

SURVIVALIST FICTION



Chaparral Challenge

by Old Bear

I wanted to try a different style of writing, hopefully along the lines of one of my writing hero's. The story still has survival information tucked in it. Just call me "Louis Ol Bear".

Chapter 1 Convict.

As he picked up his meager belongings off the table and signed for them, Johnny felt none of the emotions he had expected, as he had waited for this day for close to three years. During that time he had lived within the walls and fences of this prison and thought of little except the day he would be free again. Yet now that the day was here he just felt kind of numb inside. One of the old timers had told him that it would be that way. "When you live for something and little else, getting it often leaves an empty place in you for a while." Johnny had not believed the old convict, at least not until this day. At first some of the other inmates had tried to push Johnny, but his willingness to fight rather than give in eventually convinced them to leave him alone. Many of the inmates had gotten tattoos while inside, but Johnny decided against it. He had nothing against tattoos and already had one in fact, but did not care for the lack of the choice of colors in the prison tattoos.

When Johnny stepped outside the gate, there was nobody waiting for him and he was not surprised. While he felt that his father did love him, his father was the kind of man that did not much show it. Johnny could not recall his father ever saying that anything Johnny had done was good enough.

Mostly to keep the locals happy, the prison provided transportation the nearest bus station. Johnny went inside and waited until the prison van had left, before exiting. He had just a bit over \$40.00 to his name and was not going to waste any of his money on a bus ticket. Not when the highway was nearby and he could hitch a ride. Knowing it was his last day there; He had eaten an extra large breakfast, so he could go longer before he would need to buy food. No one had ever accused Johnny of not being thrifty.

It seemed to take a lot longer to get a ride than he had expected and the one he got did not take him as far as he had hoped. At least he was headed home and he was free. He had turned down parole, because when he got out, he did not

want to have to be checking in with any parole officer. He had served his time, with some off for good behavior and now he was free, or at least as free as he could now ever be, with a felony on his record. He could go where he wanted and work at whatever job he could find, but he could not vote or own a firearm. It was a long way from the days when the prison would furnish each man getting out with a horse, a twenty dollar gold piece and a gun.

Two rides later, Johnny was back in the desert he loved so well, but the sun was setting. Earlier he had gone into an army surplus store. The world was not always like the “Disney Channel” and Johnny felt better with some sort of weapon. Some states and towns had laws against sheath knives and even how long the blade could be. Johnny, not ever wanting to have to go back to prison or even jail, bought a solid but inexpensive folding knife. He also bought a cheap flashlight and a surplus French army sleeping bag. The sleeping bag had a built in water proof ground cloth and would roll up into a small package with it’s own carrying handle, But best of all, the price was only fifteen dollars.

Johnny felt that the later it got, the worse his chances of getting a ride would become, so he decided to spend the night in the desert. Johnny stopped in a laundry mat and by digging in the trash, soon found an empty bleach bottle. After a little washing, the bleach bottle made a decent one-gallon canteen. Johnny noted that now that he was doing something, most of the numb feeling had worn off. He had very little to be thankful about, in his time in prison, but there he had learned how to use a computer and the “Internet”. He had found several “survival” sites and had joined in the posting, mostly asking questions. He had never told the other posters that he was in prison. It was something that he was not proud of. Now he was getting to use some of the survival information that he had gathered from those sites. Before leaving town Johnny made sure that he had several books of matches in his pockets. Survival thinking took in a lot of stuff that he had taken for granted before, like being able to start a fire, or having water.

Chapter 2 Survivalist.

Johnny finally broke down and bought a couple of “McBurgers” to go. He would eat them once he found a stopping place. Not wanting to be too near the town, he kept walking along the highway. It was now fully dark. Ahead Johnny saw some tail lights on the side of the road. As he drew nearer he could see that it was a pick up truck, pulled far off the shoulder. Not wanting any problems, Johnny decided to circle into the desert and go around the truck. A passing

eighteen wheeler's headlights showed a woman working on what looked like a flat tire. Johnny started to keep going. Then something made him turn back. Johnny felt a strange sensation, like the hair on the back of his neck standing up. Being part Native American, Johnny had been raised with not only the Christian teachings, but those of his other ancestors as well. He knew the feeling meant something, but was not sure what. "Hello." "Do you need any help?" He called out. The woman jerked upright, from working on the wheel and looked around. "No. I mean Yes. Well Maybe I do need some help." She said. Johnny chuckled to himself. Just like a woman to not even know if she needs help or not. Johnny turned on his flash light so that she would see him as he approached. "What is the problem?" he asked. The woman had taken a couple of steps back and was looking at him with suspicion. "The spare was flat. I have a small battery powered air pump, but I can't get it to pump up." Johnny knelt down by the tire and looked at it with his light. "This tire is off the rim. That is why it won't pump up." He said. The woman stepped a little closer and looked at the tire and the rim. "Oh Dear! Now what can I do?" she said. Johnny was also thinking of the options. He could leave her here. It was after all, not his problem. Or he could roll the tire back to town and have it fixed, but this would take a long time and be a lot of work. Suddenly two small figures appeared. Johnny automatically stood up quickly and shown the light on them. The light showed a young boy and a slightly older girl. He estimated their ages to be around 6 and 10. "Who are you?" the boy asked. The older girl just stared at him with suspicion in her eyes. "My name is Johnny and I am trying to fix your tire." Johnny said. Thinking back to some of the stuff he had learned at the survival sites, Johnny had an idea. "Do you have any rope?" he asked. More suspicion in the woman's eyes. "I need some rope to put around the tire. Then when I twist it tight with a stick, the tire should go back on the rim, long enough to get air into it." He explained. The woman nodded her head and went to look in the truck. Soon she came back with some rather old looking rope. Johnny wrapped it around the tire three times and stood the tire up. Then he used the lug wrench to twist the rope, tightening it against the tire. The woman hooked up the air pump to the tire and waited for Johnny to tell her to turn it on. Just as the tire was beginning to contact the rim, the rope suddenly broke and Johnny went sprawling on the gravel. The young boy broke out laughing. "Sweet kid!" thought Johnny. "We almost had it. Do you have any more rope?" He asked. "That was all the rope." The woman said. In the light of passing vehicles Johnny had seen that the woman was in her mid thirty's and rather pretty. He did not much care for leaving her and her children alone while he walked the tire back to town. Who knew what type of creep might stop by the truck? Johnny racked his brain. There was something else about getting a tire

back on the rim. He vaguely remembered it and thinking that it was a last resort. "Do you have any starting fluid?" Johnny asked. "I don't know." The woman said and went to rummage in the truck once again. She returned with a can of starting fluid that was almost empty. "Ok. We may only get on shot at this, so we need to make it work." Johnny said. He laid the tire back down. "What are you going to do?" the woman asked. "I am going to squirt some starting fluid into the tire and ignite it. This will cause a small explosion that will cause the tire to go against the rim. The problem is that it won't stay there for too long. We have to work together to get the air into the tire as quick as possible." The woman now looked at him with a strange expression. "Are you sure that you know what you are doing?" she asked. Johnny might be young, but he knew that there are times when the complete truth would simply not do. "Of course I know what I am doing." He lied. "You be ready to turn on the air pump. I don't want to take a chance on the explosion messing up the little air pump, by leaving it hooked up." Johnny explained. "Are you going to wreck our tire?" asked the little boy. Johnny ignored the question, but was wondering the same thing himself. Now he wished he had paid more attention the post telling how to do this. At the time he read it, he never imagined he would ever need the information. The woman got both children safely inside the truck before letting him continue. With a book of matches in hand, Johnny said a short prayer to both the Christian God and his personal totems. Taking a deep breath he sprayed the starting fluid inside the tire. He gave it about a one second spraying. Dropping the can, he quickly struck several matches and threw them at the tire. There was a fairly loud explosion and the flashlight showed that the tire was tight on the rim. Quickly Johnny called for the woman to turn the air pump on. Johnny expected to see the tire separate from the rim at any second. Time slowly passed and Johnny began to relax. "I think we got it." He said. "I have never seen anything like that!" said the woman, looking at Johnny like he had made an elephant suddenly disappear. The little boy's eyes were very large also. Johnny had to agree that it had been pretty impressive and gave a silent thanks to the survivalist that had posted the information.

Next came getting the flat tire off the truck. Johnny almost twisted the four-way lug wrench off getting the lug nuts loose. "The tire shops use an air gun, often set at over 90 pounds to tighten the lugs. Then when you need to get them off, because you have a flat, they are too tight." Johnny said. "Better to have them let you do the finishing tightening with the lug wrench, so that you can get them off if you need to change a tire." He said. This information had also come from one of the survival sites.

Chapter 3 Choices.

By the time the truck was ready to go, Johnny was tired and dirty. "My name is Dorothy Thompson." Said the woman, apparently deciding that Johnny was not going to try to rape her or steal the truck. "Can I pay you?" she asked. "You don't owe me anything. I was just trying to help." Said Johnny, who seeing the twenty-dollar bill being replaced in her purse regretted his statement. Johnny started gathering his meager belongings, with the woman looking on. "Could we give you a lift? Where are you headed?" She asked. Johnny felt self-conscious, But replied "I am hitching home and will just go off the hiway a ways and bed down in the desert for tonight.". "Why don't you come home with us?" the little boy asked. Dorothy was torn by conflicting emotions. Who was this strange man? He had certainly been helpful, but she knew almost nothing about him. Could he be dangerous? Why was he hitching and going to sleep in the desert? On the other hand there was something about him. He seemed different, somehow. Making up her mind, based on her "woman's intuition" Dorothy said "Yes. Why not come home with us. My husband and I have a Dude ranch and there are spare beds and a hot shower. In the morning, after breakfast, we will have one of the hands bring you back to the highway." Johnny had actually been looking forward to lying out under the stars, but after getting dirty working on the tire, the shower certainly sounded good. Still he did not know these people and did not want any problems. How would the "husband" react to his wife dragging some man home? Just when he was ready to thank them for their offer, but decline Johnny felt again the prickling along. His spine and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. The wind, which had been blowing steadily all the time he had worked on the tire, seemed to stop. There was no traffic on the hiway. A deep silence filled the night. Johnny was certain that he was at a crossroads in his life. His choice would have deep impact on his future. But which choice? Go with these strangers, or stay with his original plan? In the sudden quite of the desert night an owl hooted three times off to Johnny's right. The owl was one of his totems. Owl knew the mysterious and had great knowledge. Owl could read men's hearts. Johnny said "Thank you. I would be grateful for the use of a bed and a shower.". The wind began to blow again and headlights appeared in the distance on the hiway.

With his gear stowed in the bed of the truck and the boy sitting on his lap, Johnny realized how tired he actually was. Not only had it been a long day, prison life had made him soft. Not even the workouts in the weight room had been enough to keep him in shape. Too much time spent in sitting. Johnny swore a silent oath

that he would never knowingly do anything to give them an excuse to send him back to prison,

“My name is Joey and my sister is Trina,” “Are you an Indian?” Joey said, all in one breath. “Pleased to meet you Joey and Miss Trina. And yes I am part Indian” Johnny said. “Which part of you is Indian?” Joey asked. Johnny actually considered the question for a few seconds. Which part of him was Indian? “ My head is Indian.” Johnny said. “The rest of me is mostly white.” “My dad is related to the man who made machine guns.” Joey proudly informed him. “That’s nice,” said Johnny, not making any connection from what Joey had said. Eventually even Joey gave in to his tiredness and fell asleep on Johnny’s lap. Trina leaned against him and also slept. They drove along in silence.

“The children, especially Joey, certainly seem to like him.” Dorothy thought, as she drove. “I wonder what Ben will think about me bringing home a strange man?” she wondered. Dorothy thought of the lonely section of road to the ranch, after they left the highway and had second thoughts. “What if I was wrong to trust him?” What if he decides to rape me, or steal the truck?” she thought. “I can’t just stop the truck and tell him to get out. That would be just too rude, after all he has done.” She thought. She drove along in silence as her mind raced with these conflicting thoughts. Johnny glanced over at Dorothy’s face. “She is a strong woman.” He thought. He appreciated that she had no need to fill quiet places with chatter, as most white folks did. Johnny too treasured quiet, until someone had something worth saying. “Yes. She is strong and sure of herself.” Thought Johnny. They drove along in silence.

Johnny was on the verge of falling asleep himself, by the time they got to the ranch. He could see by the headlights several wooden buildings; all looking weathered from the Arizona sun. Dorothy came around and took Joey off his lap and carried him into the house. Not sure what to do, Johnny waited for her to return for Trina, who was awake enough to be guided into the house by her mother. “ I will be right back, just as soon as I get the kids in bed” Dorothy said. She was true to her word and directed Johnny to one of the buildings. “It is pretty late, so we won’t wake the hands in the bunk house. You can sleep in one of our guest cottages. Everything you need should be there. Towels in the closet. See you in the morning.” She said. At the door Dorothy turned. “ By the way, Thanks again for all your help. I can’t wait to tell Ben, he’s is my husband, about that thing you did with the tire. Good night Johnny.” She said. After she left Johnny felt a comfortable warm feeling. It had been a good day. A strange day, but not a

bad day for the first day out of prison, Johnny decided. No. Not bad at all. Johnny showered, ate his cold burgers and lay down in the bed. A few minutes seemed to pass and the next thing he knew it was morning.

Chapter 4 A job.

He knew it was morning because somebody was banging on his door and telling him to breakfast was ready. Johnny recognized Joey's voice coming through the door and got up. He put his pants on and went to the door. "What's up squirt?" "Aren't you up kind of early?" Johnny ask. " It's not early. It is almost seven o'clock." Joey returned. Johnny donned his shirt and sat down to put on his socks and boots. " Come on. Breakfast is ready and you can meet my dad." Said Joey. Johnny felt a small knot tighten in his stomach. He wondered how Mr. Thompson would feel about his pretty wife dragging a strange man home. Suddenly the Name "Thompson" had an ugly sound to it. "Thompson, as in submachine gun." Thought Johnny. The sun was already in the sky as Johnny let Joey lead him to the main house. Three surly looking men watched from the corral as Johnny walked by. A covered porch, the supports of which were made from trees with the bark peeled off, surrounded the front of the house. This gave it a rough, but sturdy look. The house itself was rock, carefully laid and cemented. The windows were not large and were set high in the wall. The house had an old look to it and the porch looked newer. They both seem to fit and somehow belong there. " The land has accepted this house here." Thought Johnny. He had seen houses that seemed to be an affront to the very land on which they stood, but this was not the case here. There was a peace and solidness about the house that Johnny liked. Already he felt better about meeting Mr. Thompson. Johnny noted that the furniture fit the house and was solid, running towards a lot of oak. Joey led him into a large kitchen, where a table was already set. The wonderful smells of frying bacon, brewing coffee assailed his nostrils. A large man was seated at the head of the table. He rose and extended his hand towards Johnny. As Johnny shook his hand he noticed that Mr. Thompson had a rugged face, that looked like it had weathered from being outside much of the time. Ben was also taller than Johnny by two inches and slightly heavier built. His wavy black hair had a touch of gray around the temples. "Pleased to meet you Johnny. I am Ben Thompson". "My name is Johnny Tatum" Johnny replied. Mr. Thompson went on "My wife has told me about all the help you were and about that trick of using the starting fluid to get the tire back on. Thank you for helping Dorothy." Ben then gestured towards an empty chair and said, " Sit down. Coffee is ready and breakfast will be along before you can drink your first cup". Johnny felt at ease with this man and felt that what he said was what he meant. Trina filled Johnny's cup with

steaming coffee. Sugar and what looked like real cream was close at hand, so Johnny doctored his coffee to his liking. Many times he had drunk his coffee black and was grateful to have it, but when the opportunity to “dress it up” came, Johnny took it. Before he was even close to half finished with his coffee Mrs. Thompson was putting breakfast on the table. Eggs, bacon, fried potatoes and fresh biscuits, with butter, honey and jam was the fare of the day. Dorothy filled Ben’s plate for him, while he drank more of his coffee. Johnny took a couple of eggs, three slices of bacon and a generous helping of potatoes. Johnny was wolfing his food when he noticed that Ben ate his slowly, apparently savoring each bite and began to do the same. “My wife told me that you were going to sleep in the desert. I have done that many times myself and loved the quite and the stars”. “She also told that you refused to take money for helping her”. “That is the mark of a gentleman”. Johnny did not know what to say. He had never thought of himself as a “gentleman” before, but once he thought about it, he liked the thought. The way Ben used the word held no sissy connotations. “ You seem pretty handy at fixing things. Would you be looking for a job”? Ben asked. This startled Johnny. He had not even considered the possibility that he might be offered a job here and his plans were to get home before looking for work. Johnny also remembered the long weeks spent unsuccessfully seeking work near his home and that he had finally been forced to move to the city to find work. To buy time to think Johnny asked, “ What kind of work would I be doing”? “I don’t really know much about ranching”. Ben waved a large hand in dismissal. “We have plenty of broken things that need fixing around this place and you can certainly learn ranching as you go along. It is mostly common sense anyway”. “You would start out at a dollar over minimum wage, Plus room and board”. When Johnny did not answer immediately Ben said, “If things don’t work out, then you can move on”. Johnny hesitated and then said “ Mr. Thompson, I just got out of prison”. Ben sat silent for a few seconds before he answered “ I am glad you told me, Boy”. “What were you in for”? Here it was! Johnny felt that he needed to tell this man the truth. “I went to prison for killing a man, sir”. Said Johnny. Dorothy or Trina gasped, but Johnny was looking at Ben Thompson. Ben’s eyes did not show any emotion, but continued to stare out the window of the house. The seconds stretched by and no one spoke. Just when Johnny was beginning to feel the need to try to explain, Ben broke the silence. “ Did he need killing, boy”? He asked. Johnny thought about the question before he replied “ He was a thief and a coward, but he probably didn’t need killing”. “He stole my Harley motorcycle and I tracked him down in a biker bar. I was just going to give him a good beating and get my bike back. When he pulled a knife, I busted a chair over his head”. “Some of the witnesses said I hit him again with the chair

once he was down, but if I did, I don't remember doing it". "That sounds like self defense to me". Ben said. "I had a public defender and some of the witnesses said they did not see the knife". Johnny said. "There was a plea bargain. I was supposed to get one year and probation, but the judge gave me three years." Johnny explained. "Do you have a temper Boy"? Ben asked. "Some times". Johnny said. "When I drink I tend to have more of one than when I am not. I had been drinking pretty heavy that night". "Now I try to stay away from liquor". Ben nodded his head. "I used to drink too much once in a while myself and I have been in a bar fight a time or two. I was just lucky that I never killed anybody". "Well, boy, do you want the job?" Ben asked. Johnny had made up his mind. If this man would have him, he would take the job and do his best. Johnny stood up and held out his hand to Ben Thompson. To Johnny's surprise Ben just sat there looking slightly away from Johnny. Johnny looked at Dorothy and saw sadness in her eyes. Johnny moved his hand past Ben's face and the eyes did not follow the movement. Suddenly and with a shock, Johnny realized that this big outdoorsman was blind. He simply knew the inside of his house to such an extent that he did not show it. Dorothy had a routine of setting his coffee cup in the same place, the same with the dishes and silver ware. Johnny controlled his voice and said "I would be pleased to work for you, sir". "Good". Said Ben. "You will bunk with the other men. Old Jedidia will show you the ropes and what needs fixing. Mind me boy. You listen to that old man and you will learn more about ranching and life in general that you ever thought possible." Ben looked thoughtful and then said "That old man was here when we bought the place. I have no idea how old he is, but we would have gone bankrupt several times without his knowledge and hard work. Even at his age he is worth any two of the other hands". With that Ben began to fill a pipe with tobacco from a leather pouch and Johnny knew that the talk was over. Johnny thanked Mr. Thompson and headed for the bunkhouse to find this "Jedidia" and get to work.

Johnny found Joey and asked him where Jedidia was and was directed to a large building that was well behind the house. As Johnny entered he saw that the building was a large shop for repairing vehicles and equipment. He heard a noise from the rear of the building and walked towards it. Johnny was surprised to see an old black man working at a bench. The man was cussing some piece of equipment that he was working on. Johnny was impressed by his colorful language, as he called the broken part all the names in the book and some that Johnny had never heard before. "Hello. I am Johnny Tatum. I am looking for a Mr. Jedidia". The old man turned swiftly and looked Johnny over. Johnny had the uneasy impression that this old man was seeing his very soul with his

surprisingly bright eyes. “ You are looking at him” the man replied. “Mr. Thompson said for me to find you and you would show me what needed fixing and maybe show me the ropes here” said Johnny. “Humph!” said Jedidia. “You can call me Jed. Only Ben Thompson calls me Jedidia. You good at fixing things?” “Sometimes” answered Johnny. “Then get your young tail over here and help me fix this Honda engine,” came Jed’s reply. Johnny worked with the old man on the motor. While they worked Jed told him about the ranch. “This used to be a pretty damn good cattle ranch. Then beef prices went to hell, so old Ben started letting city dudes come here to play cowboys. We still run cattle and send them to market, but it’s the city folks that pay most of the bills now days” Jed confided. “You know anything about horses Boy?” he asked. “Not much” admitted Johnny. “That is ok. Most of the time we use trucks and four wheelers around the ranch. It is mostly when we have “Guests” that we use horses. City folks expect a cattle ranch to still be like it was in the eighteen hundreds and we have to accommodate them” Jed said. “You will be staying in the bunk house, with the three other hands. Try not to let Jake Myrick get under your skin. He is a all right cow hand, but a loud mouth and a bit of a bully, especially when he is drinking” The old man said. As they worked, Johnny found the courage to ask, “ Ben said that you were a good cow hand yourself. I was a bit surprised to find a black man working on a cattle ranch”. “That goes to show that you don’t know much history boy. Lots of colored folks were cow hands in the old days” the old man replied.

Eventually they got the motor rebuilt and back in the four wheeler. They were about to start it up when a ringing sound signaled that lunch was ready. They stopped work and Jed led the way to the dining hall. Three men were already eating when they walked in. “This is Johnny Tatum, the new hand. These three hombres are Jake, Clyde and Ed. Johnny is supposed to help repair all the stuff you jokers tear up around here, so he should have plenty of work” Jed said. The men just looked Johnny over and went on eating. Johnny found that the food was good and there was plenty. The other hands left before Johnny and Jed were finished, without saying a word. “ Don’t pay them any mind boy. Those three run together like a pack of mangy dogs and don’t take to new hands right off” Jed informed him. After lunch Jed set Johnny to welding up several projects, only coming over occasionally to inspect his work. “Not bad for a youngster. Where did you learn to weld Boy”? Jed asked. “I learned some in school and the rest while I was in prison,” Johnny admitted. The old man nodded. “Lots of folks been to prison, one time or another. The trick is in not going back. Some people spend so much time in prison that they can’t fit in on the outside and find some way to

get back inside, where everything is done for them and they don't have to do their own thinking". Johnny thought of some of the old timers that he had known in prison and how many of them kept going back and wondered if there was something to what Jed was saying. Some of them certainly seemed to do the dumbest things to land back in jail. "I don't plan on doing anything that will ever get me sent back," said Johnny. "I like the open places too much. Maybe it is the Indian in me". They worked until dinner and then Johnny went the bunkhouse to bed down. He was pleased to find that the bunkhouse was divided into separate rooms, with a recreation area and showers. After he showered, Johnny went into the recreation room where the other hands were playing cards. They did not offer for him to join them, so he watched TV until he got sleepy. Two days later Dorothy took Johnny to town and advanced him enough money to buy several pairs of blue jeans, shirts and a pair of boots. "We all have to at least look "western" for the city folks when they come out" she said.

Chapter 5. Taking a beating.

That night Jake started needling Johnny about his being a "jail bird". He had learned of Johnny's being in prison from Joey. Johnny ignored Jake's comments, which only seemed to make Jake try harder. "I hear you are part Indian. Well, I never met a Indian that was worth a damn" Jake taunted. Johnny tried to ignore the other man, but Jake would have none of it. "I am talking to you boy. We don't need any damn half-breed ex-cons around here. I better never catch you stealing anything of mine or I will break you into!" Jake snorted. "I never stole anything in my life" Johnny returned. Jake stepped close and Johnny could smell whisky on the other man's breath. "I say you are a thieving half breed." Jake said. Not wanting trouble Johnny started to turn away, but a heavy hand caught his shoulder and turned him back around. "Don't you ever walk away from me when I am talking to you Punk!" shouted Jake. Johnny had learned enough in prison to know that he could not always avoid a fight and that it was often better to get it over with. Still he did not want to jeopardize his new job, so he tried to calm Jake down. "I don't want any trouble" he said and again tried to walk away. This time when Jake's hand turned him back, Johnny used the momentum of his turn to throw a punch into the man's face. The punch took Jake by surprise, but he came in swinging. Johnny knew that he was in for a fight because Jake was at least two inches taller and maybe thirty pounds heavier and there was no fat on Jake anywhere. Johnny ducked under a roundhouse swing and drove his fist into Jake's stomach. It was like hitting gravel! Jake's next punch stunned Johnny and knocked him backwards. Johnny hit a chair and almost fell down. Jake was on him before he could regain his balance. A blow to the chest knocked the wind out

of Johnny. Johnny ducked his head and waded in on the bigger man, swinging his fists into Jake's stomach. Jake took the blows and sent a right cross into Johnny's face that split his lip. Johnny turned and took the kick aimed for his groin on his upper leg. Another blow left Johnny staggering and Jake came in for the finish. Johnny felt the floor rush up to hit him and felt a pain in his side as Jake kicked him. "That was just a little lesson punk. You learn some manners or I will give you a lot more" Jake said. After Jake walked away Johnny got up painfully and took a hot shower. A bruise was already starting on his ribs, but nothing seemed to be broken. Having given Johnny a beating seemed to enough for Jake, at least for the time being. Johnny lay awake in his bed thinking of the fight and wondering what he should have done differently. There was no denying that Jake was one tough customer, or that Johnny would have to fight him again in the future. Something that Johnny was not looking forward to.

The next day Jed noticed Johnny's swollen lip and black eye. "Did you tangle with Jake?" he asked. "I tried to avoid it, but he wouldn't let it go" answered Johnny. "How did you do?" asked the old man? "Not too well. I hit him several times, but it didn't seem to bother him" Johnny replied. "Jake is one tough customer in a fight" Laughed the old man. "He will probably pick another one, until you whip him or at least hurt him enough to make him leave you alone". The old man looked at Johnny hard and then said, "You know where you win or lose, Boy?" he asked suddenly. "You probably think it's is strength or speed that counts, but you win or lose a fight right here" and Jed pointed to his forehead. "What was you thinkin about when you were fighting Jake? Jed asked. "I was mostly thinking that I did not want to do anything and lose my job" "Then I was thinking that Jake was one of the toughest men I had ever fought," said Johnny. "Uh Huh. You were being the dog instead of the rabbit," Jed said. This made exactly no sense to Johnny and he told Jed so. " Think about it boy" "Why can't the dog catch the rabbit?" Johnny thought about it, but could not come up with an answer. "The answer is that the dog is runnin for his lunch and the rabbit is runnin for his life." "You think about that a while boy and apply it to fightin and any other thing in life where there is a winner and a loser". "I don't see how I could have done anything different." Johnny retorted. "He was just better than I was is all, and all the thinking in the world won't change that." He added. "I am not saying that mind set alone will win every fight. There are times when a person just don't have much chance of winning at all, but mind set can sure as anything lose a fight for you, if you don't have it right, and I think that's what happened with you and Jake." Jed said. Johnny only shrugged, wanting the conversation over.

Chapter 6. Buckaroo.

Jed's lists of things needing repairing were growing shorter. So it was only natural that Johnny began being sent out to repair fence, clean water tanks and do some "real ranch work". He loved it. Of course he used a four wheeler or a pick up truck for these jobs, but he was beginning to feel like a real "cowboy" anyway. Jed had even corrected him on that. "The correct term is "Buckaroo", not "cowboy." He had informed Johnny. "A "cowboy" was the young boy that led the milk cows out to pasture during the colonial days. A man that worked a cattle herd from horseback was a "Buckaroo". Johnny preferred "Cowboy" and thought "Buckaroo" sounded faggy. It was on one of his trips to check fence where Johnny found the carcass of a young steer that had been butchered. Not too far away he found the remains of a campfire. When he reported this to Mr. Thompson, Ben had been thoughtful. "We have just been lucky so far. Other ranchers have had this kind of thing happening for some time. Times are hard in Mexico right now and a lot of the Mexicans are coming north to find work. Not too many years back the one's coming up were all pretty decent folks, with a family back home they were trying to support, but lately the ones we are seeing are a different bunch. They will steal most anything that is not bolted down and seem to have a real chip on their shoulder towards us "gringos". Ben said. "Somebody felt hungry and saw one of our steers. It is that simple." He went on. "We will have to keep a better watch on the back country, I guess. We also don't want any trouble that might scare off our paying guests." Ben said, " You think you could learn to stay on a horse's back?" Johnny had been wanting his chance to learn to ride and said so. "OK. Have Jed pick you out a good pony to learn on. Take it slow at first and don't go breaking you darn neck." Ben said. Johnny grinned and thanked Mr. Thompson and headed out to find Jed.

Jed grinned at Johnny's excitement over learning to ride. "Damn Boy, lots of western men were riding long before we learned to walk. A few never learned to walk all that well. Mind me boy, the day will come when you drag in saddle sore and tired and cussing the first horse you ever set a saddle on." Jed said. "If you had good sense you would stick with the trucks and four-wheelers and leave the horses to the damn fools and city dudes." "Well I don't have good sense and I want to learn to ride. What do I do first?" Johnny replied. "Take that rope hangin over there and go out to the main corral and catch that small roan. That's reddish brown colored, to you. When you get that horse tied up in front of the livery I will show you how to put a saddle on and you can start learning to be a damn fool cowboy." Jed said.

Johnny grabbed the rope and headed out at a fast walk. Jed only grinned some more. While Johnny had no problem picking the roan out of the small horse herd, catching it proved to be another story. First Johnny tried to walk up to the horse, talking softly to it. This might have worked, if some of the other horses had not spooked and begin running

around the corral. Soon the roan had picked up on their fear and was running as well. Johnny had seen enough westerns to know that now he must lasso the horse, but again, this looked easier than it was. Eventually Johnny caught the roan, having caught two other horses by mistake and losing some skin off his palms as they fought to get away. Once caught, the roan calmed down and Johnny was able to lead it to the barn where the horse gear was kept. Jed was no where to be seen, so Johnny in his eagerness to get the horse saddled asked Clyde what to do. Clyde seemed anxious to be helpful and showed Johnny how to spread the saddle blanket and fasten the saddle on the roan. He then sent Johnny for a bridle and waited for him to return. After showing Johnny how to fasten the bridle, Clyde walked away, leaving Johnny with the roan. Johnny knew that he should wait for Jed before getting on the horse, but as time passed he grew more and more impatient. In his impatience Johnny did not notice that Clyde, Jake and Ed had gathered in the shade of the bunkhouse to watch. Telling himself that riding a horse could not be any harder than riding a motorcycle, Johnny took the rope off the roan and put his foot in a stirrup and started to swing into the saddle. Before he could get in the saddle the roan began to sidestep, leaving Johnny hopping on one foot, trying to stay close to the horse. Johnny finally grabbed the saddle horn and pulled himself up. Before he was even seated the roan started bucking and Johnny was thrown off. He hit the dirt on his back and had the wind knocked out of him. As soon as he let go of the reins the roan stopped. Johnny got up and dusted himself off. He was suddenly aware of the laughter of the three men lounging nearby. Angry at himself and the horse Johnny grabbed the reins again and once again tried to mount. Again the roan did not let him get settled in the saddle before starting to buck and Johnny was once more lying on the ground. He was about ready to try again when Jed walked up and motioned for Johnny to come into the barn with him. "Having fun boy?" Jed asked. "Not exactly" replied Johnny. "You should have waited for me." Jed said. "Ok. Let's start over. First off, always check the saddle blanket to make sure it is smooth and doesn't have wrinkles in it. Also check to make sure that there is nothing under the saddle blanket that would irritate the horse. Another thing is to always check the chinch yourself to make sure it is set right. Too loose

and the saddle might slip on you, too tight and the horse won't like it." Jed told him. "Now, you go back out and practice taking the saddle off, checking the saddle blanket and then putting the saddle back on again." Johnny was impatient, but did as the old man said. When he had the saddle off and was checking the blanket he found a small stone under the blanket. Johnny pocketed the stone and put the blanket and saddle on the horse. He showed the stone to Jed, who only grinned and said, "I figured something like that. Those clowns don't have enough to amuse themselves. Now, when you get ready to mount pull the horse's head around with the bridle. This will keep it from being able to buck as well until you are in the saddle. If the horse starts to buck, don't be ashamed to grab the saddle horn to keep from being thrown. Just walk the roan around for a while. You don't need to saw on the reins to get that horse to turn. Just a little pressure on its neck with the reins is enough." Jed told him. Johnny did as he was told and was soon in the saddle. This time the roan did not buck. Soon Johnny was feeling more comfortable on the horse's back and was having no trouble walking the horse. Within three days Johnny had learned to ride, well enough to go out checking fence on horseback accompanied by Jed. Johnny noticed that Jed carried an old Winchester rifle in a scabbard. "Why do you have a gun?" Johnny asked. "Sometimes wild dogs will get after a calf, or a steer might get hurt bad and need to be put out of it's misery. A gun is the mark of a free man, boy." Jed answered. "I can't own a gun, because I am a felon." Johnny replied, glumly. "Maybe so and maybe not." Was all Jed would say.

Chapter 7 Silent invasion.

They spent the day mostly walking their horses along miles of fence. Although there were roads of sort near most of the fence line and Johnny had been out in a truck checking fence, he soon saw that from the back of a slow moving horse it was possible to see much more. Before he had looked for places where the wire was down, now he noticed everything. Places where the ground had eroded from under the wire, where a wire was loose from the fence post and much more. They stopped several times at the water tanks, low metal tanks, each with a windmill and a well, to let the horses drink. At one tank they removed several disposable diapers from the water tank and gathered and burned a lot of other human trash. "Why would anybody put used diapers in the water tank? They stopped here for water. Don't they care that other people and the cattle might need to drink here too?" asked Johnny in total disgust. "Humans are the most disgusting creature on the earth. Some are even more disgusting than others. These people come from a country where everybody throws their trash on the ground. No! They really don't give a flat damn about the next bunch to need the

water. They have been crossing that river for almost one hundred years, but the ones coming lately are a different breed from those that came over here to work and then go back to their families. Today they come to get all the free welfare and medical that they can. They also say that they are taking back all the land this country took away from them in the first place.” Jed snorted. “The hell of it is they are taking over a lot of this land and the government won’t lift a finger to stop them from coming across.” Jed shook his head. “It is almost like the government wants hundreds of thousands of these wetbacks moving into the country. They sure cater to them once they are here, giving them welfare, free medical. All things that American citizens can’t even get. Hell! Don’t get me started Boy!” Jed said. They had planned on eating their lunch at the water tank because of an old cottonwood tree that gave it good shade, but decided to move on a ways further. The trash had left a gloomy feeling in both of them. It was shortly that they came to a place where the fence had been cut. “Damn lousy *****s!” Jed roared. “It is easy enough to crawl under a barbed wire fence, but these pieces of **** have to cut it!” Johnny thought that Jed might have a stroke, right on the spot. Instead they repaired the fence, using wire stretchers and some wire they carried in their saddlebags. Lunch, when they finally stopped was a sullen affair, with neither man talking much. After they had both eaten Jed Finally spoke up “ Damn it boy! There are a whole lot of damn good people in this world and only really a hand full of bad apples. The trouble is that the good folk go about their business and are kind of invisible most of the time. It is the bad ones that get noticed. Maybe a hundred people crawled under that section of fence, but it only takes one *** hole with wire cutters to make me angry with all of them. We have to try not to judge people Boy. We can’t know what is in their heart. As your people used to say “Don’t judge a man until you have walked a mile in his moccasins.” With that, the mood seemed to lift and they again rode with good spirits.

Chapter 8. Economy lesson.

Shortly before nightfall, they came to a line cabin. The cabin was larger than Johnny had expected, having six bunks in it. “Sometimes we bring the city folk out to one of the line cabins to spend the night, especially if the weather looks questionable. Other wise we let them sleep out under the stars, with comfortable bedding of course. You know, for some of those people it is the only time they have ever slept outside of a building.” Jed said with wonder in his voice. “Many of them never even been around animals!” Jed said, shaking his head. “Make a man wonder what kind of lives they had, and what they do value. It ain’t the open country. That’s for sure.” Jed was in one of his philosophical moods, so Johnny

let him ramble. “ You ever take the time to think how lucky you really are Boy? You are still young, got good health and are out in some of the most beautiful country God ever created. On top of that, you got me for company.” Jed cackled. “I can agree with the first two parts, but I am not sure if the last is a blessing or a curse.” Answered Johnny. This broke Jed up with laughter. When he was over his laughing Jed told Johnny to get out and take the saddles and gear off both horses and give them a good brushing. Johnny asked? “Why do the horses need brushed down? We never road them hard all day.” Jed explained “Those horses did all the work for several hours, while we just sat they’re admiring the view. Maybe they don’t need a brushing, but they sure like one. It is a change to give something back to your horse, maybe get to know him a little better and him know you better too.” “Why do I have to brush both horses, when I only road one?” Asked Johnny. “Because you are young and I am old and because I am your boss. Besides, you wanted to learn everything there is to know about horse riding and brushing down horses is part of it. You don’t just brush the horse boy. You use that time to really look the horse over. Check for any little cuts or places where the saddle pad is wearing on the horse’s back. You lift each hoof and while you are cleaning them check the condition of the horseshoe and the hoof in general. Brushing down a horse is an important thing that almost everybody overlooks. A horse is not some damn car that you can drive hard and park in the garage and forget. A horse is a living breathing creature, just like us and it deserves to be treated like one.” Jed answered. After that speech, Johnny did not have anything to say, so he went to brush two horses.

By the time he was finished with the horses Jed had dinner almost ready, Biscuits in the oven and a pot of stew on the stove. The aromas made Johnny realize how hungry he was. There seemed to be something about being outside all day that made Johnny ravenous. They each filled their plates and there was plenty to go around. Johnny poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot on the stove and sat down to enjoy the meal. With his first sip of the hot coffee Johnny’s eyes widened. “ Whoa! Damn Jed, this is some strong coffee!” he exclaimed. Jed took a sip and Said “ Yep. It came out about right this time. Sometimes it turns out too weak and I have to add more grounds before I like it.” “It is called “cowboy coffee”. Boy.” “It will put hair on your chest.” Jed said. “In that case I will stay bare chested! I think this stuff would take the enamel off my teeth!” Johnny moaned. “You can add some hot water to your cup, if you want to be a wimp all your life.” Jed replied. Johnny did just that and returned to the table. “I can’t believe you drink this stuff and still lived to a ripe old age. Say! How old are you anyway?” Johnny remarked. “I am old enough to be your grand pa. I was a

youngster during the Great Depression. I have seen a lot of change in this country and most of it not for the good.” Jed replied. “People today have forgotten their roots and think nothing bad can ever happen. Most of the ones that saw the really bad times of the depression are gone and nobody wants to hear about it from the rest. He said. ”People think it can’t happen again. They are fools! They are doing just what their grand parents did before the big depression all over again, because they won’t learn from history.” Johnny ate for a few seconds, sipped his now weaker coffee and said, “ I thought the government had found a way to prevent the banks from failing, which was one of the reasons for the great depression.” “HA!” Jed snorted. “The government insures the depositor’s money, but only up to a point. It is like having one thousand dollars of insurance on a five thousand dollar car.” He said. “And what makes you think the Federal Government is in any position to pay, if things come apart? The good old U.S.A. is the biggest debtor nation in the world. We owe more than any other country and our national debt is totally out of control. When these lying politicians talk about paying off the national debt I want to puke. You know what it would take to pay off our national debt, boy? If we could find buyers, and everybody sold everything that they owned, houses, cars, TV sets, even the clothes off our backs, it would take all the money we got to pay off the debt! Now do you think some politician is really going to pay this debt off?” Jed asked. Johnny replied “Well, maybe so, but we owe this money to ourselves so it doesn’t really matter very much.” “Wrong, Boy!” Jed answered. “We owe a lot of it to foreign banks and they will want something for their money. The big shots know that the U.S. economy is propping up most of the economies of the world, so they won’t do anything to rock the boat too much. This is why we have been able to keep running up our debt for so long.” Jed said. “But now we can’t even pay the interest on the debt. I think all this land that the Federal government has been giving to the U.N. to make those “International Biosphere’s” is to pay the interest on our debt, but I can’t prove it.” “I haven’t heard anything about any National Forest land being transferred to the U.N.” Johnny said. “I would think something like that would make the news and I seriously doubt that Congress or the American people would allow it.” He announced. “Well, It is happening whether you know about it or not. When we get back to the ranch, you ask Ben’s wife to show you all about this on their computer.” Jed said. “How much you know about history, boy?” Jed then asked. “I don’t know. Just what I learned in school.” Johnny answered, wondering how to gracefully get out of listening to another lecture from the old man. “Most of what is taught in school is plain bull **** !” Jed snorted. “You take the great depression. When did it start?” Jed asked. “That’s easy. The depression started in 1929 when the market crashed.” Johnny replied.

“Not so.” Answered Jed. “The market crash might have been the cause, but it was a while before the depression affected the people who did not own stocks, which was most of the people.” Jed said. “Then the damn depression just went on and on, with people getting poorer all the time. The weather didn’t help any either. We had several years of bad drought and the “dust bowl” drove a lot of farmers and their families off their land. There were whole “tent cities”, or “Shanty towns” sprung up, filled with people that had lost their homes and had no where else to go. It was a cruel hard time, boy.” Jed said. “Did they teach you in school who ended the depression?” Jed asked. “It was Roosevelt I think.” Johnny said. “Nope. It was Hitler. He ended it in his own country by starting a war. When we saw how well it worked for him we joined in the war and all our economies got going again.” Jed said. “There is nothing like a good war to make people forget how bad they have things.” Jed philosophized. “We sent all the out of work young men off to Europe to fight and that left plenty of work in the war plants for everybody left. Because we were in a war the people accepted not having sugar, coffee, much meat, no new cars, or tires for the ones they had and a whole bunch more stuff.” Jed reminisced. “But all good things must eventually end and the war was pretty soon over. When all those young men came back home, they all wanted jobs. Some of the war plants were able to turn to making things for civilian use, but not many people needed a big cannon, or a submarine, so a lot of the war plants closed down, throwing people out of work. Our economy started slowing down again and something had to be done or we would end up back in a depression again. That is when the big whigs got together and decided we needed another war. The trouble was none of the countries that had just been through WW2 could afford another war right then. So they came up with an idea. They would have a “war” but not so intense. That is where the “Cold war” came about, boy.” Jed said. “To have a war, you got to have an enemy. The Russkies had come out pretty well in the war, so they became our “enemies” for this “cold war” and our war plants opened back up and everybody was happy.” Jed said. “Now wait one darn minute!” Johnny said. “Are you saying that the “cold war” was nothing but a way to keep the economy up?” He asked. “That’s right, and it worked pretty well for a lot of years. Of course you got to keep the people believing it or it won’t work. There had to be some real fighting or the people would figure it out, so we jumped into Korea. This took a lot of young men out of the work force and that helped too. Eventually everybody had built up about all the weapons they could reasonable use, so we had Viet Nam to use a lot of that stuff up. We had to have a whole bunch of new military gear to fight in the jungle. They replaced a perfectly fine rifle with the M-16 and lots of other new stuff.” Jed said. “Things were working fine until a bunch of ungrateful young men got tired of

going off to a far away place to die, so that some old men could get richer and started protesting the war. Those ingrates stirred the rest of the country up and the politicians knew that they would have to stop their “cold war”. They tried something they called “free Trade” and look at what happened. The poor Soviet Union came apart and now who are we going to use as an enemy?” Jed said. Johnny shook his head and said, “ I bet you don’t believe any of that garbage and if you do you are about the most cynical old man I ever met.” “That so? Replied Jed. “I suggest you talk to Ben, if you don’t believe me” Johnny said he would do just that and the talk turned to the ranch work.

Chapter 9. Enter the rabbit.

Two days later Jake forced another fight on Johnny. Although Johnny fought hard he was again soundly beaten; coming away with a split lip that required four stitches. “You are still being the dog instead of the rabbit” Jed told him, but Johnny was in no mood for the old man’s philosophizing. The fact was that he simply could not beat Jake in a fight and that was that. The following Monday, after the “visitors” had gone back to the city, Johnny was sent out alone to check fence and do whatever repairs were needed. Johnny was proud to be able to ride out alone on horseback. It was a fine day, with a gentle breeze blowing and a few puffy clouds in the sky. “Be nice to have some rain.” Johnny thought, but the clouds did not look like rain clouds to him. Johnny road along slowly to conserve his horse’s energy, the way Jed had taught him. A person could also see more of their surroundings moving slowly and taking everything in. Johnny could see where the idea of the “Singing cowboy” came from. He felt kind of like singing himself, only ever time he started, his horse would give him such a critical look that Johnny soon stopped. Jed had explained that in the old days of the big cattle drives the men that road around the herd at night often sang to the cattle, to keep them calm. Cattle tended to be spookier at night, although they were bad enough any time. Johnny had been working his way towards the spot where the fence had been cut. This was also the general area where the steer had been found butchered. Johnny’s horse heard it before Johnny did. His ears perked up and he started side stepping, at first refusing to go forwards. Soon Johnny could hear the sound of angry human voices and rode towards the sound. Topping a hillcrest Johnny saw that Jake and Clyde had a mixed group of Mexicans stopped in an arroyo. Clyde held a rifle in his hands. “Good!” thought Johnny. “Now we will turn them over to the boarder patrol.” Something held Johnny back from riding right up. Instead he watched from the hilltop, quiet and unseen by those below. He could hear the tone of the words, but not make out what was being said. Jake and Clyde made the trespassers sit down and when one man was too slow Jake

grabbed him by his shirtfront with his left hand and drove his right fist into the man's stomach. The man doubled over and lay on the ground, where Jake kicked him several times. Having been the recipient of Jake's attention himself, Johnny felt uneasy. Of course these people were trespassers, not only on the ranch but into his country as well, thought Johnny. They had cut fence and butchered a steer, Hadn't they? Of course it had not been these particular people that did those things, but it was their race. This line of thinking did not sit well with Johnny. He found himself torn between conflicting emotions. As he watched, fascinated, the way a bird is as a snake slides slowly closer. Johnny saw Jake take the Mexican's water jugs away from them. Something Jake said seemed to upset the trespassers because they all started jabbering at once and one of the men stood up. Jake quickly beat the man to a pulp. Still the Mexican's did not comply with whatever Jake wanted, until Clyde fired a round from his rifle into the sand near by. The demoralized group began to slowly take off their shoes. Suddenly Johnny knew that Jake was not planning on turning them over to the boarder patrol. He was going to send them back south with no water and no shoes. It was quite possibly a death sentence for some of them. Several dehydrated bodies had been found along the boarder. People that tried to cross on foot with too little water. Without ever knowing he had started, Johnny found himself riding towards the arroyo. When Jake saw him he said, "Get the hell out of here, Punk!" Johnny rode straight in. "You want me to get on the radio in the truck and have them send the Boarder Patrol out here?" Johnny ask, hoping to give both Jake and himself a way out of the situation. "You just get your scrawny *** out of here, or you will find my boot stuck in it again." Then Johnny knew! As he dismounted and tied his horse to a bush, Johnny knew that here and now, he was going to take Jake Myrick. Johnny did not think this. It was something that he knew to the very bottom of his being. He had no idea how he would do it, but he was certain that he would. That he would undoubtedly get badly hurt in the fight no longer mattered. All that mattered was that Johnny was not going to let Jake send these people into the desert to die. Johnny also knew that Jake was the only one that mattered. Clyde went along with whatever Jake said. Beat Jake and Clyde would back down too, rifle or not. Johnny was surprised to find that he was actually looking forward to the fight. Something hot and angry was beginning to build within him. It seemed to start in his stomach and radiate outwards until his whole being was filled with it. When Jake said, "Ok punk. I am going to teach you another lesson." Johnny could not stop himself from laughing. It was the laughter of a warrior. Johnny circled around and down into the arroyo, where there would be plenty of room. When Jake came for him Johnny met him head on. Jake threw a roundhouse blow that Johnny ducked and Johnny hit him hard

in his stomach. Jake did not seem to feel the blow and hit Johnny with a wicked left jab. Johnny took the blow and moved in closer. Jake had longer reach and Johnny needed to find a way to neutralize that. Jake took a step back and Johnny hit him in the face. Jake kicked for Johnny's groin, but Johnny turned in time and took the blow on his thigh. Jake hit Johnny with two fast punches and Johnny felt his head swim. To avoid going down Johnny grabbed Jake's head with both hands and pulled it towards him, while driving his own forehead into Jake's face. Johnny felt his face splashed with blood, but did not know if it was his own or Jake's. It did not matter. Now the Mexicans no longer mattered. All that mattered was him and Jake, locked in a ritual that was older than fire. Jake's nose was smashed and he had to breathe through his mouth. Even then the blood that was running down his face sometimes choked him. The punk had always given ground when they had fought before. Now he kept coming in, always getting too close. When Jake had heard Johnny's laugh, a fear had gone through him. Something was wrong. Always before he had controlled the fight. Still Jake was confident that he would beat Johnny. Hadn't he beat him twice before? Jake bore in and smashed a right into Johnny's stomach. Johnny grunted with pain, but instead of giving ground moved in closer and drove his left knee into Jake's stomach. The blow caught Jake off guard and he doubled forward. Johnny again drove his forehead into Jake's face. Now it was Jake's turn to give ground. The pain was terrible and one eye was swelling shut. Jake shook his head to clear some of the blood off his face. Johnny was right there driving blow after blow into Jake. Jake swung a hard roundhouse with his right hand, but Johnny was inside the arc of the blow. Damn! He had to get that damned punk off of him, Jake thought. Jake threw a series of short hard jabs into Johnny's body. Johnny took the blows, making no attempt to block or evade them. In return Johnny hit Jake several times in the face with short, wicked jabs of his own. They stood there trading punches and it was Jake who again gave ground. Johnny's face was a mass of cuts, some from Jake's teeth when he had butted him and his breath was ragged, but still the fire burned in him and he bore into Jake. Jake was in no better shape. His nose was now a constant stream of blood that ran into his mouth making breathing difficult, one eye was swollen shut and he had to keep shaking his head to keep the blood out of the other one. The kid was still on him! He couldn't shake him off! Jake felt real fear for the first time. He thought of the times he had put his boots to the kid when Johnny was down and expected no less from Johnny. Summoning strength that came from fear, Jake threw more jabs to Johnny's face. Johnny took the blows and swung a hard overhand to Jake's jaw. The blow stunned the bigger man and his guard dropped. Johnny slapped both palms to Jake's ears and Jake dropped like a

sack of manure. Johnny stood over him, waiting, but the big man did not get up. Gasping for breath, Johnny staggered to his horse and took a drink from his canteen, then poured some of the water over his head. Then he wiped his face with his bandana. Turning to Clyde he said, "Give them back their shoes." Clyde looked at Jake's bloody face and backed away. The Mexicans scrambled to get their shoes back on. Johnny walked to the truck and called the ranch to tell them to send the Border patrol. Johnny had forgotten about Jake Myrick until he heard a hoarse voice from behind. "Turn around punk!" Jake screamed. Johnny turned and found himself looking down the bore of the rifle, now in Jake's hands. "I am going to kill you." Jake roared. Johnny knew that Jake meant it. He glanced around, but there was no where to run and he was in no condition to move quickly anyway. Suddenly a voice from behind Jake said, "You better think hard Jake. You even twitch wrong and the last thing you will ever know is my blowing your heart out of your chest!" All heads turned towards the voice and Johnny saw Jed sitting on his horse with his ancient Winchester rifle trained on Jake. "You and Clyde get back to the ranch. Johnny and I will handle these Mexicans." Jed ordered. For a split second Johnny thought Jake might still shoot him, so strong was the man's anger and hatred. Then Jake lowered the rifle and walked slowly to the truck. Clyde got in with him and drove away. Once the truck was out of sight Jed dismounted. "Well boy, you got some rabbit in you after all." He said to Johnny. Not replying, Johnny went to his horse for another, longer drink of water. "How long have you been here?" he asked. "Long enough." Jed laughed. "Why didn't you break up the fight?" Johnny asked. "And stop Jake Myrick from getting the beating he deserves? That was one of the best fights I have ever seen. Far be it from me to stop it?" Jed answered. "Well, I am sure glad you were here. I think Jake would have shot me other wise. Say what were you doing out here anyway?" Johnny said through swollen, bloody lips. "Maybe so, Maybe not, but you best start packing a gun from here on out. I figured I might sort of tag along behind you to see that you didn't get into any trouble on your first time out alone." Jed said. "Well I am glad you did. I can't own a gun, and I am not willing to risk going back prison." Johnny replied. "There may be a way for you to have a gun and not violate the law." Jed said. "I have been doing a little checking and talked to the sheriff. Some guns are not considered "firearms" under the law." Johnny was too tired too much care at the moment, but if there was a way he could keep working for the Thompson's and not have Jake Myrick run him off, he wanted it. "That Jake Myrick is basically a coward. All bullies are basically cowards. I doubt he would try to shoot you if he thought you could shoot back. I also don't think he will be wanting to pick another fight with you after today." Jed said. "It did my old heart good to see you whip him, boy!" They took the Mexicans to the nearest

water tank, so that they could drink while waiting for the border patrol. When the Mexicans were taken away, the two men road slowly back toward the ranch. Jed was silent and thoughtful for most of the ride. "When we get back to the ranch, I would take it kindly if you did not mention any of this to anyone." Jed finally said. "Why not? I think Ben needs to know what Jake was going to do." Johnny said. "Ben is kind of hot headed. He would fire Jake on the spot." Jed answered. The thought was pleasing to Johnny and he said so. "If Jake left, his two friends would go with him. That would leave Ben with few hands, right in the middle of tourist season. Cowhands are hard to find these days and some won't work on a Dude Ranch. Ben needs the money from the city folks to pay the bills. We will just let things ride until summer when nobody much wants to play cowboy and then I will have a talk with Ben." Jed said. As much as he would like to see Jake gone, Johnny also didn't want to cause hardship for the Thompsons. "Ok. I won't say anything." He said. Despite his pain Johnny realized that he felt pretty good. He also doubted that Jake would start any more fights and if he did Johnny knew that he could beat him again, if he had to. Johnny decided that the rabbit would be one of his totems from then on. The rabbit had wisdom to teach.

Part two The guns of yesteryear.

When Johnny and Jed got back to the ranch the sun was on the horizon. Johnny was beginning to feel stiffness in his upper body and sore muscles from the bruising blows he had taken. His lower body had some pain, but the constant motion of the horse had prevented any stiffness. Other than a little tired and saddle sore, Johnny felt pretty good. He had not only stood up to Jake Myrick, but had beaten him in a stand up fight. Johnny had the unsettling thought that Jake might step out of the bunkhouse rifle in hand when they showed up, but this proved unfounded. In fact Jake and Clyde were gone when Johnny and Jed came on. Of the three "compadres" only Ed was at the ranch. Ed looked at Johnny with fear and awe in his eyes and kept his distance. Clyde had driven Jake into town to the emergency room, because his smashed nose would not stop bleeding. Johnny unsaddled both horses and was brushing them when Dorothy came into the stable. "After seeing Jake, I wanted to see what you looked like." She said, as she carefully looked Johnny over. "It is obvious that you have either been in a fist fight or trying to bathe a wild cat, but you certainly look better than Jake did." Dorothy laughed. Then she grew serious and said "Johnny, Ben wants to talk to you. He heard Clyde's side of the story and now he wants to hear yours". Johnny said he would come in to talk as soon as he had finished the horses. "That is fine. Taking care of the horses always comes first, at least around here" Dorothy said. As she reached the stable door, Dorothy turned "By

the way Johnny, I know about the other fights you had with that loud mouthed bully and I for one am glad you taught him a lesson this time". With that, she left Johnny standing there with the brush in his hand. As Johnny hurried to finish the horses, he wondered what Ben Thompson would say to him. Would he fire him?" Damn. Jed had put Johnny in a tight spot by asking him not to tell Ben what Jake was going to do. Johnny felt that he did owe the old man a lot, not only for probably saving his life this day, but all that he had taught him about the ranch. "Oh. What the hell? I was looking for a job when I found this one" Johnny philosophized as he walked towards the house.

Ben was in the living room, sitting in his easy chair and filling his pipe when Dorothy announced that Johnny was there. Ben motioned for Johnny to sit down and went on filling his pipe. By now Johnny was somewhat used to Ben's silences and so he waited for the big man to speak. "Clyde said you busted Jake up pretty badly today," Ben said. It was a statement and not a question, so Johnny did not answer. "Clyde was in here trying to get you fired. He said you picked a fight with Jake, when Jake was just doing ranch work and minding his own business." Ben Announced. " Fortunately I know what Jake and the other two are like. I also know about some of the fights you already had with Jake and that when he is drinking Jake can turn mean." Ben dug a lighter from his pocket and lit his pipe. Johnny was amazed how well this man did without sight. There were times when he almost forgot the man was blind. "Maybe now Jake will leave you alone. I need my cowhands in shape to work and not all busted up" Ben laughed. "I know that you don't care much for Jake, or probably the other two either, but when it comes to the wanna be cowboys, they are damn good at taking care of them. I think the city dudes give those three a chance to show off and to really feel like they are somebody. The city people are wise enough in their own environment, but out here they are almost totally lost. It is a whole different world for them and I think that is what makes it fun". Ben said. "Jake and the others feel superior to the city people and are just condescending

enough to keep the city slickers in their place. How about you try staying out of fights with Jake, at least until the tourist season is over." Ben said. "I will not provoke a fight with him, but I won't run from him either." Johnny answered. "I don't think Jake will want any more of you, after the way you whipped him." Ben laughed. "I sure won't be fighting him just for fun either. He is one tough hombre." Johnny said.

Johnny left the house and took as hot a shower as he could stand. As he was

drying Jed came into the bunkhouse. "I brought you some DMSO to rub on those bruises." He announced. "Same stuff we use on the horses when they hurt a leg." Jed said. "Is it safe for humans?" Johnny asked. "Well I have used it for years." Jed returned. "Yeah, but is it safe for humans?" Johnny shot back, feeling pretty cocky. "You darn overstuffed lizard, if it weren't safe I wouldn't be giving it to you." Jed laughed back. "Ok. You will know it is working because your skin will feel like ants are crawling all over it. When Johnny started putting the DMSO on his bruises, he found that he had a lot more of them than he had thought. He seemed to be sore everywhere! Damn! Jed had not lied about the feeling of ants crawling on him! Johnny let the DMSO work for as long as he could stand the sensations and then took another shower. Johnny ate dinner then headed for bed. When the alarm went off, Johnny was pleasantly surprised to note that the places he had used the DMSO were not sore, while the places he had skipped hurt like blazes. Over all he felt a lot better than the other times he had fought with Jake. When he saw Jed Johnny asked him why he had not told him about the DMSO before. "I did not want to make it too comfortable for you when Jake whipped you. I figure that if you hurt some, you would get your belly full sooner and give him the whipping I knew you were capable of. and that is just what you did." Jed said. "Why you rasty old goat! Letting me suffer all this time. It's your old tail I ought to whip." Johnny said. "If it is any consolation to you, I still haven't told Jake about the DMSO." Jed laughed.

Johnny spent the day repairing things around the ranch and getting caught up on needed welding. He only saw Jake a couple of times during the day. By evening Johnny had worked out almost all the soreness from his body and many of the bruises had disappeared thanks to Jed's horse liniment.

Dinner was a very quiet affair, with Jake and his friends saying very little. After dinner Johnny went to the bunkhouse. He was behind in writing his folks and wanted to catch up. The bunkhouse door burst open and there stood Jake Myrick, He had bruises on his face, his nose was still bandaged, and there were stitches above his left eye. "You got lucky Punk. That's all. Now I am going to whip your scrawny ***!" Jake shouted. Johnny looked Jake straight in the eye and walked casually over to him. "We both know it was not luck Jake. If you are ready for another beating, then bring it on!" Johnny said. Jake hesitated. He had hoped to back the punk kid down, but Johnny was having none of it. Jake wanted a way out of this, without looking bad in front of his friends. Johnny gave it to him. "Jake, you are one tough dude, If you want a rematch I will give you one any time. How about you heal up a little and we can go at it whenever you want."

Johnny said. Jake raised his hand to his broken nose and spit on the floor in front of Johnny. The he turned and went to his room, without another word. Johnny just shrugged and went back to writing his letter. Life was too short to let creeps get under your skin.

Jed found Johnny as he was getting ready to ride the fence line. You thought about getting a gun, Boy? He asked. " I have thought about it. I don't want to do anything that will land me back in prison? Johnny said. "You mentioned some guns that might be legal for me to have. How sure are you about that?" Jed lit his pipe and said, " There can be some difference with what the law books say and what a Judge will do. You might be legally in the right and end up before a Judge that hates guns and ex-cons. In life you make your best choices and can't expect guarantees." "That is kind of what I was expecting." Johnny said. "I haven't needed a gun all my life, and I don't think I need one now. Jake is a lot of talk, and now that he has cooled down I don't think he will be gunning for me." "If I ended up shot Jake would be the prime suspect."

"Maybe so. But you would be the prime dead body." Jed answered. "If you change your mind about getting a gun, let me know." Johnny doubted that he would change his mind.

Johnny spent the day riding fence, but found little to do in the way of repairs. He spent the night in one of the line shacks. Johnny liked staying in the line shacks and cooking his meals on the wood cook stove and trying to read by kerosene lamplight. It had taken him a little time to learn to move the pan around on the stove top to find just the right heat, but once he learned he like using the old stoves. He had noted that there were several replacement chimneys for the kerosene lamps. When he broke one, while just cleaning it, he understood. Jed had told him that diesel fuel could be used in the lamps, instead of kerosene, but that it gave a little less light.

Johnny went to sleep listening to the coyotes howling in the distance. He felt whole for the first time in his life. It was like he had been born for this and had been unknowingly searching for this all his life.

Johnny woke before the alarm. He fed grain to his horse and had breakfast cooking as the sun came up. Just like people, horses did best when not worked on a full belly, so he fed his horse before he started his own breakfast. This was another thing Jed had taught him. There was so much to learn, but it all made

good sense, once he thought about it. Johnny realized that he had been taught not to think in the public schools.

As he rode the fence line Johnny noticed something in the distance that did not look quite natural and rode toward it. It turned out to be an old mine tailings pile. The mouth of the mine was slightly above the tailings. Johnny wished he had brought a flashlight and vowed to get one of the "Mini-Mag" lights for his gear. Those little lights did not take up much room, were not heavy, but gave surprisingly good light. Johnny dismounted and dropped his horse's reins on the ground. All good western horses are taught to stand still if "ground reined". Johnny slowly worked his way into the old mine. He knew he was doing something stupid, because the mine could be full of snakes, or the wild Peccary. The wild pigs could really tear a man up on their way by, if he were between them and the exit, but Johnny saw no sign that the pigs were living in the mine. Just when Johnny had decided that he had gone as far into the mine as he could possibly see and was about to leave, he noticed something partly sticking out of a small pile of rocks by one side of the shaft. Johnny nudged the rocks with his foot to make sure there were no snakes, and then he knelt down to examine his find better. It turned out to be nothing more than a can of gray spray paint. Johnny noticed that the can did not look old and was still full of paint. He left the can lying on the rock pile and left the old mine. Someday he would come back with a flashlight and explore the old mine some more, but for now he had other chores. Other than seeing several Jack rabbits and one rattlesnake the rest of the day was uneventful, and Johnny got back to the ranch in time for a shower and dinner.

The next day Johnny worked with Jed repairing the hitch on the tractor. Johnny finally asked a question that had been on his mind. "How did Ben lose his eyesight?" Jed wiped the sweat off his head and face with his bandana. And said. "He was in a mining accident. There was an explosion and he had some brain damage." "Isn't there anything they can do?" Johnny asked. "With all the advances in medicine it would seem that there must be something." Jed said "There is a operation that might restore his sight, but it is risky. If it went wrong Ben could end up paralyzed. Cutting into the brain is still a tricky business." They worked in silence after that. Soon Johnny had the broken hitch welded. He was dripping sweat under the welding hood and more than ready to get on to a different job. "You work pretty well, for a young'un." Jed stated. "Most young people today don't have any idea how to work." "Too much time sitting in front of a TV set, or playing one of those stupid computer games." Johnny thought about

it before answering. "I guess I was lucky, without ever realizing it." He said. "My family never had too much money, so I kind of had to scrounge and make do for the things I wanted. One way or another I have been working to get what I wanted all my life." Jed nodded. "Too many parents make the mistake of handing their kids everything on a platter. The kids grow up, never valuing anything enough and expecting that the world owes them something, just for being born." He said. "I have noticed that, other than a few beers, you don't seem to be spending most of your wages. It is a good idea to have something saved back, in case of emergency, or if you find something you really want." Johnny laughed. "There is not much to spend money on out here and I get room and board. It is easy to save a little in a situation like that." Johnny answered.

"You need to go check the water tank by Knob Hill again. Clyde found that some Yahoo had shot holes in it last week. He plugged it with some pieces of wood, but it needs proper fixing. Water is one thing we can't afford to waste out here." Jed said. Johnny took a four wheeler to make the repairs. While Johnny liked the four wheelers, he preferred it when he could go out on horseback. Sure enough some of the wooden pieces had come out and the tank was only partly full, despite the efforts of the nearby windmill. Why anyone would shoot a water tank in this country was beyond Johnny's understanding. He had to admit that he just couldn't understand people sometimes.

The next day found Johnny happily on horseback, checking more fence line. He had been at it for several hours and was looking forward to the line cabin, when a cottontail rabbit ran out of the brush almost under his horse's hooves. His horse shied violently to the left, almost dumping Johnny. It probably saved his life. Johnny heard the angry whine of a bullet as it whipped past his head. Without pausing to think, Johnny leaned low over his horse's neck and dug his spurs into his horse's side. His horse lunged forward and Johnny took it into a close by arroyo, as another shot passed close by. He cut right toward where the arroyo was deepest and let the horse run. He did not slow up for several minutes. Where he stopped, the arroyo was deep enough for him to be out of sight. Johnny dismounted and crept to the edge of the arroyo and peered around. There was nobody in sight in all directions. Going on to the line shack did not seem like a wise idea. Johnny led his horse down the arroyo, stopping every so often to survey the countryside. Although riding at night was risky because the rattlers came out at night, and a horse can step in a hole and brake a leg, Johnny waited until dark to make his way back to the ranch. It was past midnight when Johnny put his tired horse away and went to the bunkhouse. He found Jed before

breakfast and told him what had happened. Johnny was sure that it was Jake Myrick who had shot at him, but Jed informed him that Jake had been at the ranch all that day. "He was right here, Boy. Clyde and Ed were out working, but neither of them have any reason to take a shot at you." Jed stated. Johnny had been so sure that he had everything figured out, but now he was at a loss. "Somebody sure took a couple of shots at me!" Johnny exclaimed. "Strange things happen out here in the desert." Jed said. "There are some crazy people in the world." "What are you going to do now?" Johnny had been sure that it had been Jake that shot at him. Now he was not quite sure what he should do. He could quit. Run off with his tail between his legs and look for another job. That idea did not sit at all well with him. He really liked it here and he liked working for Ben and Dorothy. "Damn! What can I do Jed? Johnny asked. "That is a question you will have to answer for yourself, boy." "I can say what I would do, but I ain't going to even try to tell you what you should do." Jed answered. "You have mentioned several times that there might be a gun that I could have legally. Tell me about that." Johnny said. "Under Federal law, guns that use loose black powder are not considered to be a "firearm". Some states follow this and some don't. I can talk to the State Attorney General's office and explain the situation and see what they say, if you like. Jed answered. "Black powder! I don't want some damn flintlock to defend myself with!" Johnny snorted. "I am not talking about no damn flintlock! There are some nice reproductions that load almost as fast as modern guns and shoot just as well." Jed answered. "You just sit tight and let me call the state Attorney General. If he says it is ok, I will show you some of the guns that are available." Jed said. "You might want to find some work that keeps you close to home for the next few days." Jed advised.

That afternoon Jed came to where Johnny was cleaning out a drainage ditch. "I talked to the Attorney General. He said that as far as he knows there is no law that you could not have a black powder gun. Tomorrow I need to go to town. Why don't you ride along and we will go to a gun shop?" Jed said. Johnny agreed, somewhat reluctantly. They left right after breakfast. "I know that you don't ever want to go back to jail, but there are some things worse than jail. Being dead is one of them." Jed said. Despite his doubts that he would find anything he wanted Johnny was interested in looking at the guns. "I have never had a gun. I don't know anything about shooting." Johnny complained. "That is all the better." Jed said. "You don't have any bad habits to try to break, when you learn. You had never been on a horse before either, but you learned that fast enough." Jed stated. They road in silence until Johnny blurted "I don't know if I could shoot a man!" "That is one question you had better find the answer to before you go to

packing any gun, boy. If you can't use it, having a gun will get you killed for sure." Jed mused. "How can I know?" lamented Johnny. "You got to look inside yourself, boy, and look real deep." Jed said "You have probably been raised "Christian", and had "Thou shalt not kill" drummed into you before you could even walk. That should be "Thou shalt not commit murder." Jed said. "There is a big difference in "murder" and defending yourself." Jed said. "If you decide to get a gun, you had better be prepared to use it. A gun is also a very big responsibility, just like driving a car." "If you own one, you must know how to use it safely, and that is a tall order." Jed continued. "Well, You have about convinced me that I don't want to own a gun." Johnny commented. "I am just trying to show you that owning a gun is not something to be taken lightly." Jed answered. "Owning a firearm is also the one main difference between a "Citizen" and a "Subject". The Citizen is a free person while the Subject belongs to the government." Jed stated. "With being a Citizen of this country comes the responsibility of owning a gun, to defend the country and Constitution against all enemies." Jed was silent for several seconds then spoke. "What do you know about being in a Militia, boy?" "You mean one of those anti government groups?" Johnny answered. "I have never been involved with any Militias in my life." "Damn!" Didn't they teach you anything in those public schools?" Jed snorted. Johnny was silent. He knew that he was about to hear another of Jed's wild theories and could think of no way to get out of it.

"You have been a member of a militia sense your eighteenth birthday and just did not know it. Says so right in the Constitution." Jed said before Johnny could answer. "This is where the government, namely the President of the United States, has the right to draft your young tail, I will loan you my copy of the Constitution and I suggest you read it, since it effects you every day of your life." Jed announced. They rode in silence until they reached the gun shop. "Here we are, "Peterson's guns. They have two stores now, but the really interesting stuff is here at the new store." Jed said.

As they walked in, Johnny felt like a child going in a candy store for the first time. He tried to not act or look like a bumpkin as Jed steered him to the black powder section. A man not much older than Johnny was standing behind the counter. "Can I show you gentlemen anything?" he asked. "We want to look at some reproduction cap and ball revolvers." Jed said. The young clerk led them to where several new looking pistols were on display. Johnny was immediately attracted to one of the guns. "Can I see that one?" he asked while pointing. Jed said nothing and let him examine the pistol. "It is beautiful!" Johnny exclaimed. "I

never knew a gun could be this pretty, and it feels so natural in your hand.” “What kind is it?” he asked. “That is a reproduction of an 1860 new model Army Colt. It was the side arm of the Union Army during the War Between the States.” Jed answered. “It is one of the most beautiful pistols ever made. It is a fine gun, but there is another that is much better for your purposes.” Jed told him. “Let us see one of those Remingtons.” Jed said. The clerk handed Jed another large handgun that Johnny thought looked ugly compared to the Colt. “This is a 1958 Remington reproduction. Some were used in the war, but not as many as the Colts. The Remington may not be as sexy as the 1860 Colt, but it is better in several ways, especially for you.” Jed stated. “Now pay attention, boy. They both load the same way. You fill the cylinder with powder and then use the loading lever to push a lead ball or a lead bullet down on top of the powder. Then you put a special “cap” back here on the nipple, and you are ready to shoot.” Jed said. “That is awfully slow,” fumed Johnny. “You are right about that, which is why you want this ugly Remington instead of that beautiful Colt.” Jed stated. With that he put the Remington on half cock, lowered the loading lever and pulled the Cylinder pin forward, letting the cylinder fall out in his hand. “Now, imagine that this is a extra cylinder that you have already loaded.” Jed said. With that he put the cylinder back in the gun, pushed the cylinder pin in and latched the loading lever. “Presto. All loaded!” stated Jed. Johnny’s mouth was open. “Wow! Who said these guns were slow to load!” he exclaimed. “How about this one?” Johnny asked holding out the Colt to Jed.

“Totally different critter, boy” Jed said. “To get the cylinder out you first have to push this barrel pin out. It often takes hitting it with something to get it out. Then you pull the whole barrel off, put the gun on half cock and the cylinder will come out. you can see that the Remington, with this top strap is a stronger designed gun too.” Jed said. Johnny picked up the Remington and aimed it. “I like the way the Colt feels, and the Remington is ugly.” He said. “The Colt does feel better in the hand and is much easier to just point and shoot, but someday your life might depend on your gun and how fast you can get it reloaded. On that day which gun would be looking the most beautiful?” Jed questioned. “You make your own choice, but I would go with the Remington.” Jed said. Johnny really liked the Colt. But what Jed said made too good sense for him to ignore. “Ok. I will get the Remington. Can I get a spare cylinder here?” Johnny asked. The clerk said, “We will have to order you another cylinder. It will take a little over a week to have it here.”

“One thing at a time.” Jed said. “How much is the Remington, 200 round balls, 2

boxes of caps, a powder flask, and a can of Pyrodex “P” Jed asked. The clerk began gathering those items and ringing them up. “What brand of caps do you want?” the clerk asked. “The best brand that you carry.” Jed said. “I guess that would be the CCI caps.” The clerk said. “That comes to \$199.69, including tax.” The clerk said. Johnny reached for his wallet, but Jed stopped him. “How much is a spare cylinder?” he asked. The clerk had to look the price up before he said “That would come to \$31.40, total.”

“Great!” Now you go fetch the manager over here. I want to talk to him.” Jed said. “Is anything wrong?” Asked the clerk. “Nothing is wrong boy. Now you just get me the manager.” Jed smiled. The clerk left sullenly and returned with a middle-aged man, who was not looking too happy. “What can I do for you gentlemen?” he asked. “Are you the manager” Jed asked politely. “Yes. I am the manager. Now what can I do for you.” The man said. “Well, we are all ready to buy all this stuff here, but we can’t get everything worked out quite right.” Jed said. “What is the problem? The manager demanded. “We live a good ways from town and with the ranch work and all, we can’t get in all that often.” Jed lamented. “My friend wants a Remington revolver, but wants a spare cylinder to go with it. This gentleman here says that you can order one and it will be here in less that two weeks.” “That is correct.” The Manager said. “This cylinder you can order, will it fit any of these Remington pistols?” Jed asked. “It will fit perfectly.” The manager stated. “I see that you have several Remingtons on display. How many do you usually sell in a week?” Jed asked innocently. “We sell one or two a month, on an average. Why do you ask?” The manager asked. “If you sold us the cylinder out of one of those guns, you could have the replacement back in a little over a week. Now we understand that this is a lot of work on your part so my friend is willing to pay double the price for the cylinder, if we can get it right now.” Jed said. “I am sorry, but we can’t sell parts from our display guns.” The Manager said. “I am sorry to hear that, sir. Come on Johnny. We have to look around some more to find you a gun.” Jed said and started to walk out. The manager looked stricken. “Wait! I will make an exception for you, this one time.” He said. The manager then handed another Remington to Jed, and watched curiously as Jed quickly removed the cylinder. Johnny fished out the money, slightly in awe of Jed’s haggling ability. “Don’t be fretting about paying more to get the cylinder today, boy” “Never quibble over price when your life is at stake.” Jed said. They filled the back of the truck with feed before heading for the ranch. Johnny could not resist playing with his new “toy”. “That’s right. Get to really know your gun. Practice changing out the cylinders until you can do it in your sleep. Practice doing it fast, but never rush.” Jed told him. “When we get back to the ranch, you

need to practice dropping the empty cylinder and putting in the loaded one. Don't put the empty cylinder in your pocket. Let it drop." Jed Said. " Why?" Asked Johnny. " Because you will do under stress exactly what you did in practice. If you practice putting the empty cylinder in your pocket, then you will do it automatically in a real situation and it could be just that amount of wasted time that gets you killed." Jed said. "There was a study of police officers who were killed in the line of duty. This was before your time, back when the police still carried the .38 revolvers. In many cases they found the dead officer had five empty casings and one live round in their left pocket." Jed stated. After a pause he continued " The reason was that on the police training range the officers would only load five shots, shoot them, and then reload. This was because it was easier to score with multiples of five than with six. Because the officers had to turn the empty brass in after shooting, they were told to put it in their left pocket. Later, when under stress, the officers automatically did exactly as they had been trained and it cost them their lives. It was partly because of that study that many police forces changed the way they trained. You need to think about what you are doing, when you practice, because you will likely do the same thing when under stress." Jed said. " The upside to this is that if you practice doing everything correctly, you will do it right in a real situation."

Johnny thought about this for a time and then said, " Will you help me to practice right?" "I don't know much about guns and even less about these reproductions."

"No problem. Boy." "First off, forget everything you ever saw about guns in a movie." "Nobody ever picked up a gun for the first time and was immediately a good shot. Like anything else, shooting takes a lot of practice. That is the key, boy. Practice until your hands know what to do without you even having to think about it, and then keep on practicing." Jed stated. "I will show you how to load and give you some pointers, but the rest is up to you." Jed then turned on the radio to a country western channel and they drove, each immersed in their own thoughts.

Back at the ranch, Johnny quickly put his purchases away and returned to unload the feed from the truck. He felt better having made up his mind about getting the gun. The rest of the day seemed to drag on forever. Finally it was dinnertime. Jed had promised to show Johnny how to load the big Remington that night. Johnny brought everything he had gotten in town to Jed's room as he had been told. Jed was waiting, with a beer for Johnny and himself. "Sit down here at the table and we will go over how you feed that critter." Jed said. Johnny laid everything out on

the table. “ This looks complicated.” He said. “ It is simple as pie once you get the hang of it. Fill this powder flask with Pyrodex, while I wipe the cylinders down to make sure there isn’t any oil in them.” Jed said. “ The flask will measure out the same amount of powder each time. First you put a cap on each cylinder and make sure it is pressed on tight, then you just pour the powder in the cylinder, then put a ball on top and press it down with the loading lever.” Jed demonstrated. “ Here. You do the rest and then do the same with the spare cylinder.” Now you have twelve shots. If you can’t handle almost any situation with twelve .44 rounds, you are in a heap of trouble boy.” Jed commented. “This is a lot easier than I expected.” Johnny said, and soon had both cylinders loaded. “ Now, when you go out to practice, you shoot one cylinder and then reload it. You don’t go firing both cylinders dry, just in case you might suddenly need a loaded gun. You understand that, boy.” Jed said. “Now that you said it, I understand it. But I might not have thought about it otherwise.” Johnny said. “ If you have a hankering to ever become a really old man, you better learn to think. Your greatest tool and weapon is that soft spot between your ears.” Jed said. “Ok. I keep one cylinder loaded and shoot the other one, then reload. I let the empty cylinder drop on the ground, and don’t waste time putting it in my pocket. I try to practice the way I would like to respond to a real situation. What else?” Johnny asked.

“You have to decide how you want to wear your gun and then take some leather and make yourself a holster. There is plenty of leather around that here is not being used. I will show you how to use a sewing awl to stitch it up” Jed said. “Personally I recommend the cross draw. With your gun on the left, you can draw from any position, even sitting in a chair, and you can get the gun out with your left hand, if your right is out of action.” Jed stated. “ The standard “cowboy” carry is fine for horse back or standing, but not worth a damn if you are driving a truck or sitting down.” He said. “ Ok. Cross draw sounds good to me.” Said Johnny. The next few days Johnny working under Jed’s direction made a holster and a small pouch to hold the loaded cylinder. Johnny had decided to use his regular belt instead of a separate gun belt. “Good idea to keep things simple.” Jed stated.

Jed rode with Johnny when he went to check fence the next day, but nothing happened and they saw nobody, nor any tracks that were out of the ordinary. “I told Ben about somebody taking a couple of shots at you. He talked to Jake about it and Jake said that he may have said some things right after the fight, but he did not shoot at you.” Jed said. “It may have been some “Coyote” bringing

some Mexicans across, who thought you were about to spot them. He may have shot near you to scare you off.” He commented. “ Well he succeeded, if that was what he was trying to do.” Johnny agreed. “I still think that if my horse had not shied, that bullet would have split my skull.” Johnny said. “We will never know.” Jed said. Johnny pointed out the old mine that he had found. Jed looked thoughtful. “That is the place where Ben got hurt. Jake went into the mine to drag him out. The whole thing could have come down on them both. Jake said the old mine is ready to cave in at any time.” Jed said. They spent a pleasant night in the line shack and finished checking the fence line the next day. Clyde and Ed reported that they had seen nothing unusual while they were moving cattle in another section.

Johnny took his pistol with him whenever he went on the range, but kept it out of sight, rolled in a piece of canvas. Only when he was far enough from the ranch house that he thought the shots would not be heard did he practice. When Johnny used the sights he could hit his target, or at least come close, as long as the target was not too far away. He had seen people in the movies shoot without using the sights, just pointing the gun, but when Johnny tried this his shots went wild. “ It can take years to learn to point shoot.” Jed told him. “ Might be best for you to work on using the sights as fast as possible.” Jed advised. “If you are really close then you might be able to just point, but for most situations you will want the sights.” Jed made a trip into town without Johnny, but brought back more .44 balls, caps, pyrodex, and a mini-mag flashlight for Johnny. Johnny continued to practice, until he could drop the empty cylinder and stick in the loaded one in his sleep. “ You simply can’t practice too much, boy.” Jed told him. For the next two days Johnny had repair work around the ranch and did not get to practice. When he next rode out on horseback it was to a different section than where he had been shot at. Johnny felt uneasy the whole time and was continuously watching for anything that might indicate the presence of another human. He tried to keep from showing himself along the skyline and rode along arroyos whenever possible. When he reached the line shack, Johnny was able to relax a little. After he had fed and rubbed his horse down, Johnny went in to prepare his own dinner. Johnny was surprised and pleased to find that the old wood cook stove already had a fire laid up in it. Just as Johnny was about to strike a match, his paranoia took over. He dug the wood and paper out of the stove and found four sticks of dynamite, taped together, complete with a blasting cap and short fuse. Johnny was stunned. If he had lit the fire, he would have been killed. This was premeditated! Somebody wanted him dead. This time Jake had the opportunity. He had been on the range a time or two while Johnny was

working at the ranch. Only somebody at the ranch could have known that Johnny would be spending the night at the line shack. "What if it was not meant for him?" Johnny wondered. "If somebody had meant to kill him, were they watching the line shack right now?" Johnny's hand went to the big revolver on his left side. The feel reassured him somewhat. He pondered what to do. Johnny took the dynamite and left the shack. He put the saddle back on his horse and rode into the coming darkness. He rode away from the ranch, deeper into the desert hoping to avoid anybody who might be laying for him. When he thought he had gone far enough he dismounted and unsaddled his horse. He put the halter on his horse and tied it to a small tree. He did not want anything spooking his horse during the night. Johnny was up before the sun and was riding a round about route back toward the ranch. When he rode in he still wore his pistol in plain sight. He didn't give a damn if Jake or the others saw it. Johnny was mad as a wet hen and plenty scared. He went straight to Jed and told him what he had found. When Johnny showed Jed the dynamite Jed quickly reached out and pulled the blasting cap and fuse out of the dynamite. "Damn, boy! You should have pulled it's teeth, before hauling it around with you. We had better talk to Ben about this." Jed said grimly. "Maybe you best put your shootin iron away first." Ben listened as Johnny told his story. The now defused dynamite lay on the big oak desk in front of him. "I had thought the shooting was just somebody trying to scare you, but this is an all together different matter. I will call the Sheriff, and have him investigate, but maybe you need to find another job, Johnny. I don't want you getting killed because you work here." Ben said. For the first time since he had known him the big man seemed to be defeated and unsure of himself. "Maybe trying to keep the ranch going was a mistake from the start." Ben said. "We have had fence cut, water tanks damaged, cattle killed, and now I am not sure bringing people out here for vacation is such a good idea." Ben spoke sadly. "I have had several very decent offers on the ranch, but I did not want to even think about selling, until now." "Please let me have some time to think about this, before I decide to leave." Johnny said. "What do you know about Jake Myrick?" Johnny asked. "I know he is somewhat of a loud mouth and sometimes a bully, but he is also a pretty good cowboy and a good man. He came into that mine right after the blast and pulled me out. I owe him my life. I can't believe that he would try to kill you." Ben remarked. Johnny left Jed with Ben and went to get something to eat. He had not had dinner the night before and it was well past breakfast. He drank several cups of coffee with his food and tried to make some sense out of the situation. Other than his fight with Jake, nothing had happened that could be behind the attempts on his life. It had to be Jake. But Jake had been at the ranch when he had been shot at, or so Jed had claimed. "What did

he really know about Jed, for that matter?" Johnny wondered.

Just as Johnny was finishing his last cup of coffee Dorothy came into the dining room. She got herself a cup of coffee and sat down across the table from Johnny. Johnny refilled his cup. It seemed obvious that Dorothy wanted to talk. They sat sipping the hot bitter liquid for what seemed a long time, before Dorothy spoke. "Johnny, I am scared. I have never seen Ben so close to giving up before. Ever since Ben's accident there have been incidents happening around the ranch. Little things at first, fence being cut, cattle run off our range, water tanks and wind mills vandalized." She said. "Something is going on, but I can't figure out what it is, and now somebody is trying to kill you." She fumed. "Then there is that mystery man that keeps trying to buy the ranch. We have a good ranch here with enough range and water, but it is certainly nothing special. If it were not for the city people wanting to vacation here, we would be running in the red. A "Mr. Johnson" has offered to buy the ranch at well over market value, but Ben has refused to sell, at least until now. For the first time I think he is really contemplating selling the place." Dorothy commented sadly. "Would that be so bad?" asked Johnny. "I think so." Dorothy said. "A man like Ben needs to be doing, working, creating. Take that away and it will kill him. Ben knows the ranch well enough to keep it running even without his eyes, but if he sold it, what would he be able to do to feel useful?" She asked.

"Johnny, there simply has to be some pattern to what has been happening here, and somebody trying to kill you. There simply has to be!" Dorothy cried in frustration. Johnny drank more coffee and tried to think, but could not see how the past events could have any connection to somebody wanting to kill him. "I think that Jake is the one trying to either kill me or run me off." Johnny stated. "I think it is because I whipped him in a fight and he can't stand me being around to remind him of that." Johnny said, but even as he said it, he realized that it just did not make all that much sense. It did not seem reasonable that Jake would risk the electric chair because Johnny had beaten him in a fight. Nothing made sense any more. "What do you know about Jed?" Johnny asked. "I know that he was not always a cowboy. He used to teach law at some college back east. When his wife died he left teaching and came west to start over. We more or less inherited Jed when we bought the ranch. He had worked for the former owners and stayed on for us. If it were not for Jed's knowledge of ranching and the west in general, we would have gone bankrupt several times over. I would trust Jed with my life." Dorothy said. Johnny had to admit that deep down he felt the same way about the old man and was ashamed that he had begun to doubt even Jed's integrity.

“What about Jake, Clyde and Ed? Ben seems to think pretty highly of Jake.” Johnny asked. “ Jake was helping Ben setting some charges at an old Spanish mine. One of the charges did not fire when Ben pushed the plunger. Ben is always careful, so he waited a long time before going in to check the charge. It blew up while Ben was in the mine. Jake risked his own life and went in to pull Ben out. We all thought Ben would not survive and it was touch and go for several days.” Dorothy said with a far away look in her eyes. A thought seemed to race across Johnny’s mind, too fast to really catch. Something about that mine. But then the thought was gone. “ Ben did some research and the old mine tailings still have some gold in them. There is just enough gold there to about cover the cost of setting up a operation to get them out and pay for the labor. Nothing left over for profit. Ben thought that maybe the original vein of gold was still there and had just pinched off. That was why he was setting the blasting charges. I wish he had never found the mine in the first place.” Dorothy sobbed. “Back then we were having a hard time making ends meet. Cattle prices had dropped again and the cost of feed was up. Ben was hunting for some way to pay the bills and one mistake cost him his eyesight.” Dorothy said. “Did Ben find any gold in the mine?” Johnny asked. “ It was the third blast when Ben was hurt. They had not even cleaned up from the first two when the accident happened. Jake later went back in the mine, but he could find no gold and the old shaft is about ready to collapse, probably due to the blasting.” Dorothy said. “ Johnny I don’t want you do leave. I don’t want you to get hurt either, but there is something going on here and I am scared. I am scared for myself and I am scared for Ben.” She said.

“ I have not made up my mind to leave as of yet. Let’s see what the Sheriff can find out, before I go anywhere.” Johnny said. “ Thank you Johnny.” Dorothy said. “ You know, that night on the hiway, there seemed something kind of strange about it all. It seemed like it had all happened before, or was some how preordained, or something. I can’t quite put it into words, but it felt like you were supposed to come to work here. I know this must sound crazy to you, but it was how it felt to me.” Dorothy said as she got up to leave. Johnny just sipped his coffee. Unwilling to admit that he too had felt something strange happening that night. Soon after Dorothy left Johnny finished his coffee and went to find Jed, who was in the shop, working on a power winch off one of the trucks. “ How you doing, boy? Have you decided if you are going to stick around here or not yet?” He asked. “ I still haven’t decided, but I have to admit that the road out of here is looking better than it did a few days ago.” Johnny admitted. They both turned as a Jeep Cherokee drove up to the house. Other than the blue lights it was

unmarked. The Sheriff himself got out. Ben was too well respected in these parts for him to send a deputy, especially with elections coming up in a few months. The Sheriff disappeared into the house for several minutes before coming to the shop. "Are you Johnny Tatum?" he asked. "I am Sheriff Frank Wilson. "I want you to show me where you claim to have found the dynamite." Wilson said. Johnny only nodded. He recognized a cop with a chip on his shoulder when he saw one. The trip to the line cabin was made in silence, except for the country western music on the Jeep radio. " I came in and saw that paper, kindling, and some wood was already in the fire box of the stove." Johnny said. " Why did you decide to look in the fire box?" The Sheriff asked. Johnny tried to explain about the previous shooting, but the explanation sounded hollow even to his own ears. "Why did I decide to look?" wondered Johnny. " Was there something more that his conscious mind had overlooked, but his subconscious had noticed?" Johnny now wondered. He tried to think back, but the Sheriff went on talking. " So you claim to be the only one to have been shot at and there was nobody else around when you claim to have found the dynamite. Is that right?" Wilson asked. Johnny knew that nothing he could say would make any difference to the Sheriff. The man had "solved" everything at the ranch in his own mind and that was that. "My work causes me to often be alone out here." Johnny said lamely. "I have seen enough. Let's get back to the ranch." Wilson said. More silence and country music, until they reached the ranch. Wilson went into the ranch house without another word to Johnny. "Ben, you had me run a check on that Boy when he first showed up. We both know that he is an ex-con and that he has already killed one man. I warned you not to hire him then, but you would not listen. He made both stories up for some reason. I am sure that nobody shot at him and his story about finding the dynamite is full of holes. All that I can figure is that he was planning something. You should fire him right now. I can take him into town and he can catch a bus from there." Wilson said. Ben was silent for several seconds. He had always considered himself to be a good judge of character, but now was beginning to doubt himself. " What if I am putting Dorothy and the kids in danger by having Johnny around?" Ben wondered. Before Ben could decide, Dorothy came into the room. " Hello Sheriff Wilson. Won't you sit down and have a piece of homemade pie and some coffee with us." Dorothy asked brightly. "I really should be getting back to town. What kind of pie did you say it was?" Wilson asked. "Pecan pie. Ben's favorite." Dorothy said. " Well maybe one small piece. I am trying to keep from getting fat." The Sheriff laughed. "I hope you catch whoever it is that has been vandalizing the ranch. Now they seem to be bent on chasing off one of our very best hands." Dorothy purred as she sipped coffee. "Johnny has been a real help around the place. I think there isn't anything that he

can't fix." She said innocently. "He certainly came to our rescue that night on the hiway, and refused to take any money too." Dorothy said as she squeezed Ben's hand. The Sheriff just ate his pie. "No sense trying to explain anything to a woman." He thought. Ben had decided. He would continue to trust Johnny and his own judgement. If Johnny had wanted to he could have hurt or killed Dorothy and the kids that night on the hiway. Besides just like Dorothy had said, Johnny had been a hard worker and a good hand from the first day. "I am going to keep Johnny on, for a while more at least. So far he has never given me any reason to doubt him." Ben told the Sheriff. "Suit yourself. It is your family that you are putting in danger. Once a criminal, always a criminal, I always say." Wilson said as he got ready to leave. After the Sheriff had gone, Ben squeezed Dorothy's hand and simply said. "Thank you honey. I think I was about to make a big mistake." "I hope we aren't making a bigger one by keeping Johnny here." Dorothy thought, but said nothing to her husband.

Sheriff Wilson stepped in front of Johnny. "Boy, I know what you are. You are just a jailbird that is temporarily on the outside. Your kind never changes! For some reason Ben refuses to fire you, but I will be watching you like a hawk. One wrong move and I will be on you like a duck on a June bug." Wilson growled. With that the Sheriff turned and stomped to his Jeep and drove off. Johnny was angry all the way through. He had been seriously thinking of leaving, but now he was determined to stay and hopefully figure out what was going on, or perhaps die trying. Jed had been listening to the Sheriff. "What are you going to do boy? Are you going to let that loud mouth with a badge run you off? Jed asked. "Ben needs you now, boy." Thing are coming to a head around here. I can feel it in my bones." Jed said. "I will stay on, at least for a while longer." Johnny said. "Ben trusted me and I owe him something for that. I am not too fond of the fact that somebody keeps trying to kill me though." Johnny mused. "Tell me more about gun fighting." Johnny said. "Not too much to say about it boy. No sane man ever got into any gunfight that there was any way of avoiding. The only sure way to survive a gunfight is to not get into one in the first place. Run, crawl and beg if you have to, but do everything in your power to stay out of a gunfight. If you simply can't avoid one, don't waste time talking. Shoot! Don't talk. If you can throw the other guy mentally off balance it may give you a small edge. Do or say something unexpected." Jed said. "Make your shots count. It is one thing to shoot at targets and a totally different thing when the target can shoot back. Your fear can get you killed. The Plains Indians understood this and would accept their own death before a battle. That way they could be concentrating on the fight and not worrying about their own hide." Jed said. "Anything more?" Johnny asked.

“Lots of little stuff, all of it important.” Answered Jed. “Getting behind cover is a darn good idea, for one thing. If you are facing more than one man, shoot the closest one first because he is the most likely to hit you.” Jed said. “Like I said, boy. The best gunfight is one that you only read about in one of those westerns Jake and his buddies are always reading.” “ I have no desire to be in a gunfight, but I might not have much choice if I stick around here.” Johnny lamented. “I sure don’t envy you none and that is for sure. Now would be a right good time for you to start using that brain of yours. Somewhere churning around is the answer. It is up to you to figure it out.” Jed said. “ Tomorrow I am going over to the line cabin where you found the dynamite and do some scouting around. Somebody had to put it there and maybe they left some sign that I can find.” Jed said. “ Thanks for believing me.” Johnny said. Dinner that night was a tense affair, with little talking. Johnny turned in early, as much to be away from the others as anything. As he lay there, Johnny went over everything that had happened, but could find no answers. The old Spanish mine kept bobbing up in his mind. “Why was a fresh can of spray paint left in there?” he wondered. “What connection could that have with anything?” Unable to sleep Johnny opened a Louis Lamour book and was soon lost in the west of another, simpler time. Johnny had come to love those books, packed with real places and real people. There was always some mystery thrown in too. Suddenly Johnny had a thought. “Were they really simpler times?” Human nature had not changed. Greed, hatred, violence still existed, even though most people today tried to pretend that it did not. Suddenly Johnny realized that what had happened here sounded a bit like one of the Western stories. “Ok. If this were a fictional story, what would be the plot?” thought Johnny. “Let’s see. Somebody wants the ranch. That somebody is vandalizing, or has hired someone to vandalize the ranch to try to force the owner to sell.” So far so good, but why does somebody want the ranch? Johnny was stumped again. The ranch is just so- so, now that people can put in wells, water is seldom a reason. It did not seem likely that anyone would be wanting to build a shopping center way out here, so that was out. “Oil?” Not likely. No oil had been found in the area. “Mineral deposits?” “Gold?” They had found no gold except for the mine tailings and they were not worth working. Suddenly Johnny sat straight up. He got his gun, flashlight and left the bunkhouse. He checked one of the four wheelers to be sure it was filled with gas and drove into the desert, where he camped for the night. He felt safer away from the bunkhouse, if his suspicions were correct. The next morning Johnny awoke stiff from sleeping on the ground, but was on his way to the mine as the sun came up. It was still early when he parked the four-wheeler on the mine tailings. This time he paid more attention to the mine entrance. There were no tracks other than a few rodents. The hairs on

the back of Johnny's neck lifted. His tracks should be there, but they were not. He looked deeper into the mine, but found no human tracks what so ever. Someone had swept the mine floor clean of tracks, including the ones he had left when he was there the last time! Using his flashlight Johnny inspected the mineshaft. He was no mining expert, but it did not look to him like the old shaft was ready to cave in. He worked his way cautiously to the back of the mine. There were no tracks on the floor of the mine at all. Something else was bothering Johnny about the mine, but he could not put his finger on it. Then it hit him. Ben had set off two blasts before the accident. There ought to be debris from those blasts on the floor of the mine, but the floor was clean of rocks. Careful examination showed an area that had been painted with the gray spray paint. Johnny scratched at the surface with his pocketknife. There was the answer. Gold! Someone had found gold in the mine. All he had to do was tell Ben and an investigation would unravel all guilty parties. Johnny rushed out of the mine to the four-wheeler. Gasoline has formed a puddle on the ground under the machine. The rubber gas line had been cut. Johnny stopped in his tracks. His left hand removed the thong from the hammer of his pistol, as if with a mind of it's own.

"Over here, punk" said Jake Myrick. Johnny turned slowly to face the sound. There stood Jake, Clyde and Ed. They all had pistols on their sides. Johnny felt sick. "You are one smart cookie, punk. I was afraid you would figure it out. That mine is worth a bundle." Jake said. "I stumbled on the gold vein several years back and was quietly taking a little out at a time, covering the vein with spray paint when I was done. Then Ben got the idea to blast, hoping to open up the vein. I waited until he was inside setting another charge and I cut the wire. When he went back inside to see why the last charge did not fire I made the connection and set off the blast." Jake said. "I thought the blast would kill him. I never meant to blind him. I would not do that to anyone." Jake said. Johnny's mouth was dry, but his palms felt wet. "Fear will kill you, boy." Jed's words seemed to say in his head. "There is enough gold in there to make all of us rich men, you included, if you will throw in with us." Jake said. "We have taken enough gold out to buy this pitiful ranch, if that stubborn blind fool would only agree to sell." Jake said. "Why would you trust me not to tell the law?" Johnny asked, playing for time. "Because you are going to be in too deep to ever talk, is why." Jake answered with a smirk on his face. "The brats are in school. Dorothy has gone to town and Jed is off playing Boy Scout at the line cabin. That leaves poor blind Ben at home all alone. Be really simple for him to set the place on fire. Since he won't sell I figure it is time to finish what I tried to do. Once Ben is dead, Dorothy will sell the ranch

quick enough, I figure.” Jake said. “After you help us kill Ben, you can never go to the law, or you would fry along with the rest of us.” Jake added. Johnny was certain that Jake meant to kill him too. In his mind he saw two charred bodies being found in the remains of the ranch house. That would explain everything as far as the Sheriff was concerned. Johnny smiled. “I always wanted to be rich.” He said and walked closer to the three men. Trying to go back into the mine was out of the question. All they would have to do was fire into the entrance until a glancing bullet hit him. There was no cover that he could get to before they would cut him down, so he walked toward them. A calm seemed to settle over Johnny. He knew that he was about to die. It could be here, or back at the ranch, but they were going to kill him. “Maybe if I get Jake, the others will lack the guts to go through with killing Ben.” He thought. Johnny remembered Jed telling him to try to throw his enemy off balance. He said the first thing that came to mind. “You guys have picked the wrong dude this time.” Johnny purred. “You know that I am part Indian. My father was named “Tatum”, but my mother was half-Indian. My great grandfather was a gunfighter who took an Indian wife. My mother carried his name. In fact I was named after my great grandfather. Maybe I take after him in a lot of ways.” Said Johnny. “So what?” jeered Jake. “Are you with us or not?”

“I bet you have read about my great grandfather in those westerns you are always reading.” Johnny continued. “No, I will have no part of hurting Ben or any of his family.” Johnny said and then he laughed out loud. Jake felt a fear at the sound of that laughter. “My great grandfather’s name was “Ringo”. “Johnny Ringo”. With that, Johnny went for his gun.

He was not particularly fast. Jake managed to get a shot off first, but it went wild. Since his gun was on the left side, Johnny worked them from left to right. He drew and fired, first at Jake, then let the gun move on to Clyde, as the sights lined up he fired again. Swinging on, he lined up on Ed and thumbed the hammer back and fired again. He lined the sights up on Ed’s chest and fired a second round. Then the gun was swinging back toward Clyde, all in one continuous motion. Something hit Johnny in the hip and his gun swung past Clyde. Johnny was aware of many things at once. Ed, turning and beginning to fall, Jake with bright blood showing on his shirt, Clyde seemed unhurt, with flames coming from his gun’s barrel. Johnny brought his gun back on line with Clyde and let the sight line up. He took a split second longer to get them right before he squeezed the trigger and felt the gun jump in his hand. A surprised look appeared on Clyde’s face and he grabbed his stomach with his left hand. Johnny moved his gun to line up on Jake and fired. Johnny immediately knew that he had missed. Jake

fired again and Johnny felt the bullet hit him in the side. Johnny's hand cause him to cock the gun and try to fire again, but the hammer fell on a fired cap. Jake fired again and Johnny heard the bullet slip past his head. Johnny released the loading lever and dropped the spent cylinder in the dirt. Reaching to his belt he grabbed the loaded cylinder and placed it in his revolver. As Johnny was locking the loading lever Jake fired again and the bullet hit him in the chest. The blow was terrible. Johnny felt dizzy and the world seemed to spin, Johnny fell forward to his knees. He looked upwards at Jake and saw that Jake's gun was locked open, empty. Johnny's gun dropped from his hand and he fell on his side in the dirt. Jake hit the magazine release and reached for another clip.

For Johnny the world seemed to have become misty and unclear. The last thing Johnny heard was Jake Myrick's laughter.

Johnny was surrounded by mist and felt that he was a part of the mist. He wondered if this was death. The mist began to take on shapes and form and Johnny found himself standing on a grass-covered plain. Far off there were moving black spots that Johnny somehow knew were Buffalo, the sacred animal to the plains Indians. Johnny became aware that there was a man riding toward him across the plain. As the man drew nearer Johnny saw that it was a warrior in full regalia. On his left arm he wore a ceremonial shield and in his right hand he carried a war lance. Johnny knew who this vision was, the same way he had known that the black dots were distant buffalo. The knowledge came from within and could not be disputed. Johnny was looking at perhaps the most famous of Indian heroes. The warrior stopped a few feet away and his black eyes pierced Johnny to the soul. "Why do you walk here, Two Crows" the vision spoke. "This is the land of the dead. Your enemy still stands and you are not dead. Go back to the world of pain and heartbreak. It is not your time here yet". With that the vision reached out the lance and made a slight cut on Johnny's right cheek with the point. Suddenly Johnny was a ball of mist that was slowly floating downwards. There was no pain and no sense of time, just the sensation of slowly sinking down. Johnny felt the ball of mist encounter something solid and flat. The ball of mist began to flatten and spread out over this surface. As it did so, the mist seemed to thicken and take form. There was a slight jolt or click and Johnny found himself laying in the sand looking upward at Jake Myrick. The magazine was falling from Jake's gun and seemed to float towards the earth. Johnny was aware of fiery pain in his body where the bullets had torn his flesh, but he forced himself back up to his knees. His pistol lay in the dirt in front of him and Johnny reached out and picked it up. Jake had the loaded magazine in his hand and was

trying to get it in the butt of his gun when he heard again that laugh. As the magazine slid into Jake's gun, Johnny cocked the hammer of his pistol. Both men were staring into the other's eyes, seemingly frozen in time. It was Johnny who broke the silence "Any time, Punk." was all he said. Jake reacted quickly and as the slide was coming forward he was already lining the gun up. Jake was fast, but he was not faster than a bullet. The bullet from Johnny's gun was already racing across the short distance between them and right for Jake's heart. They say that after the heart stops a person has seven seconds of consciousness. Maybe so, but Jake fired one wild round and dropped like a puppet who's strings had been cut. Johnny now turned his attention to the other men, but though they were not dead, they were out of the fight. Johnny thought he could hear the sound of far off drums, but decided that it must be the beating of his own heart. Johnny got painfully to his feet. The world spun, but steadied. Johnny tasted something salty and brought his hand to his face. There was blood running down his right cheek from a small cut. One of the bullets must have grazed him he thought.

"I can't move my legs!" Clyde moaned. Johnny staggered to the downed men and kicked the guns away from Clyde and Ed's reach. Jake was dead. The blood that had spurted from his chest stopped when his heart stopped beating. Johnny holstered his gun for fear of dropping it. He had been calm during the fight, but now his legs felt weak and his hands were shaking uncontrollably. The truck was about one hundred yards away, but it seemed like miles. Johnny began to stagger toward the truck, feeling weaker and shakier all the time. The gun began to feel like a heavy weight that was dragging him down. He dropped it, and continued his slow journey to the truck. "My God. I have never been so thirsty!" Johnny thought. The truck seemed to waver in the desert heat. The sand came up to slap him and he lay there breathing hard. "I am bleeding to death." thought Johnny in a detached way. It seemed easier to lay there and die than try to go on. Johnny again heard the far off sound of drums, and decided again that it was the sound of his own labored heart, but some how this gave him the strength to go on. He forced himself to his feet and managed to reach the truck. Once he was seated he felt a little better, although the blood continued to seep from his wounds. It seemed to take a long time to get an answer on the radio. Ben's voice brought a sense of relief to him. "I need help. I have been shot. I think I am dying." Johnny said. "Clyde and Ed are shot up pretty bad too." He said. After Johnny told where they were, Ben instructed him where to find a first aid kit under the seat of the truck. There was also a canteen of warm water there and Johnny drank deeply. Under Ben's direction Johnny applied some raw wheat

germ to his wounds. Ben claimed that it would help slow the bleeding. "Help is on the way, Johnny. You just stay in the truck until it gets there." Ben told him. "You stay there and keep talking to me, boy! "Don't you be going to sleep on me now." Ben said. Johnny heard Clyde's frantic cries for help and looked back at the spot where the other men lay. Men that had tried to kill him. Men that he owed nothing to. The distance was too far. He knew that he did not have the strength to make that walk back again, besides his best chance of survival was to stay still and hope he did not bleed to death before help came. Jed's voice seemed to echo in Johnny's head again "Sometimes you have got to do more than you think you can, boy. That is what makes a man, instead of just a human being." "I can't do it, Jed" Johnny thought. "Talk to me Johnny" Ben said. "I can't just sit here, Ben. I have got to see what I can do for Clyde and Ed." Johnny heard himself saying. "No! You stay put. Do you hear me?" Ben shouted over the radio. "Can't" was all Johnny said, and climbed out of the truck. As he stepped out his legs gave way and he sprawled on the ground. Using the truck for support he climbed back to his feet then began staggering toward the other men. Halfway he fell again and could not get back to his feet. The canteen and first aid kit felt too heavy and cumbersome, but he would not leave either behind. Johnny's world had narrowed to the desert right in front of him. Place one hand ahead of the other, drag the canteen and first aid kit forward, then do it all over again. Johnny had forgotten why he was crawling, but knew that he had to keep going. Suddenly he found himself at Ed's side. Ed was able to drink a little water and Johnny managed to slow the bleeding some. Then he crawled to Clyde. Clyde had a wild look in his eyes. "The buzzards!" he cried. "If we pass out they will pluck out our eyes!" Clyde said. It seemed that Johnny had heard this somewhere before. Clyde drank some water, but was still terrified. "You got to turn us over, Johnny, so that the buzzards can't get to our eyes." Clyde pleaded. How he did it, Johnny never knew, but he managed to get the men turned face down, with their arms protecting their faces. Then Johnny took a long drink of water and laid face down himself. Johnny lapsed into a world of strange and dark dreams and knew no more.

Faces swam before Johnny's eyes. He thought he heard voices. He felt pain and knew that he was alive. Pain was the price of living, Jed had once said. Right now Johnny thought it was too high a price. Then a mask was placed over his face and sleep came again.....To be continued