to cut."

"Where would you cut—I've wondered," Gus asked, abruptly leaving Call to contemplate the Mexican mustang alone. He was a Ranger on the wild frontier now and needed to imbibe as much technical information as possible about methods of suicide, when in danger of capture by hostiles with a penchant for torture.

"No Comanche's going to be quick enough to sew up your jugular vein, if you whack it through in two or three places," Bigfoot said. Aware that several of the Rangers were inexpert in such matters, he stretched his long neck and put his finger on the spot where the whacking should be done.

"It's right here," he said. "You could even poke into it with a big mesquite thorn, or whack at it with a broken bottle, if you're left without no knife."

Long Bill Coleman felt a little queasy, partly because of the mescal and partly from the thought of having to stick a thorn in his neck in order to avoid Comanche torture.

"Me, I'll shoot myself in the head if I've got time," Long Bill said.

"Well, but that can go wrong," Bigfoot informed him. Once set in an instructional direction, he didn't like to turn until he had given a thorough lecture. Bigfoot considered himself to be practical to a fault—if a man had to kill himself in a hurry, it was best to know exactly how to proceed.

"Don't go sticking no gun in your mouth, unless it's a shotgun," he advised, noting that Long Bill looked a little green. Probably the alkaline water didn't agree with him.

"Why not, it's hard to miss your head if you've got a gun in your mouth," Ezekiel Moody commented.

"No, it ain't," Bigfoot said. "The bullet could glance off a bone and come out your ear. You'd still be healthy enough that they could torture you for a week. Shove the barrel of the gun up against an eyeball and pull—that's sure. Your brains will get blown out the back of your head—then if some squaw comes along and chews off your balls and your pecker, you won't know the difference."

"My, this is a cheery conversation," Major Chevallie said. "I wish Matilda would come back and remove this turtle."

"I'd like to go back and have another look at them tracks," Bigfoot said. "It was about dark when I seen them. Another look couldn't hurt."

"It could hurt if the Comanches that got that Mexican caught you," Josh Corn remarked.

"Why, those boys are halfway to the Brazos by now," Bigfoot said, just as Matilda returned to the campfire. She squatted down by the turtle and watched it wiggle, a happy expression on her broad face. She had a hatchet in one hand and a small bowie knife in the other.

"Them turtles don't turn loose of you till it thunders, once they got aholt of you," Ezekiel said. Matilda Roberts ignored this hackneyed opinion. She caught the turtle right by the head, held its jaws shut, and slashed at its neck with the little bowie knife. The whole company watched, even Call. Several of the men had traveled the Western frontier all their lives. They considered themselves to be experienced men, but none of them had ever seen a whore decapitate a snapping turtle before.

Blackie Slidell watched Matilda slash at the turtle's neck with a glazed expression. The mescal had caused him to lose his vision entirely, for several hours—in fact, it was still somewhat wobbly. Blackie had an unusual birthmark—his right ear was coal black, thus his name. Although he couldn't see very well, Blackie was not a little disturbed by Bigfoot's chance remark about the chewing propensities of Comanche squaws. He had long heard of such things, of course, but had considered them to be unfounded rumor. Bigfoot Wallace, though, was *the* authority on Indian customs. His comment could not be ignored, even if everybody else was watching Matilda cut the head off her turtle.

"Hell, if we see Indians, let's kill all the squaws," Blackie said, indignantly. "They got no call to be behaving like that."

"Oh, there's worse than that happens," Bigfoot remarked casually, noting that the turtle's blood seemed to be green—if it *had* blood. A kind of green ooze dripped out of the wound Matilda had made. She herself was finding the turtle's neck a difficult cut. She gave the turtle's head two or three twists, hoping it would snap off like a chicken's would have, but the turtle's neck merely kinked, like a thick black rope.

"What's worse than having your pecker chewed off?" Blackie inquired.

"Oh, having them pull out the end of your gut and tie it to a dog," Bigfoot said, pouring himself more chickory. "Then they chase the dog around camp for awhile, until about fifty feet of your gut is strung out in front of you, for brats to eat."

"To eat?" Long Bill asked.

"Why yes," Bigfoot said. "Comanche brats eat gut like ours eat candy."

"Whew, I'm glad I wasn't especially hungry this morning," Major Chevallie commented. "Talk like this would unsettle a delicate stomach."

"Or they might run a stick up your fundament and set it on fire—that way your guts would done be cooked when they pull them out," Bigfoot explained.

"What's a fundament?" Call asked. He had had only one year of schooling, and had not encountered the word in his speller. He kept the speller with him in his saddlebag, and referred to it now and then when in doubt about a letter or a word.

Bob Bascom snorted, amused by the youngster's ignorance.

"It's a hole in your body and it ain't your nose or your mouth or your goddamn ear," Bob said. "I'd have that little mare broke by now, if it was me doing it."

Call smarted at the rebuke—he knew they had been lax with the mare, who had now effectively snubbed herself to the little tree. She was trembling, but she couldn't move far, so he quickly swung the saddle in place and held it there while she crow-hopped a time or two.

Matilda Roberts sweated over her task, but she didn't give up. The first gusts of the norther scattered the ashes of the campfire. Major Chevallie had just squatted to refill his cup—his coffee soon had a goodly sprinkling of sand. When the turtle's head finally came off, Matilda casually pitched it in the direction of Long Bill, who jumped up as if she'd thrown him a live rattler.

The turtle's angry eyes were still open, and its jaws continued to snap with a sharp click.

"It ain't even dead with its head off," Long Bill said, annoyed.

Shadrach, the oldest Ranger, a tall, grizzled specimen with a cloudy past, walked over to the turtle's head and squatted down to study it. Shadrach rarely spoke, but he was by far the most accurate rifle shot in the troop. He owned a fine Kentucky rifle, with a

cherry-wood stock, and was contemptuous of the bulky carbines most of the troop had adopted.

Shadrach found a little mesquite stick and held it in front of the turtle's head. The turtle's beak immediately snapped onto the stick, but the stick didn't break. Shadrach picked up the little stick with the turtle's head attached to it and dropped it in the pocket of his old black coat.

Josh Corn was astonished.

"Why would you keep a thing like that?" he asked Shadrach, but the old man took no interest in the question.

"Why would he keep a smelly old turtle's head?" Josh asked Bigfoot Wallace.

"Why would Gomez raid with Buffalo Hump?" Bigfoot asked. "That's a better question."

Matilda, by this time, had hacked through the turtle shell with her hatchet and was cutting the turtle meat into strips. Watching her slice the green meat caused Long Bill Coleman to get the queasy feeling again. Young Call, though nicked by a rear hoof, had succeeded in cinching the saddle onto the Mexican mare.

Major Chevallie was sipping his ashy coffee. Already the new wind from the north had begun to cut. He hadn't been paying much attention to the half-drunken campfire palaver, but between one sip of coffee and the next, Bigfoot's question brought him out of his reverie.

"What did you say about Buffalo Hump?" he asked. "I wouldn't suppose that scoundrel is anywhere around."

"Well, he might be," Bigfoot said.

"But what was that you said, just now?" the Major asked. "It's hard to concentrate, with Matilda cutting up this ugly turtle."

"I had a dern dream," Bigfoot admitted. "In my dream Gomez was raiding with Buffalo Hump."

"Nonsense, Gomez is Apache," the Major said.

Bigfoot didn't answer. He knew that Gomez was Apache, and that Apache didn't ride with Comanche—that was not the normal

order of things. Still, he had dreamt what he dreamt. If Major Chevallie didn't enjoy hearing about it, he could sip his coffee and keep quiet.

The whole troop fell silent for a moment. Just hearing the names of the two terrible warriors was enough to make the Rangers reflect on the uncertainties of their calling, which were considerable.

"I don't like that part about the guts," Long Bill said. "I aim to keep my own guts inside me, if nobody minds."

Shadrach was saddling his horse—he felt free to leave the troop at will, and his absences were apt to last a day or two.

"Shad, are you leaving?" Bigfoot asked.

"We're all leaving," Shadrach said. "There's Indians to the north. I smell 'em."

"I thought I still gave the orders around here," Major Chevallie said. "I don't know why you would have such a dream, Wallace. Why would those two devils raid together?"

"I've dreamt prophecy before," Bigfoot said. "Shad's right about the Indians. I smell 'em too."

"What's this—where are they?" Major Chevallie asked, just as the norther hit with its full force. There was a general scramble for guns and cover. Long Bill Coleman found the anxiety too much for his overburdened stomach. He grabbed his rifle, but then had to bend and puke before he could seek cover.

The cold wind swirled white dust through the camp. Most of the Rangers had taken cover behind little hummocks of sand, or chaparral bushes. Only Matilda was unaffected; she continued to lay strips of greenish turtle meat onto the campfire. The first cuts were already dripping and crackling.

Old Shadrach mounted and went galloping north, his long rifle across his saddle. Bigfoot Wallace grabbed a rifle and vanished into the sage.

"What do we do with this mare, Gus?" Call asked. He had only been a Ranger six weeks—his one problem with the work was that it was almost impossible to get precise instructions in a time of crisis. Now he finally had the Mexican mare saddled, but everyone in

camp was lying behind sandhills with their rifles ready. Even Gus had grabbed his old gun and taken cover.

Major Chevallie was attempting to unhobble his horse, but he had no dexterity and was making a slow job of it.

"You boys, come help me!" he yelled—from the precipitate behavior of Shadrach and Bigfoot, the most experienced men in the troop, he assumed that the camp was in danger of being overrun.

Gus and Call ran to the Major's aid. The wind was so cold that Gus even thought it prudent to button the top button of his flannel shirt.

"Goddamn this wind!" the Major said. During breakfast he had been rereading a letter from his dear wife, Jane. He had read the letter at least twenty times, but it was the only letter he had with him and he did love his winsome Jane. When the business about Gomez and Buffalo Hump came up he had casually stuffed the letter in his coat pocket, but he didn't get it in securely, and now the whistling wind had snatched it. It was a long letter—his dear Jane was lavish with detail of circumstances back in Virginia—and now several pages of it were blowing away, in the general direction of Mexico.

"Here, boys, fetch my letter!" the Major said. "I can't afford to lose my letter. I'll finish saddling this horse."

Call and Gus left the Major to finish cinching his saddle on his big sorrel and began to chase the letter, some of which had sailed quite a distance downwind. Both of them kept looking over their shoulders, expecting to see the Indians charging.

Call had not had time to fetch his rifle—his only weapon was a pistol.

Thanks to his efforts with the mare, the talk of torture and suicide had been hard to follow. Call liked to do things correctly, but was in doubt as to the correct way to dispatch himself, should he suddenly be surrounded by Comanches.

"What was it Bigfoot said about shooting out your brains?" he asked Gus, his lanky pal.

Gus had run down four pages of the Major's lengthy letter. Call had three pages. Gus didn't seem to be particularly concerned about the prospect of Comanche capture—his nonchalant approach to life could be irksome in times of conflict.

"I'd go help Matty clean her turtle if I thought she'd give me a poke," Gus said.

"Gus, there's Indians coming," Call said. "Just tell me what Bigfoot said about shooting out your brains.

"That whore don't need no help with that turtle," he added.

"Oh, you're supposed to shoot through the eyeball," Gus said. "I'll be damned if I would, though. I need both eyes to look at whores."

"I should have kept my rifle handier," Call said, annoyed with himself for having neglected sound procedure. "Do you see any Indians yet?"

"No, but I see Josh Corn taking a shit," Gus said, pointing at their friend Josh. He was squatting behind a sage bush, rifle at the ready, while he did his business.

"I guess he must think it's his last chance before he gets scalped," Gus added.

Major Chevallie jumped on his sorrel and started to race after Shadrach, but had scarcely cleared the camp before he reined in his horse. Call could just see him, in the swirling dust—the plain to the north of the camp had become a wall of sand.

"I wonder how we can get some money—I sure do need a poke," Gus said. He had turned his back to the wind and was casually reading the Major's letter, an action that shocked Call.

"That's the Major's letter," he pointed out. "You got no business reading it."

"Well, it don't say much anyway," Gus said, handing the pages to Call. "I thought it might be racy, but it ain't."

"If I ever write a letter, I don't want to catch you reading it," Call said. "I think Shad's coming back." His eyes were stinging, from staring into the dust.

There seemed to be figures approaching camp from the north.

Call couldn't make them out clearly, and Gus didn't seem to be particularly interested. Once he began to think about whores he had a hard time pulling his mind off the subject.

"If we could catch a Mexican we could steal his money—he might have enough that we could buy quite a few pokes," Gus said, as they strolled back to camp.

Major Chevallie waited on his sorrel, watching. Two figures seemed to be walking. Then Bigfoot fell in with them. Shadrach appeared on his horse, a few steps behind the figures.

All around the camp Rangers began to stand up and dust the sand off their clothes. Matilda, unaffected by the crisis, was still cooking her turtle. The bloody shell lay by the campfire. Call smelled the sizzling meat and realized he was hungry.

"Why, it's just an old woman and a boy," he said when he finally got a clear view of the two figures trudging through the sandstorm, flanked on one side by Shadrach and on the other by Bigfoot Wallace.

"Shoot, I doubt either one of them has got a cent on them," Gus said. "I think we ought to sneak off across the river and catch a Mexican while it's still early."

"Just wait," Call said. He was anxious to see the captives, if they were captives.

"I swear," Long Bill said. "I think that old woman's blind. That boy's leading her."

Long Bill was right. A boy of about ten, who looked more Mexican than Indian, walked slowly toward the campfire, leading an old white-haired Indian woman—Call had never seen anyone who looked as old as the old woman.

When they came close enough to the fire to smell the sizzling meat, the boy began to make a strange sound. It wasn't speech, exactly—it was more like a moan.

"What's he wanting?" Matilda asked—she was unnerved by the sound.

"Why, a slice or two of your turtle meat, I expect," Bigfoot said. "More than likely he's hungry."

"Then why don't he ask?" Matilda said.
"He can't ask, Matilda," Bigfoot said.
"Why not, ain't he got a tongue?" Matilda asked.
"Nope—no tongue," Bigfoot said. "Somebody cut it out."

2.

THE NORTH WIND BLEW harder, hurling the sands and soils of the great plain of Texas toward Mexico. It soon obliterated vision. Shadrach and Major Chevallie, mounted, could not see the ground. Men could not see across the campfire. Call found his rifle, but when he tried to sight, discovered that he could not see to the end of the barrel. The sand peppered them like fine shot, and it rode a cold wind. The horses could only turn their backs to it; so did the men. Most put their saddles over their heads, and their saddle blankets too. Matilda's bloody turtle shell soon filled with sand. The campfire was almost smothered. Men formed a human wall to the north of it, to keep it from guttering out. Bigfoot and Shadrach tied bandanas around their faces—Long Bill had a bandana but it blew away and was never found. Matilda gave up cooking and sat with her back to the wind, her head bent between her knees. The boy with no tongue reached into the guttering campfire and took two slices of the sizzling turtle meat. One he gave to the old blind woman—although the meat was tough and scalding, he gulped his portion in only three bites.

Kirker and Glanton, the scalp hunters, sat together with their backs to the wind. They stared through the fog of sand, appraising the boy and the old woman. Kirker took out his scalping knife and a small whetstone. He tried to spit on the whetstone, but the wind took the spit away; Kirker began to sharpen the knife anyway. The old woman turned her sightless eyes toward the sound—she spoke to the boy, in a language Call had never heard. But the boy had no tongue, and couldn't answer.

Even through the howling of the wind, Call could hear the grinding sound, as Kirker whetted his scalping knife. Gus heard it

too, but his mind had not moved very far from his favorite subject, whores.

"Be hard to poke in a wind like this," he surmised. "Your whore would fill up with sand—unless you went careful, you'd scrape yourself raw."

Call ignored this comment, thinking it foolish.

"Kirker and Glanton ain't Rangers—I don't know why the Major lets 'em ride with the troop," he said.

"It's a free country, how could he stop them?" Gus asked, though he had to admit that the scalp hunters were unsavory company. Their gear smelled of blood, and they never washed. Gus agreed with Matilda that it was good to keep clean. He splashed himself regularly, if there was water available.

"He could shoot 'em—I'd shoot 'em, if I was in command," Call said. "They're low killers, in my opinion."

Only the day before there had nearly been a ruckus with Kirker and Glanton. The two came riding in from the south, having taken eight scalps. The scalps hung from Kirker's saddle. A buzzing cloud of flies surrounded them, although the blood on the scalps had dried. Most of the Rangers gave Kirker a wide berth; he was a thin man with three gappy teeth, which gave his smile a cruel twist. Glanton was larger and lazier—he slept more than anyone else in the troop and would even fall asleep and start snoring while mounted on his horse. Shadrach had no fear of either man, and neither did Bigfoot Wallace. When Kirker dismounted, Shadrach and Bigfoot walked over to examine his trophies. Shadrach fingered one of the scalps and looked at Bigfoot, who swatted the cloud of flies away briefly and sniffed a time or two at the hair.

"Comanche—who said you could smell 'em?" Kirker asked. He was chewing on some antelope jerky that Black Sam, the cook, had provided. The sight of the old mountain man and the big scout handling his new trophies annoyed him.

"We picked all eight of them off, at a waterhole," Glanton said. "I shot four and so did John."

"That's a pure lie," Bigfoot said. "Eight Comanches could string you and Kirker out from here to Santa Fe. If you was ever unlucky enough to run into that many at once, we wouldn't be having to smell your damn stink anymore."

He waved at Major Chevallie, who strolled over, looking uncomfortable. He drew his pistol, a precaution the Major always took when he sensed controversy. With his pistol drawn, decisive judgment could be reached and reached quickly.

"These low dogs have been killing Mexicans, Major," Bigfoot said. "They probably took supper with some little family and then shot 'em all and took their hair."

"That would be unneighborly behavior, if true," Major Chevallie said. He looked at the scalps, but didn't touch them.

"This ain't Indian hair," Shadrach said. "Indian hair smells Indian, but this don't. This hair is Mexican."

"It's Comanche hair and you can both go to hell," Kirker said. "If you need a ticket I can provide it."

The gap-toothed Kirker carried three pistols and a knife, and usually kept his rifle in the crook of his arm, where it was now.

"Sit down, Kirker, I'll not have you roughhousing with my scouts," the Major said.

"Roughhousing, hell," Kirker said. He flushed red when he was angry, and a blue vein popped out alongside his nose.

"I'll finish them right here, if they don't leave my scalps alone," he added. Glanton had his eyes only half open, but his hand was on his pistol, a fact both Bigfoot and Shadrach ignored.

"There's no grease, Major," Bigfoot said. "Indians grease their hair—take a Comanche scalp and you'll have grease up to your elbow. Kirker ain't even sly. He could have greased this hair if he wanted to fool us, but he didn't. I expect he was too lazy."

"Get away from them scalps—they're government property now," Kirker said. "I took 'em and I intend to collect my bounty."

Shadrach looked at the Major—he didn't believe the Major was firm, although it was undeniable that he was an accurate shot.

"If a Mexican posse shows up, let 'em have these two," he

advised. "This ain't Indian hair, and what's more, it ain't grown-up hair. These two went over to Mexico and killed a passel of children."

Kirker merely sneered.

"Hair's hair," he said. "This is government property now, and you're welcome to keep your goddamn hands off it."

Call and Gus waited, expecting the Major to shoot Kirker, and possibly Glanton too, but the Major didn't shoot. Bigfoot and Shadrach walked away, disgusted. Shadrach mounted, crossed the river, and was gone for several hours. Kirker kept on chewing his antelope jerky, and Glanton went sound asleep, leaning against his horse.

Major Chevallie did look at Kirker hard. He knew he ought to shoot the two men and leave them to the flies. Shadrach's opinion was no doubt accurate: the men had been killing Mexican children; Mexican children were a lot easier to hunt than Comanches.

But the Major didn't shoot. His troop was in an uncertain position, vulnerable to attack at any minute, and Kirker and Glanton made two more fighting men, adding two guns to the company's meager strength. If there was a serious scrape, one or both of them might be killed anyway. If not, they could always be executed at a later date.

"Stay this side of the river from now on," the Major said—he still had his pistol in his hand. "If either of you cross it again, I'll hunt you down like dogs."

Kirker didn't flinch.

"We ain't dogs, though—we're wolves—at least I am. You won't be catching me, if I go. As for Glanton, you can have him. I'm tired of listening to his goddamn snores."

Gus soon forgot the incident, but Call didn't. He listened to Kirker sharpen his knife and wished he had the authority to kill the man himself. In his view Kirker was a snake, and worse than a snake. If you discovered a snake in your bedclothes, the sensible thing would be to kill it.

Major Chevallie had looked right at the snake, but hadn't killed it.

The sandstorm blew for another hour, until the camp and everything in it was covered with sand. When it finally blew out, men discovered that they couldn't find utensils they had carelessly laid down before the storm began. The sky overhead was a cold blue. The plain in all directions was level with sand; only the tops of sage bushes and chaparral broke the surface. The Rio Grande was murky and brown. The little mare, still snubbed to the tree, was in sand up to her knees. All the men stripped naked in order to shake as much sand as possible out of their clothes; but more sand filtered in, out of their hair and off their collars. Gus brushed the branch of a mesquite tree and a shower of sand rained down on him.

Only the old Indian woman and the boy with no tongue made no attempt to rid themselves of sand. The fire had finally been smothered, but the old woman and the boy still sat by it, sand banked against their backs. To Call they hardly seemed human. They were like part of the ground.

Gus, in high spirits, decided to be a bronc rider after all. He took it into his head to ride the Mexican mare.

"I expect that storm's got her cowed," he said to Call.

"Gus, she ain't cowed," Call replied. He had the mare by the ears again, and detected no change in her attitude.

Sure enough, the mare threw Gus on the second jump. Several of the naked Rangers laughed, and went on shaking out their clothes.

3.

IN THE EARLY AFTERNOON, still carrying more sand in his clothes than he would have liked, Major Chevallie attempted to question the old woman and the boy. He gave them coffee and fed them a little hardtack first, hoping it would make them talkative—but the feast, such as it was, failed in its purpose, mainly because no one in the troop spoke any Comanche.

The Major had supposed Bigfoot Wallace to be adept in the tongue, but Bigfoot firmly denied any knowledge of it.

"Why no, Major," Bigfoot said. "I've made it a practice to stay as far from the Comanche as I can get," Bigfoot said. "What few I ever met face-on I shot. Some others have shot at me, but we never stopped to palaver."

The old woman wore a single bear tooth on a rawhide cord around her neck. The tooth was the size of a small pocketknife. Several of the men looked at it with envy; most of them would have been happy to own a bear tooth that large.

"She must have been a chief's woman," Long Bill speculated. "Otherwise why would a squaw get to keep a fine grizzly tooth like that?"

Matilda Roberts knew five or six words of Comanche and tried them all on the old woman, without result. The old woman sat where she had settled when she walked into the camp, backed by a hummock of sand. Her rheumy eyes were focused on the campfire, or on what had been the campfire.

The tongueless boy, still hungry, dug most of the sandy turtle meat out of the ashes of the campfire and ate it. No one contested him, although Matilda dusted the sand off a piece or two and gnawed at the meat herself. The boy perked up considerably, once he had eaten the better part of Matilda's snapping turtle. He did his best to talk, but all that came out were moans and gurgles. Several of the men tried to talk to him in sign, but got nowhere.

"Goddamn Shadrach, where did he go?" the Major asked. "We've got a Comanche captive here, and the only man we have who speaks Comanche leaves."

As the day wore on, Gus and Call took turns getting pitched off the mare. Call once managed to stay on her five hops, which was the best either of them achieved. The Rangers soon lost interest in watching the boys get pitched around. A few got up a card game. Several others took a little target practice, using cactus apples as targets. Bigfoot Wallace pared his toenails, several of which had turned coal black as the result of his having worn footgear too small for his feet—it was that or go barefooted, and in the thorny country they were in, bare feet would have been a handicap.

Toward sundown Call and Gus were assigned first watch. They took their position behind a good clump of chaparral, a quarter of a mile north of the camp. Major Chevallie had been making another attempt to converse with the old Comanche woman, as they were leaving camp. He tried sign, but the old woman looked at him, absent, indifferent.

"Shadrach just rode off and he ain't rode back," Call said. "I feel better when Shadrach's around."

"I'd feel better if there were more whores," Gus commented. In the afternoon he had made another approach to Matilda Roberts, only to be rebuffed.

"I should have stayed on the riverboats," he added. "I never lacked for whores, on the riverboats."

Call was watching the north. He wondered if it was really true that Shadrach and Bigfoot could smell Indians. Of course if you got close to an Indian, or to anybody, you could smell them. There were times on sweaty days when he could easily smell Gus, or any other Ranger who happened to be close by. Black Sam, the cook, had a fairly strong smell, and so did Ezekiel—the latter had not bothered to wash the whole time Call had known him.

But dirt and sweat weren't what Bigfoot and Shadrach had been talking about, when they said they smelled Indians. The old woman and the boy had been nearly a mile away, when they claimed to smell them. Surely not even the best scout could smell a person that far away.

"There could have been more Indians out there, when Shad said he smelled them," Call speculated. "There could be a passel out there, just waiting."

Gus McCrae took guard duty a good deal more lightly than his companion, Woodrow Call. He looked at his time on guard as a welcome escape from the chores that cropped up around camp—gathering firewood, for example, or chopping it, or saddle-soaping the Major's saddle. Since he and Woodrow were the youngest Rangers in the troop, they were naturally expected to do most of

the chores. Several times they had even been required to shoe horses, although Black Sam, the cook, was also a more than adequate blacksmith.

Gus found such tasks irksome—he believed he had been put on earth to enjoy himself, and there was no enjoyment to be derived from shoeing horses. Horses were heavy animals—most of the ones he shoed had a tendency to lean on him, once he picked up a foot.

Drinking mescal was far more to his liking—in fact he had a few swallows left, in a small jug he had managed to appropriate. He had kept the jug buried in the sand all day, lest some thirsty Ranger discover it and drain the mescal. He owned a woolen serape, purchased in a stall in San Antonio, and had managed to sneak the jug out of camp under the serape.

When he brought it out and took a swig, Call looked annoyed.

"If the Major caught you drinking on guard he'd shoot you," Call said. It was true, too. The Major tolerated many foibles in his troop, but he did demand sobriety of the men assigned to keep guard. They were camped not far from the great Comanche war trail—the merciless raiders from the north could appear at any moment. Even momentary inattention on the part of the guards could imperil the whole troop.

"Well, but how could he catch me?" Gus asked. "He's trying to talk to that old woman—he'd have to sneak up on us to catch me, and I'd have to be drunker than this not to notice a fat man sneaking up."

It was certainly true that Major Chevallie was fat. He outweighed Matilda by a good fifty pounds, and Matilda was not small. The Major was short, too, which made his girth all the more noticeable. Still, he was the Major. Just because he hadn't shot the scalp hunters didn't mean he wouldn't shoot Gus.

"I don't believe you was ever on a riverboat—why would they hire you?" Call asked. At times of irritation he began to remember all the lies Gus had told him. Gus McCrae had no more regard for truth than he did for the rules of rangering.

"Why, of course I was," Gus said. "I was a top pilot for a dern year—I'm a Tennessee boy. I can run one of them riverboats as well as the next man. I only run aground once, in all the time I worked."

The truth of that was that he had once sneaked aboard a riverboat for two days; when he was discovered, he was put off on a mud bar, near Dubuque. A young whore had hidden him for the two days—the captain had roundly chastised her when Gus was discovered. Shortly after he was put off, the riverboat ran aground—that was the one true fact in the story. The tale sounded grand to his green friend, though. Woodrow Call had got no farther in the world than his uncle's scratchy farm near Navasota. Woodrow's parents had been taken by the smallpox, which is why he was raised by the uncle, a tyrant who stropped him so hard that when Woodrow got old enough to follow the road to San Antonio, he ran off. It was in San Antonio that the two of them had met—or rather, that Call had found Gus asleep against the wall of a saloon, near the river. Call worked for a Mexican blacksmith at the time, stirring the forge and helping the old smith with the horseshoeing that went on from dawn till dark. The Mexican, Jesus, a kindly old man who hummed sad harmonies all day as he worked, allowed Call to sleep on a pallet of nail sacks in a small shed behind the forge. Blacksmithing was dirty work. Call had been on his way to the river to wash off some of the smudge from his work when he noticed a lanky youth, sound asleep against the wall of the little adobe saloon. At first he thought the stranger might be dead, so profound were his slumbers. Killings were not uncommon in the streets of San Antonio—Call thought he ought to stop and check, since if the boy was dead it would have to be reported.

It turned out, though, that Gus was merely so fatigued that he was beyond caring whether he was counted among the living or among the dead. He had traveled in a tight stagecoach for ten days and nine nights, making the trip from Baton Rouge through the pines of east Texas to San Antonio. Upon arrival, his fellow passengers decided that Gus had been with them long enough; he was in such a stupor of fatigue that he offered no resistance when they

rolled him out. He could not remember how long he had been sleeping against the saloon; it was his impression that he had slept about a week. That night Call let Gus share his pallet of nail sacks, and the two had been friends ever since. It was Gus who decided they should apply for the Texas Rangers—Call would never have thought himself worthy of such a position. It was Gus, too, who boldly approached the Major when word got out that a troop was being formed whose purpose—other than hanging whatever horse-thieves or killers turned up—was to explore a stage route to El Paso. Fortunately, Major Chevallie had not been hard to convince—he took one look at the two healthy-looking boys and hired them at the princely sum of three dollars a month. They would be furnished with mounts, blankets, and a rifle apiece. Departure was immediate; saddles proved to be the main problem. Neither Gus nor Call had a saddle, or a pistol either. Finally the Major intervened on their behalf with an old German who owned a hardware store and saddle shop, the back of which was piled with single-tree saddles in bad repair and guns of every description, most of which didn't work. Finally two pistols were extracted that looked as if they might shoot if primed a little; and also two single-tree rigs with tattered leather that the German agreed to part with for a dollar apiece, pistols thrown in.

Major Chevallie advanced the two dollars, and the next morning at dawn, he, Call, Gus, Shadrach, Bob Bascom, Long Bill Coleman, Ezekiel Moody, Josh Corn, one-eyed Johnny Carthage, Blackie Slidell, Rip Green, and Black Sam, leading his kitchen mule, trotted out of San Antonio. Call had never been so happy in his life—overnight he had become a Texas Ranger, the grandest thing anyone could possibly be.

Gus, though, was irritated at the lack of ceremony attending their departure. A scabby dog barked a few times, but no inhabitants lined the streets to cheer them on. Gus thought there should at least have been a bugler.

"I'd blow a bugle myself, if one was available," he said.

Call thought the remark wrongheaded. Even if they had a bugle,

and if Gus could blow it, who would listen to it, except a few Mexicans and a donkey or two? It was enough that they were Rangers—two days before they had simply been homeless boys.

Bigfoot Wallace, the scout, didn't catch up until the next day—at the time of their departure he had been in jail. Apparently he had thrown a deputy sheriff out the second-floor window of the community's grandest whorehouse. The deputy suffered a broken collarbone, an annoyance sufficient to cause the sheriff to jail Bigfoot for a week.

Gus McCrae, a newcomer to Texas, had never heard of Bigfoot Wallace and saw no reason to be awed. Throwing a deputy sheriff out a window did not seem to him to be a particularly impressive feat.

"Now, if he'd thrown the governor out, that would have been a fine thing," Gus said.

Call thought his friend's comment absurd. Why would the governor be in a whorehouse, anyway? Bigfoot Wallace was the most respected scout on the Texas frontier; even in Navasota, far to the east, Bigfoot's name was known and his exploits talked about.

"They say he's been all the way to China," Call explained. "He knows every creek in Texas, and whether it's boggy or not, and he's a first-rate Indian killer besides."

"Myself, I'd rather know every whore," Gus said. "You can have a lot more fun with whores than you can with governors."

Call had seen several whores on the street, but had never visited one. Although he had the inclination, he had never had the money. Gus McCrae, though, seemed to have spent his life in the company of whores—though he had once mentioned that he had a mother and three sisters back in Tennessee, he preferred to talk mainly about whores, often to the point of tedium.

Call, though, had the greatest respect for Bigfoot Wallace; he intended to study the man and learn as many of his wilderness skills as possible. Though most of the older Rangers were well versed in woodcraft, Bigfoot and Shadrach were clearly the two masters. If the company came to a fork in a creek or river while the scouts

were ranging ahead, the company waited until one of them showed up and told it which fork to take. Major Chevallie had never been west of San Antonio—once they left the settlements behind and started toward the Pecos, he allowed his accomplished scouts to choose a route.

It was Shadrach who took them south, into the lonely country of sage and sand, where the two boys were now crouched behind their chaparral bush. In San Antonio there had been talk that war with Mexico was brewing—early on, the Major had instructed the troop to fire on any Mexican who seemed hostile.

"Better to be safe than sorry," he said, and many heads nodded.

In fact, though, the only Mexican they had seen was the unfortunate driver of the donkey cart. In the western reaches, no one was quite certain where Mexico stopped and Texas began. The Rio Grande made a handy border, but neither Major Chevallie nor anyone else considered it to be particularly official.

Mexicans, hostile or otherwise, didn't occupy much of the troop's attention, almost all of which was reserved for the Comanches. Call had yet to see a Comanche Indian, though throughout the trek, Long Bill, Rip Green, and other Rangers had assured him that the Comanches were sure to show up in the next hour or two, bent on scalping and torture.

"I wonder how big Comanches are?" he asked Gus, as they peered north into the silent darkness.

"About the size of Matilda, I've heard," Gus said.

"That old woman ain't the size of Matilda," Call pointed out. "She's no taller than Rip."

Rip Green was the smallest Ranger, standing scarcely five feet high. He also lacked a thumb on his right hand, having shot it off himself while cleaning a pistol he had neglected to unload.

"Yes, but she's old, Woodrow," Gus said. "I expect she's shriveled up."

He had just consumed the last of his mescal, and was feeling gloomy at the thought of a long watch with no liquor. At least he had a serape, though. Call had no coat—he intended to purchase

one with his first wages. He owned two shirts, and wore them both on frosty mornings, when the thorns of the chaparral bushes were rimmed with white.

Just then a wolf howled far to the north, where they were looking. Another wolf joined the first one. Then, nearer by, there was the yip of a coyote.

"They say an Indian can imitate any sound," Gus remarked. "They can fool you into thinking they're a wolf or a coyote or an owl or a cricket."

"I doubt a Comanche would pretend to be a cricket," Call said.

"Well, a locust then," Gus said. "Locusts buzz. You get a bunch of them buzzing and it's hard to hear."

Again they heard the wolf, and again, the coyote.

"It's Indians talking," Gus said. "They're talking in animal."

"We don't know, though," Call said. "I seen a wolf just yesterday. There's plenty of coyotes, too. It could just be animals."

"No, it ain't, it's Comanches," Gus said, standing up. "Let's go shoot one. I expect if we killed three or four the Major would raise our wages."

Call thought it was bold thinking. They were already a good distance from camp—the campfire was only a faint flicker behind them. Clouds had begun to come in, hiding the stars. Suppose they went farther and got caught? All the tortures Bigfoot had described might be visited on them. Besides, their orders were to stand watch, not to go Indian hunting.

"I ain't going," Call said. "That ain't what we were supposed to do."

"I doubt that fat fool is a real major, anyway," Gus said. He was restless. Sitting half the night by a bush did not appeal to him much. It was undoubtedly a long way to a whorehouse from where they sat, but at least there might be Indians to fight. Better a fight than nothing; with no more mescal to drink, his prospects were meager.

Call, though, had not responded to the call of adventure. He was still squatting by the chaparral bush.

"Why, Gus, he is too a major," Call said. "You saw how the soldiers saluted him, back in San Antonio.

"Even if he ain't a major, he gave us a job," he reminded his friend. "We're earning three dollars a month. Long Bill says we'll get all the Indian fighting we want before we get back to the settlements."

"Bye, I'm going exploring," Gus said. "I've heard there's gold mines out in this part of the country."

"Gold mines," Call said. "How would you notice a gold mine in the middle of the night, and what would you do with one if you did notice it? You ain't even got a spade."

"No, but think of all the whores I could buy if I had a gold mine," Gus said. "I could even buy a whorehouse. I'd have twenty girls and they'd all be pretty. If I didn't feel like letting in no customers, I'd do the work myself."

With that, he walked off a few steps.

"Ain't you coming?" he asked, when he heard no footsteps behind him.

"No, I was told to stand guard, not to go prospecting," Call said. "I aim to stand guard till it's my turn to sleep.

"If you go off and get captured, the Major won't like it one bit, either," Call reminded him. "Neither will you. Remember how that Mexican screamed."

Gus left. Woodrow Call was stubborn—why waste a night arguing with a stubborn man? Gus walked rapidly through the cold night, toward where the wolf had howled. It irked him that his friend was so disposed to obey orders. The way he looked at it, being a Ranger meant you could range, which was what he intended to do.

He thought best to cock his gun, though, in case he was taken by surprise. He had heard men scream while dentists were working on them, but in his experience no one undergoing dentistry had screamed half as loud as the captured Mexican.

After strolling nearly twenty minutes through the sandy country, Gus decided to stop and take his bearings. He looked back to see if

he could spot the campfire, but the long plain was dark. Thunder had begun to rumble, and in the west, there was a flicker of lightning.

While he was stopped he thought he heard something behind him and whirled in time to spot a badger, not three feet away. The badger was bumbling along, not watching where it was going. Gus didn't shoot it, but he did kick at it. He was irritated at the animal for startling him so. It was the kind of thing that could affect a man's nerves, and it affected his. Because of the badger's intrusion Gus felt a strong urge to get back to his guard post. Walking around at night didn't accomplish much. It was annoying that Woodrow Call had been too dull to accompany him.

On the walk back Gus tried to think of some adventure he could describe that would make his friend envious. The campfire had not yet come in sight. Probably the Rangers had been too lazy to gather sufficient firewood, and had let the fire burn down. Gus began to wonder if he was holding a true course. It was hard to see landmarks on a starless night, and there were precious few landmarks in that part of the country, anyway. Of course the river was in the direction he was walking, but the river twisted and curved; if he just depended on the river he might end up several miles from camp. He might even miss breakfast, or what passed for breakfast.

While he was walking, the wolf howled again. Gus decided it was probably just a wolf after all. The boredom of guard duty had caused him to imagine it was a Comanche. He felt some irritation. The wolf had distracted him with its howling, and now he was beginning to get the feeling that he was lost. He had always believed that he had a perfect sense of direction. Even when he was put off on a mud bar in the middle of the Mississippi River, he didn't get lost. He walked straight on to Dubuque. Of course, it was not hard to find Dubuque—it was there in plain sight, on its bluff. But there were willow thickets and some heavy underbrush between the river and the town. If he had been drunk he might well have gotten lost and ended up pointed toward St. Louis or some-

where. Instead he had strolled straight into Dubuque and had persuaded a bartender to draw him a mug of beer—it had been a thirsty trip, on the old boat. That Iowa beer had tasted good.

Now, though, there was no Mississippi, and no bluff. He could walk for a month in any direction and not find a town the size of Dubuque, or a bartender willing to draw him a mug of beer just because he showed up and asked. He had only owned his weapons for three weeks and so far had not been able to hit anything he shot at, although he believed he might have winged a wild turkey, back along the Colorado River. He might walk around Texas until he starved, due to his inability to hit the kind of game they had in Texas. It was skittery game, for the most part—back in Tennessee the deer were almost as docile as cows, and almost as fat. He had killed two or three from the back porch of the old home place, whereas here in Texas, deer hardly let you get within a mile of them.

Gus stopped and listened for a bit. Sometimes the Rangers sang at night—there had been plenty of whooping and dancing the night they drank the mescal. He felt if he listened he might hear Josh Corn's harmonica or some other music. Black Sam sometimes let loose with his darky hymns, when he was in low spirits; Sam had a full voice and could be heard a long way, even when he was singing low.

But when Gus stopped to listen, the plain around him was absolutely silent—so silent that the silence itself rang in his ears; the night was as dark as it was silent, too. Gus could see nothing at all, except intermittently, when the lightning flickered. It was because of the lightning that he had spotted the offensive badger that had managed to affect his nerves.

He took a few steps, and stopped. After all, it wouldn't be night forever, and he had not gone that far from camp. The simplest thing to do would be to wrap up good in his San Antonio serape and sleep for a few hours. With dawn at his back he could be in camp in a few minutes. If he kept walking he might veer off into the great emptiness and never find his way back. The sensible thing to do was wait.

He could yell and hope Woodrow Call responded, but Woodrow had been too dull to move off his guard post; he might be too dull to yell back.

The lightning was coming closer, which offered a sort of solution. He could be patient, mark his course, and move from flash to flash. A few sprinkles of rain wet his face. He could tell from the way the sage smelled that a shower was coming—he could even hear the patter of rain not far to the west. For a moment he squatted, tucking his serape around him—if it was going to turn wet, he was ready. Then a bold streak of lightning split the sky. For a moment it lit the prairie, bright as day. And yet Gus saw nothing familiar—no river, no campfire, no chaparral bush, no Call.

No sooner had he wrapped his serape around him and got ready for the rain squall than he was up and walking fast through the sage. He had meant to wait—it was sensible to wait, and yet a feeling had come over him that told him to move. The feeling told him to run, in fact—he was already moving at a rapid trot, though he stopped for a moment to lower the hammer of his pistol. He didn't intend to shoot off his thumb like young Rip Green. Then he trotted on, just short of a run.

As he trotted, Gus began to realize that he was scared. The feeling that came over him, that brought him to his feet and started him trotting, was fear. It was such an unexpected and unfamiliar feeling that he had not been able to put a name to it, at first. Rarely since early childhood had he been afraid. Creaking boards in the old family barn made him think of ghosts, and he had avoided the barn, even to the point of being stropped for a failure to do the chores, when he was small. Since then, though, he had rarely seen anything that he feared. Once in Arkansas he had come across a bear eating a dead horse and had worried a bit; he was unarmed at the time, and was sensible enough to know that he was no match for a bear. But since he had got his growth, he had not encountered much that put real fear in him—just that Arkansas bear.

What had him breathing short and stumbling now was a sense that somebody was near—somebody he couldn't see. When he sug-

gested that the wolf might be an Indian, he had just been joshing Call. He had felt restless, and wanted to take a stroll. If he turned up a gold mine, so much the better. He didn't seriously expect to kill an Indian, though. He had no desire to stumble onto a Comanche Indian, or any other Indian, just at that time. It had merely been something to twit Call about. He had never seen a Comanche Indian and could not work up enough of a picture of one to know what to expect, but he didn't suppose that a Comanche could be as large as that bear, or as fierce, either.

Now, though, he was driven to trot through the darkness by an overpowering sense that *somebody* was near, and who could it be but a Comanche Indian? It wasn't Call—being near Call wouldn't scare him. Yet he was near *somebody*—somebody he didn't want to be near—somebody who meant him harm. Shadrach and Bigfoot claimed to be able to smell Indians, and smell them from a considerable distance, but he didn't have that ability. All he could smell was the wet sage and the damp desert. It wasn't because he could smell that he knew somebody was near. It was a feeling, and a feeling that came from a part of him he didn't even know he had. What that part told him was run, move, get away, even though the night had now divided itself into two parts, the pitch-black part and the brilliantly lit part. The brilliantly lit part, of course, was the lightning flashes, which came more frequently and turned the plain so bright that Gus had to blink his eyes. Even then the light stayed, like a line inside his eye, when the plain turned black again, so black that in his running he stumbled into chaparral and almost fell once when he struck a patch of deep sand.

It was just after the sand that the lightning began to strike so close and so constantly that Gus developed a new fear, which was that his gun barrel would draw the lightning and he would be cooked on the spot. There had been some close lightning three days back, and the Rangers, Bigfoot particularly, had told several stories of men who had been cooked by lightning. Sometimes, according to Bigfoot, the lightning even cooked the horse underneath the man.

Gus would have been willing now to risk getting himself and his horse both cooked, if he could only have a horse underneath him, in order to move faster. Just as he was thinking that thought, a great lightning bolt struck not fifty yards away, and in that moment of white brightness Gus saw the somebody he had been fearing: the Indian with a great hump of muscle or gristle between his shoulders, a hump so heavy that the man's head bent slightly forward as he sat, like a buffalo's.

Buffalo Hump sat alone, on a robe of some kind—he looked at Gus, with his heavy head bent and his great hump wet from the rain, as if he had been expecting his arrival. He was not more than ten feet away, no farther than the badger had been, and his eyes were like stone.

Buffalo Hump looked at Gus, and then the plain went black. In the blackness Gus ran as he had never run before, right past where the Indian sat. Lightning streaked again but Gus didn't turn for a second look: he ran. Something tore at his leg as he brushed a thornbush, but he didn't slow his speed. In the line inside his eyes where the lightning stayed, there was the Comanche now, the great humpbacked Indian, the most feared man on the frontier. Gus had been so close that he could almost have jumped over the man. For all he knew, Buffalo Hump was following, bent on taking his hair. His only hope was speed. With such a hump to carry, the man might not be fast.

Gus forgot everything but running. He wanted to get away from the man with the hump—if he could just run all night maybe the Rangers would wake up and come to his aid. He didn't know whether he was running toward the river or away from it. He didn't know if Buffalo Hump was following, or how close he might be. He just ran, afraid to stop, afraid to yell. He thought of throwing away his gun in order to get a little more speed, but he didn't—he wanted something to shoot with, if he were cornered or brought down.

At the guard post behind the chaparral bush, Call alternated between being irritated and being worried. He was convinced his friend, who had no business leaving in the first place, was out on

the plain somewhere, hopelessly lost. There was little hope of finding him before daylight, and then it was sure to be a humiliating business. Shadrach was an excellent tracker and could no doubt follow Gus's trail, but it would cost the troop delay and aggravation.

Major Chevallie might fire Gus—even fire Call, too, for having allowed Gus to wander off. Major Chevallie expected orders to be obeyed, and Call didn't blame him. He might tolerate some wandering on the part of the scouts—that was their job—but he wouldn't necessarily tolerate it on the part of a private.

When the rain came there was not much Call could do but hunch over and get wet. The bush was too thorny to crawl under, and he had no coat. The lightning was bright and the thunder loud, but Call didn't feel fearful, especially. The bright flashes at least allowed him to look around. In one of them he thought he saw a movement; he decided it was the wolf they had heard howling.

It was in another brilliant flash that he saw Gus running. The plain went black again, so black that Call wasn't sure whether he had seen Gus or imagined him. Gus had been tearing along, running dead out. All Call could do was wait for the next flash—when it came he saw Gus again, closer, and in that flash Call saw something else: the Comanche.

The light died so quickly that Call thought he might have imagined the Indian, too. In the light he had seen the great hump, a mass half as large as the weight of most men; and yet the man was running fast after Gus, and had a lance in his hand. Call fired wildly, in the general direction of the Indian—it was dark again before his gun sounded. He thought the shot might at least distract the man with the hump. In the next flash, though, Buffalo Hump had stopped and thrown the lance—Call just saw it, splitting the rain, as it flew toward Gus, who was still running flat out—running for his life. Call fired again, with his pistol this time. Maybe Gus would hear it and take heart—although that was a faint hope. The thunderclaps were so continuous that he scarcely heard the shot himself.

Call raised his rifle, determined to be ready when the next flash came and lit the prairie. But when the flash did come, the plain was

empty. Buffalo Hump was gone. The hairs stood up on Call's neck when he failed to see the humpbacked chief. The man had just vanished on an open plain. If he moved that fast he could be anywhere. Call backed into the chaparral, mindless of the thorns, and waited. No man, not even a Comanche, could get through a clump of chaparral and attack him from the rear—certainly no man who had such a hump to carry.

Then he remembered the lance in the air, splitting the rain. He didn't know if it had hit home. If it had, his friend Gus McCrae might be dead. Buffalo Hump might even have run up on him and scalped him, or dragged him off for torture.

The last was such an awful thought that Call couldn't stay crouched in the thornbush. He waited until the next flash—a fair wait, for the storm was passing on to the east, and the lightning was diminishing—and then headed for where he had last seen Gus. Once the thunder quieted a little more, he meant to fire his pistol. Maybe the Rangers would hear it, if Gus couldn't. Maybe they would come to his aid in time to stop the humpbacked Comanche from killing Gus, or dragging him off.

Yet as he waited, Call had the feeling that help, if it came, would come too late. Probably Gus was already dead. Call had seen the lance in the air—Buffalo Hump didn't look like a man who would let fly with a lance just to miss.

When the flash came, not as bright as before, Call saw that the plain was still empty. He began to walk toward the area where he had seen Gus—it was the direction of camp, anyway. He yelled Gus's name twice, but there was no answer. Again the hair stood up on his neck. Buffalo Hump could be anywhere. He might be crouched behind any sage bush, any clump of chaparral, waiting in the dark for the next unwary Ranger to walk by.

Call didn't intend to be an unwary Ranger—he meant to take every precaution, but what precaution could you take on an empty plain at night with a dangerous Indian somewhere close? He wished that he could have got more instruction from Shadrach or Bigfoot about the best procedure to follow in such situations. They