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The B Side

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Indian Head Nickel

One hot July morning, I heard the *yip yip yipping* of Paiute Indians piercing the air and practically jumped out of my skin, diving behind the wood pile for cover. Them yips had me flashing back to my regiment days when my unit was holed up along the Little Bighorn River fending off angry hordes of Lakota and Sioux. We'd really stirred them up back then -- till they was intent on wiping us from the earth. But these weren't those times. And I wasn't that same mule headed soldier dreaming of glory. This was Utah, and I was a mule headed farmer now, homesteading with my family along the foothills of the greater Bear Valley.

Coming back to my senses, I stood up and dusted myself off before hollerin' for my little brother, Frankie. "Frankie," I called, "run on back to the house and tell Mama and Aunt Polly and Owen we have visitors coming."

"Is that why you're lying behind the wood pile? Cause they's Indians coming?"

"Scoot!" I growled sending Frankie running. Still, since Indians yelling wasn't normal for a Saturday morning, I decided to walk over to the barn and grab my gun and holster from its peg. Old habits and all. After which, I hitched my loop holster around my waist, checking my Colt Dragoon to ensure a full chamber of rounds, and strode over to the side yard to get a better look.

"What's going on?" Aunt Polly asked joining me in the side yard with the spy glass.

"Frankie said Indians are coming to raid us and you've taken cover behind the woodpile. What an imagination that boy has."

"Someone's coming. I can see two young braves riding pintos up the back spur trail," I said. "They're kicking up a good head of dust too. Not full tilt mind you, but they're coming fast and'll be here shortly."

"Lord a mercy," Aunt Polly exclaimed, making the sign of the cross over the crucifix hanging from her neck. The crucifix being totem, given to her by her late mother before crossing the Atlantic so she could marry my Uncle Miles. "What do you make of it? Will there be trouble?"

"Not sure, but I don't think so. I can see they's carrying two large baskets strapped between their horses, and it's got them loaded down pretty solid, but I don't see any weapons. Nor are they painted up in any way. Maybe somebody's chasing them? Though I don't see anyone coming up behind."

Mama walked outside with Owen and Little Frankie then, till I motioned Owen back inside to the porch where the Marlin carbine was hanging above the door frame just out of sight. He was only fifteen, but he was a crack shot.

"Wait there," I called over. Owen nodded in understanding and took down the Marlin to chamber a round.

When the Paiutes arrived five minutes later, dragging to a stop in front of our home, I stepped forward and, using hand speak and word, greeted them. The older Indian - though neither looked particularly aged past their teenage years - climbed down from his pinto and returned the greeting with "*Hello, I am friend.*" Offering the name Saaches – *Eagle Who Chases Water.*

"Hello Saaches. I am John."

The other Indian, the younger one, completely ignored us. Rather, he just swung down from his horse and began untying and unloading the two large woven baskets -- dragging them in tugs and pulls over to the nearby soft grass by the wagons. When he'd finished, without even a glance, he leapt back onto his horse and took off the way he'd come, *yipping* to punctuate his leaving.

"Oh my," Aunt Polly whispered to Mama as we all looked over to Saaches. Who waited till the dust settled, then in word and sign said, "The great chief Tawhawai sends greetings to his friend, *Jacob Fitzgerald*, and *Jacob Fitzgerald's* family from all the Paiute of the Pa-Roos-Its band. Please accept this gift," and here he gestured to the baskets, "as gratitude for the honor *Jacob Fitzgerald* bestowed upon Chief Tawhawai at the Lackawanna of the Itom Aye River three sundown's ago."

Saaches visibly sighed in relief. He'd given the speech he'd been practicing since leaving home three days earlier and now that it was done, felt he could relax and enjoy the return trip. Turning without further word, Saaches remounted, "*yipped!*" and rode off in traditional Indian fashion -- which meant, when the job was done, you left without delay -- no ceremony, no goodbye, nothing more required.

"Land sakes!" Aunt Polly exclaimed. "They always come and go so theatrically. What in the world will happen next?"

Mama ignored her because, well, of the two, Polly was always the more dramatic and Mama apparently having none of it this morning. They'd had an argument about something or other last night, as sisters will, and Mama was still a bit sore.

"Oh, what a fine gift," Mama said lifting the basket lid and discovering peaches inside. "These are lovely. And so many too -- we'll be in pies and preserves till winter."

Owen looked under the lid of the second basket. "Holy cow! There's a whole bunch more peaches in this one too! And they're dead ripe!" he exclaimed. "Well, waste not want not." Owen grabbed a peach and took a big bite, letting the juice dribble down his chin, moaning, "Ohh, they's good too! They's really good!"

"They *ARE* really good," Mama corrected, a shadow of her former schoolteacher emerging.

I looked over the gift Saaches claimed was reward for something Pa had done three days ago, but I had no way of knowing what it could've been. Pa and Uncle Miles were out country these past two weeks hunting and hadn't yet returned. Which was a bit unusual, but not so I needed to go searching yet. I figured Pa and Uncle Miles were fairly tough. When they first came to America, they worked their way from New York to Kansas on the railroads before settling in Utah. And surely had to handle themselves in quite a few predicaments despite their broguish country gent quality. They weren't rugged frontiersmen or seasoned warriors, sure, but they were good men who could handle themselves in a pinch.

Still, despite my concern, it didn't take long to become distracted by the aroma of them ripe peaches filling the air. I started imagining peach cobbler and peach pie and peach jam on bread with butter. Maybe even peach ice cream, if we had time to take the wagon to town for some rock salt and ice. Which would be nice cause I could also stop in for a visit with Sarah Ann at the Spring House and maybe invite her back to the ranch for a spell.

"Can I have one?" Little Frankie asked, tugging Mama's apron.

"Just one," she said, "but that's all for now. You'll want more, I'm sure, but I don't want you getting a stomachache."

"I won't," Frankie promised picking up a peach from the nearby basket.

"And rinse that off over at the pump too, please. There's bound to be trail dirt on them."

"Yes, Mama."

Aunt Polly jumped in, "I'll check the storage shed and see how many fruit jars from last season we still have. And I'm fairly sure there are two drums of sugar in there. We'll have to use at least one to get this job done."

"While you're looking," Mama added, "check how much paraffin is left to seal the jars with. We may have to send the boys to town for supplies." Then to us, "Boys," Mama called out, "fetch some extra wood first. We're gonna need maybe half a cord more at least. Enough to keep the fire burning hot so we can boil and scald all these peaches."

I grabbed my double bit axe from the barn and headed out to the edge of the clearing where our seasoned Oak grove lay. Owen and Frankie joined me moments later pulling the two wheeled cart we used to haul wood back and forth to the ranch.

"Why didn't those Indians have any paint on their faces?" Frankie asked, "Indians always wear paint in the picture books. All over them and their horses."

"Indians only wear face paint when they go to war," Owen explained to Frankie. "Course, if they had been, we'd surely be in big trouble trying to fend them off. Indians are strong. And they have a preference for scalping little boys with fine blond hair!"

"Really?" Frankie asked, his eyes going wide.

"Owen, don't scare him, please," I said, "He don't know you're joking. You'll give him nightmares." Owen, like his mother, Aunt Polly, also preferred the dramatic. Which he normally channeled into reciting Shakespearean sonnets or Tennyson poems after dinner. Or acting out scenes from Jefferson's monologues. But sometimes he went too far. And knew it.

"Don't worry Frankie," Owen said, "Those Indians who visited today were friendly. They were Paiute and Paiute aren't hostile. Paiutes are all tame now and live on reservations. They're mostly farmers like us. But, ohh, if they'd been Comanche! Oh brother! That surely would've been a different story! If they'd attacked, we all woulda not only been scalped, but killed deader than a doorknob!" Owen laughed tugging again at Frankie's golden locks.

"Oh, okay," Frankie replied moving closer to me and looking around the woods. "When are Poppa and Uncle Miles gonna get home?"

"Owen," I said glaring at him, "you and I are gonna have a serious chat later." Then to Little Frankie, "Pop and Uncle Miles will be back most likely tomorrow," patting Frankie on the shoulder. "They went down to the Virgin River where it meets the Muddy and it'll take them a bit of time to drive the mules and wagon back. Especially if their buffalo hunt was successful. Buffalos are big, Frankie. Bigger than you and me and Owen put together!" I smiled.

"No one's gonna be bigger than me when I grow up!" Frankie insisted smiling back. "Not Comanches or anyone! And I'm gonna hunt buffalo with Poppa and Uncle Miles when I'm big too!"

"Of course you will," I said. "I sure would like to join you when you do."

2.

Not twenty miles away, just on the other side of High Water Pass along the Wasatch Mountains, Jacob Fitzgerald was sitting on his horse waiting for his brother, Miles, to get moving. And growing impatient because he wasn't. The mules, Sarah and Beezus, had been hitched to the wagon, but Miles was sitting on a tree stump in front of them drinking chicory root coffee. Just sitting holding the lead rein while the mules stood and stared right back at him. It was aggravating.

"You gonna sit there all day pondering your fate?" Jacob asked, "Or are we gonna get these mules moving?"

"I was thinking maybe we should re-pack the buffalo meat in the back of the wagon first," Miles replied. "Wrap the haunches tighter in tarpaulin and cover them with a few fresh cut cypress branches. Mask the smell better. There's wolves and bear around who, I'm sure, can smell all that fresh meat from miles away."

"Ain't no bear or pack of wolves gonna attack a wagon in broad daylight."

"They might if they're hungry enough. It's been a fairly lean year for them too. Plus, I only got maybe ten more shells for the Winchester. Not nearly enough to fight off a pack of hungry wolves if they come callin. Covering the smell would work better."

"Well, I don't think re-packing a wagon full of buffalo meat will change much at this point. We been out country too long. We should just get moving. If we stick to the main trail head and push the mules to travel fast, we should be fine. Home by supper, I reckon."

Miles grunted, "Maybe," but he didn't move. He was humming to Sarah and Beezus between sips of coffee.

"You're gonna get sick if you continue to drink that sludge. Or you'll swallow too much chicory root and be sorry when you get stomach cramps."

"I'm good, Jacob. My stomach is cast iron. Quit fussing. When was the last time you ever saw me get sick?"

"True, but there's always a first time. And this would be an inconvenient time to start. So why don't we get up and get that wagon moving?"

"Ain't up to me. Sarah and Beezus is spooked about something and I'm letting them see me so they keep calm. Otherwise they're likely to freeze up. And then it'll be hell

getting them to move for anything short of oblivion. Or they'll bolt and throw the wagon or themselves and end up hurt."

"If you say so."

"I do. Hey, do you think there's wild Indians around these parts they're smelling?"

"Wild Indians? Hell no. Ain't been no wild Indians around here going on ten or fifteen years. And the Paiute were never really all that hostile in the first place. Most rogue bands are way down south by the Brazos. Or way out west across the plains. Not here."

"Well, Sarah and Beezus are smelling something they don't like," Miles said. "But if I can get Sarah moving, so will Beezus." He stood, tossed the dregs of chicory root coffee into the brush, and climbed up onto the buckboard. "Alright, girls," he soothed, gently snapping the reins, "Let's get moving."

Sarah moved, followed by Beezus, as Miles guided them back onto the High Water Pass trail. With Jacob following on his own horse, giving free reign while he scanned for signs of danger. *Something is out there, he worried, I can feel it too. I just can't tell who or what yet. But it don't seem good.*

3.

Saaches turned the corner to discover Tannu had disappeared. They'd delivered the peaches like instructed and, after, he'd raced to catch up with Tannu, riding west along Badger's Gap toward Tabletop, he lost sight. Tannu's horse, River, was still there -- standing on the trail with her lead rope dangling -- but no Tannu.

Did he fall off somewhere back there and I missed him? Saaches wondered. For the life of him, he couldn't figure where Tannu had gone.

“AIIYYYYEEE!” Tannu whooped, dropping down from the tree branch directly above Saaches’ horse.

“What the...?” Saaches yelped.

But instead of landing on Saaches’ horse, Tannu mis-judged, deflecting off Ember and crashing to the ground. “Woof! Ouch! Oh, that hurt!” he groaned, standing up and rubbing his backside. “I think I broke my tail bone.”

“Serves you right,” Saaches replied once he’d settled Ember and kept him from bolting. “What were you trying to do, break Ember’s back!?”

“No, of course not. Before we left, *Woveveh* told me the best way to attack Pawnee Scouts back in the day was to drop down unexpected like from a tree above and land on their horse’s backside. Then reach around and cut the Pawnee’s throat. I wanted to see if I could do it.”

“*Woveveh* is a drunken old fool who likes to tell tall tales. And you’re an idiot for listening to him. You could’ve hurt Ember.”

“Sorry ‘bout that. Is she okay? I figured she’d be strong enough to handle the drop.”

“She’s fine. But you owe her an apology. She didn’t like that.”

“Sorry Ember. Sorry I jumped on you. And sorry you have a rider who’s a big ol’ *wacheechoo*,” Tannu laughed. “If I’d landed right, I woulda had you cold and cut your throat for sure.”

“You *ton-to!* No way! But I forgive you. Here let me get your horse for you.”

Saaches spurred lightly over to Tannu’s horse and reached for the loose rein. When he had it in his hand, he “yipped” loudly, spurred his horse and galloped away with both pintos. All while looking back over his shoulder at Tannu and laughing.

Tannu watched Saaches ride away with both horses and thought, *Kutta baccha! Why didn't I think of that!?*

4.

Big Mike Henshaw whipped the draft horse harder after the beast faltered a third time pulling their wagon up the rocky south fork trail toward Tabletop -- crisscrossing his whip for best effect. *Whack, whack. Whack, whack.* "Come on, you sumbitches!" He cursed. *Whack whack.* "Get up that hill!" *Whack, whack.* He was a stubborn man who'd been pushing the poor horse hard for three days straight -- ever since he and his partner, Red Wade, had stolen ten canvas sacks of government coin intended for the treasury in Washington. The coins were confederate Indian head, buffalo nickels, gathered for years across the antebellum south, and meant to be turned over to the north's treasury for melting and re-purposing. Till Big Mike and Red intervened.

It hadn't been difficult either, since no one thought anyone would bother with a few thousand dollars in coin. All Big Mike and Red had to do was hide in a glen outside of town till the delivery rider, who had tipped them off, set up night camp. Then walk into the camp, tie up the young, inexperienced driver and knock out the roused guards, sending them back into unconsciousness. All the while using handkerchief masks across their faces to conceal their identities -- which was the only way Red had convinced Big Mike not to kill the guards. Robbing them, sure, was bound to alert the law, but they could outrun that trouble. Though Red doubted anyone would put much effort into chasing after old sacks of nickels. But killing the driver and guards? That would be much worse -- the government would surely send Pinkerton's down. And those boys wouldn't quit looking till they found their man -- their prideful reputation far too self-important for them to do otherwise. Red didn't want that kind of trouble.

"You keep hitting that horse like that," Red commented, "and he's gonna die on us. He looks pretty tuckered out."

"So?" Big Mike growled, "We only need him to get us up and over Tabletop, then down to the Baintree River. We'll be out of posse range by then and can stash the loot, then send for the boys to bring us more horses. So what's the problem?"

"Well, I don't rightly disagree," Red Wade countered, "Cept it's still a few miles to Tabletop. And ten more down to the river crossing. If that horse dies now, we'll have a hell of a time carrying all them sacks out on foot. We'll have to roll everything into the brush and hide it till we find better means of transport. That could take a while."

"We'll make it," Big Mike growled. "One way or the other. I guarantee that." *Whack, whack.*

6.

"Hey, I been meaning to ask you," Miles asked Jacob as they rode the low trail east toward Tabletop. "Exactly what did you say to that Indian chief a couple days ago that made him so happy? I thought he was gonna drop his pipe and kiss you there for a hot minute. It sure weren't over our how successful our buffalo hunt was while they stood around watching, I tell you that. We barely managed to bag two. And they weren't that big. Barely enough meat to share with them Paiutes and still have enough left over to take home."

"I told him I didn't care if the federal government did order the Dawes Allotment Act to go into effect. As far as I was concerned, their land was their land and I wasn't gonna be party to taking it from them."

"Yeah? So why'd that make him happy?"

"You remember that surveyor who come out last year and mapped out all the land we bought? Including that detached parcel up by the Big Snake Hills."

"Yeah. Course I do. He charged us near twenty dollar just to tell us how much we're gonna owe the government on taxes for the land."

"Well, part of that outparcel he surveyed along Big Snake still had remnants of an old Indian tribe camp – you know, buffalo lodges, broken clay pots and tools, campfire residue. That sorta thing. And when he did some further checking, he learned a tribe of Paiutes lived on that very land for a couple generations. Before they were moved out under President Jackson's Indian Removal and Relocation Act back in 1830.

"That weren't in the report."

"No, I asked the surveyor to keep it out to avoid any legal issues. Paid him another five dollars to do so."

"So what's that got to do with why that Indian chief was so happy with you?"

"After the buffalo hunt, when the chief invited us back to his lodge and we shared our buffalo meat and smoked with him, I did some thinking."

"Never a good sign."

"Well, still and all, I thought about it and decided I wanted to gift the Chief and his tribe those outparcel acres back as a gesture of good will."

"You're kidding."

"No. I'm not. It's the right thing to do."

"The right thing? Let's skip the fact that you didn't talk to me about it beforehand. But who says it's the right thing? It's our land. We paid for it fair and legal."

"Sure, but think about it. We ain't gonna develop that land, right? It's too narrow and out of the way. Well off our main patch, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, if we ain't gonna use it. Why not put it to some good use."

"How is deeding them Utes that land gonna help us? Not to mention there ain't no way the government's gonna let you do that in the first. That's why they's on the reservation as it is."

"I didn't say deed. I said give. Allow them to use it. You know, to hunt and fish and live on during the summer months. Just like their ancestors. I don't need the government's permission to share my land with whomever I choose."

"Okay, then what about the neighbors? The Mormons surely won't like it. Not to mention, we'll still be paying taxes."

"A few tax dollars is nothing compared to making good friends and allies out of them Paiutes. Not to mention, we need a few neighbors who aren't Mormon. Or did we not learn that lesson the hard back in Maryland with them Catholics? They run us out just for being Protestant. You don't think the Mormons will do the same given half the chance? Old Brigham, if you haven't gathered, doesn't impress me as much of a fair man when it comes to things that aren't in his best interests."

"Well, that doesn't justify giving them Indians our land."

"Look at how much they've lost as a people in the last century. Everything that makes them who they are. They ain't allowed to hunt buffalo. Nor sing their songs or dance their dances. They can't own anything and have to live where we tell them cause of the Dawson Act. The Mormons hate them too and are pressing old Ulysses S. Grant to

move them further away -- out of the state if they can. Them Utes have been stripped of just about everything that makes 'em Indian."

"And you think giving them land is actually helping them be Indians again?"

"Isn't that the whole point of the Americas -- the land of the "free" and the home of the "brave?" Where everyone gets a chance to own land and live free? Believe what they want without being conscripted into every pox-ridden revolution? Or treated like cannon fodder by vainglorious men? Isn't that why we left Hesse and travelled all this way? Well, with this land, them Paiutes know they have neighbors who care."

"You aren't doing them the favor you think, brother. Just delaying the inevitable. As far as America is concerned, the indigenous Indian way of life is over. You may admire them, but they're doomed and they ain't coming back from it. Not in this century. Not ever. The sooner they, and you, face that, and get on with the business of assimilation, the better for all of us. All you're going with this land gift is prolonging their pain, and setting us up for conflict with the Mormons. Because, what? You feel guilty they can't hunt anymore?"

Jacob was about to answer his brother. But a wolf started howling not far up ahead -- off to their right -- which made the mules jump. "What in the Sam-hill is a wolf doing howling in the middle of the day? That ain't right."

7.

Saaches waited for Tannu to catch up on foot. "No more games okay? Truce."

"Alright, truce," Tannu agreed. Then howled out, "*Owwww-whuuuuuuuu!!!*" Sounding like a wolf, letting his wolf call echo off the nearby hills. "Have you heard *Woveveh* imitate the wolf? He's really good, you know, and he's teaching me how. He says I'm

even better than Besah *ever was*, and that's saying something. *Ouw-ouw- ow- wwwwhuuuuuuuuu!!!*"

"We better get moving. We still have a way to go before we get home and I don't want to miss the dances tonight. If we cut over the dog pass on Tabletop, we can pick up the main trail and make a run for home."

"No, let's not go that way. It's way too open and chances are we'll run into someone along the way. I've had enough of these *wacheechoo* settlers for one day. Let's take the trail down by the *Itom Aye*.

"Tabletop is faster. I'm going that way."

"Fine."

8.

"Well, I hate to tell you so...." Red started.

Not even a mile closer to Tabletop, the lead horse faltered and dropped right in the middle of the trail. With the sound of his leg snapping so loud, even Big Mike winced.

"Dammit all to hell!" Big Mike cursed, getting down from the wagon and unsheathing his Bowie. Walking up to the beast and plunging his knife square into the horse's forehead. A tremendous blow, piercing the skull and killing it instantly.

Red, despite himself, was impressed. "Well, that's that then. Come on, let's find a place to stash the coin. Then we'll look for a farm or ranch nearby and get ourselves a couple more horses. Maybe, if the missus is at home, we can have ourselves a little entertainment before we leave too. But I get to go first."

"Who says?"

"I do. You always rough them up too much so they's barely breathing by the time I get to them."

"So?"

"Well...."

Both Red and Big Mike heard the sound of a wolf howling nearby, and stopped dead in their tracks.

Big Mike cursed, "Oh dammit all to hell! What now?"

8.

"That can't be no wolf," Jacob told Miles. "Who ever heard of a wolf howling in the middle of the day like that?! You don't suppose someone's having a go at us, do ya?"

"Well, whatever it is, we need to get clear of it. It's spooking the mules."

"I agree. I'm gonna scout ahead a bit. See if I can pick up on whatever is out there. Hand me the Winchester and whatever extra rounds you got left."

"Alright, but don't go too far. That only leaves me with the buffalo gun and my knife. Both of which will be darn near useless if trouble comes a-callin."

"I hear ya' brother. I won't be long." But when he returned, Jacob had a troubled look.

"Did ya' see anything?" Miles asked.

"Yeah. I think we have more than a wolf problem to worry about. Up ahead, about a mile around that curve in the trail, there's a dead horse attached to a wagon. It looks like its leg broke and then someone caved in its forehead. And if I'm not mistaken, there are drag marks from the wagon bed into the brush. Along with two sets of boot prints heading further up the trail."

"You think that's what's been spookin' the horses?"

"Not the dead horse, but maybe what, or who, done it."

"You think someone got robbed and killed? And then dragged off into the brush?"

"I don't know. I didn't see any carrion circling. Nor do I know if those footprints are gonna come back. Or go up a ways and lie in wait for the next traveler to come by."

"So we stick together and ride hard past Tabletop. If they's on foot and need help, then we help them. If they're bandits, then we out pace 'em and call for the Sheriff when we reach the ranch."

"That's not a bad idea. But I'm afraid a bandit could cut the angle on us and ambush us before we knew it. They'd have the drop on us."

"So we turn back now and go around the north fork."

"No, that would take us another two or three days to get around. If there's trouble, its best we face it now."

"Okay, agreed. We keep going and fight off whoever might be around if they come at us. Except all we have is the Winchester with less than ten rounds, that single shot buffalo gun and our side arms."

"I got a plan. There's a butte up high near the escarpment there. Around two o'clock. You see it?" Jacob said pointing.

"Yeah."

"If I head straight up there on foot, I should have a bird's eye view of the trail nearly all the way around the bend to the other side. You rest the mules a sec and I'll head up at a fast pace. That way, when you come around the bend, 'll be able to cover you for most of the way down. It shouldn't take more than an hour once you get past the dead horse

and wagon. Then, when I'm sure you're clear, I'll come down to re-join you on the other side. Then we'll push hard for home."

"You think that'll work?"

"Yeah, I do. I think it's our best option. Hopefully, whoever killed that horse is far gone. But if they're not and lying in wait up ahead, I'll be able to spot them and send up a couple of warning shots. If you hear that, turn around and head for the north fork. Once I deal with them, then I'll catch up with you. But if they come for you, well, I'll do my best to make sure they don't for very long."

"Sounds like a plan," Miles agreed.

9.

Big Mike set the four sacks down he'd been carrying to wipe the sweat from his brow and glare at Red. They'd been on foot down the Highwater Pass trail not even thirty minutes and Red was already complaining about the one sack he had to carry. Big Mike spit tobacco juice at his foot.

"Hey ya' dern fool! Watch where ya' spittin!" Red growled.

"*Whaddidjajuscallme?!*" Big Mike knew Red could be dangerous, despite his diminutive size. But he also knew Red's complaining, if it wasn't stopped, usually led to a dustup. And even Big Mike knew they didn't have the time for that right now.

"I said be careful where you spit, you fool!"

"Shut yer mouth before I shut it fer ya'. I ain't no fool."

"Like hell you ain't. Spit tobacco in my direction again and see what happens!"

"You ain't gonna do shit." Big Mike argued moving toward Red. But then they heard the sound of horses coming their way.

"Hey quiet!" Red whispered. "Do you hear that?"

"Yeah. Horses. We could definitely use a couple of them right now, fer sure. Maybe our luck is changing. Get in the brush over there," Big Mike said, "and flank them while I stop them on the trail."

"Got it."

10.

Saaches and Tannu rode in silence, trying to make up time after Tannu's joke, so they could get home by evening. But, the last they expected was to come around a bend and discover a very large and very dirty *wacheechoo* man standing in the middle of the trail blocking their way.

"I told you we were gonna run across someone," Tannu groaned.

"Now boys," Big Mike called out to Tannu, "hop off them pintos and hand 'em over. Or do I have to shoot ya' off?!" The pistol he leveled backed up his demand.

"I'm not your boy," Tannu growled, "And my horse is not yours for the taking."

A moment later, a second *wacheechoo* man - even dirtier than the first -- popped out from a side bush, grabbed the lead rein to Saaches horse and pushed Saaches clean off sending him falling hard to the ground.

"He weren't asking," Red Wade spat.

"Now you," Big Mike replied, looking at Tannu, cocking back the hammer on his gun and sending a spat of tobacco juice down the trail at him.

"Climb down, Tannu," Saaches said. "Let them have River. She'll be okay."

Red cackled. "Why thank ya' very much, boy! You heard 'em, *injun*. Give it up."

Tannu dismounted and moved over to Saaches.

"Good," Big Mike grunted. "That's a good injun. Now that that's settled. Let's see what else ya' boys got. And just so there ain't no confusion, I got no problem shootin' both of you dead right where you stand. Two more dead injuns don't matter much to me."

A round exploded in the dirt at Big Mike's feet along with the report of a rifle blast from the escarpment above them.

"Now that will be enough of that, gentlemen," Jacob hollered down while chambering another round into the Winchester. "Give 'em back their horses and let them go. Or the next round will do some damage."

"Now don't go doin' that, mister," Red yelled up, looking around, trying to pin down where the stranger was. "We's just getting our property back from these *thievin' injuns*. They stole our horses' a-ways back and left us on foot. But we caught up with them, didn't we? And are well within our rights to take our property back."

"They didn't steal anything. Those are unshod pintos without saddle. No way they were your horses. And you have three seconds to give them back to their rightful owners."

"Now look here, mister," Red called out just as he spotted the escarpment Jacob was shooting from. He glanced over at Big Mike to let him know, flicked his head in Jacob's direction, and gave Big Mike the nod to shoot.

Big Mike spun, firing his pistol in the direction Red motioned. And missed. The hole that opened up in his chest from the .308 round Jacob fired back testified Big Mike wouldn't get a second chance. He flew back landing flat – as good as dead.

Red dove for cover, simultaneously firing off two rounds up at Jacob. Till Jacob shifted sights and put Red down with another well aimed .308 round.

No one moved till the dust settled and the gunshots stopped ringing.

"I think you got them both, mister," Saaches called out. We're gonna stand up now, okay? We don't have any weapons."

Jacob dropped down to the trail, checking to make sure Big Mike and Red were dead. He then checked on Saaches and Tannu. "You boys okay?"

Tannu was staring wide eyed down into several sacks, the ones labeled Denver Dry Goods, which Big Mike and Red had left by the side of the trail. "There's a whole bunch of gold coins in this sack. And there are five of them. Wow."

Saaches waited for Jacob to recognize him from the buffalo hunt feast not even three days ago. "You are....*Jacob Fitzgerald*, yes?"

"I am. Are you boys from the tribe my brother and I just visited? If you are, I don't know what you're doing way out this way, but you were lucky. We all were. These men had bad intention, I suspect."

"Yes sir."

"I'll have to load them up in my wagon, along with them sacks of coins, and take everything back with us. You boys should come with me too till I report everything back to the Sheriff. So there's no misunderstanding."

"Yes sir."

"But right now, I could use your help. Looks like that one had good enough aim to hit me high up in the leg with his second shot. I'll live, but it's a little painful to walk at the moment. My brother is back down the trail with our wagon. If you'll catch your pinto

and ride after him, tell him I need help up here, I'd appreciate it. It'd save me considerable pain trying to catch up with him."

Saaches turned to Tannu. "You take River and ride for Mr. Fitzgerald's brother. I'll stay here and help with these ugly *wacheecho's*."

Tannu grunted and took off down the trail on River. He didn't feel like *yip yip yipping* when he did.

11.

"Does buffalo meat taste good?" Frankie asked. "I never had none."

"You never had *any*. And it tastes like peaches," Owen replied.

"It do?"

"No, Frankie," I interrupted. "Owen's joshing you again. We haven't had buffalo either -- though Uncle Miles says they taste like beef. Just a little sweeter is all."

"When do you think Poppa and Uncle Miles will get back? We been out here a long time and I'm getting hungry."

"I already told you when, Frankie. And asking a hundred times won't make them come home faster."

"I just miss 'em, is all. Poppa said when I get bigger, he'll take me on a buffalo hunt with him and Uncle Miles."

"Yes, I know, Frankie. Here, carry my axe. I believe we have enough wood to finish off the cord. Owen, grab that end of the cart and we'll head back."

Frankie, Owen, and I walked out of the woods together heading back toward home. It was nearly supper time and we'd been working all day. So when we came in sight of

the cabin, we were hungry. But when we noticed Poppa's wagon out front, all thoughts of peaches and buffalo and supper temporarily left us.

"Look!" Frankie yelled, "It's Poppa's wagon! They're home! And there's two pintos tied up to the back. He brought the Indians back!"

"Hand me that axe before you take off running, Frankie. You're liable to fall and cut yourself."

Frankie wasted no time. He handed over the axe and took off sprinting yelling, "Poppa! Poppa!"

"You too, Owen." Owen smiled and took off at a gallop. I wanted to run too, but, being the oldest, I had to maintain a certain decorum.

As I walked toward the ranch, I looked at our home – our barn and our pastures and the beautiful land surrounding us, and thought how blessed we were. For Pa and Uncle Miles, Ma and Aunt Polly to have endured so many hardships just reaching the new world, before they were able to homestead in Utah. For my enlistment in the U.S. Army at a too young age – and my luck surviving far too many close calls when others had not. For the blessings of family. Then my thoughts turned to the years ahead -- when Frankie would grow up and go on his buffalo hunt. And Owen would go off to college, then maybe New York to be a great actor on the stage. For Sarah Ann to accept my proposal and join me at the ranch as my wife -- where we'd build our own cabin nearby and raise a family. Work the ranch too so Aunt Polly and Uncle Miles, Momma and Pa, could retire when they were ready and live out the rest of their days in comfort.

I looked forward to those days, seeing them spread out in front of me one after the other, as the sun set on the horizon. Knowing each of those days would be as rare and special as an Indian head nickel.

The End.