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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 for cover behind the wood pile like a dern fool. Them yips sent 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 sure stirred up a hornet's nest back then and them Indians were looking to excise us from the land. But those weren't these times. And I wasn't that same mule headed corporal dreaming of glory along the wild frontiers of Montana. This was Utah, I reminded myself, and I was now a mule headed rancher homesteading with my family across the plains in the great Bear Valley.

"Frankie," I called out to my little brother standing nearby. "Run back to the house and tell Mama, 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 stood and dusted myself off, then walked quickly to the barn to grab my gun and holster hanging from a peg. Old habits and all. I mean, Paiutes in this part of Utah were mostly tamed, I knew, but them excited yells from the south switchback had given me

pause. Hitching my loop holster around my waist and checking my Colt to ensure a full chamber of rounds, I strode over to the side yard to get a better look.

"What's going on?" Aunt Polly asked joining me outside, handing me the spy glass.

"Frankie said Indians were coming like there's going to be a raid."

"I can see two young braves on pintos riding 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 at her neck. The crucifix being totem, given to her by her late mother before crossing the Atlantic to marry my Uncle Miles in America. "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, but 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, "till after them Paiute's arrive." 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, greeted them. The older Indian - though neither looked particularly aged past their teenage years - climbed down from his pinto

and returned the greeting for “*Hello, I am friend.*” Offering the name Saaches – *Eagle Who Chases Water.*

“Hello, friend. I am Saaches.”

“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 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. Saaches 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, 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. There are 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 shrugged taking a big bite from a peach and letting the juice dribble down his chin. Moaning, "Ohh, they're good! 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. I was a bit concerned too, but not so I need call out the calvary.

Course, when I smelled them ripe peaches, it weren't hard to become distracted, thinking about peach cobbler and peach pie and maybe even making peach ice cream - if we had time to take the wagon to town for some rock salt and ice. Which would be nice cause then I could stop in to visit Sarah Ann at the Spring House. Maybe even invite her out 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 from too much fruit."

"I won't," Frankie promised picking up a peach from the nearest 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 to see how many fruit jars we have left over. And I’m fairly sure we still have two drums of sugar in there. We’ll have to use most of it to get this job done.”

“While you’re looking,” Mama added, “check how much paraffin we have left to seal the jars. Boys,” Mama called out, “fetch some extra wood. 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 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.”

“Indians only wear face paint when they go to war,” Owen explained to Frankie, “but, if they had been, we’d surely have been in big trouble trying to fight them off. They’d have gone right for your hear toot!” he laughed pantomiming stabbing Frankie and pulling his heart out, “after they scalped you, of course.”

“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 for the

family 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 Indians, for sure. Because they were Paiute and Paiute aren't hostile. Paiutes are all tame now and live on reservations. They's mostly farmers. But, ohh, if they'd been Comanche! Oh brother, they surely would've attacked and you and I and everyone we know woulda been scalped! Our fine blond hair cut clean off!" he laughed tugging 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, and will weigh the wagon down. Bigger than you and me 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."

II.

Not twenty miles away, maybe twenty-five, 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. The mules, Sarah and Beezus, had

yet to be harnessed to the wagon and Miles sitting on a tree stump drinking chicory root coffee. Normally, the mules were steady, as was his brother's handling of them. But this morning, when they really needed to get moving, Miles just sat 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 and commiserating with the mules?" Jacob asked, "Or are we gonna get moving?"

"I was thinking maybe we should re-pack that 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 here and I'm sure they can smell all that fresh meat from miles away."

"Ain't no bear or pack of wolves gonna attack a wagon in broad daylight when we have carbines at the ready."

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

"Well, re-packing and re-dressing a wagon full of buffalo meat won't change much at this point. 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 keep drinking 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. Say, you don't think there's wild Indians around these parts they're smelling, do you?"

"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 left 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, picking up the reins and gently snapping them, "Let's go."

Sarah moved, followed by Beezus, as Miles guided them back onto the High Water Pass trail. Jacob followed 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.*

III.

Saaches turned the corner and stopped in the middle of the trail. Because Tannu had all but disappeared. They'd delivered the peaches like instructed and he'd raced to catch

up with Tannu, riding west along Badger's Gap toward Tabletop. But just when he should've caught sight of Tannu, Tannu had disappeared into thin air. His horse, River, was still there -- standing on the trail, her rope lead dangling. But no Tannu. Nor could Saaches see any footsteps leading away. *Did he fall off somewhere back there and I missed him?* he wondered. For the life of him, Saaches couldn't figure where Tannu had gone.

"AIIYYEEEE!" Tannu whooped.

"What the...?" Saaches yelped.

"AIIYYEEEE!" Tannu hollered again dropping down from the tree branch directly above Saaches' horse. But instead of landing on Saaches, he bounced off the horse's flank and fell to the ground, landing hard. "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 away. "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 before they could let go of the lead. 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 a little more to the 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!?*

IV.

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 the whip for best effect. *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, left Spanish Fork with twenty canvas sacks of The Denver Dry Good Company's gold coin. Originally bound for Colorado, but now theirs thanks to a well-executed nighttime robbery just outside of town that left the young, inexperienced driver tied up and the two roused guards knocked back into unconsciousness. None had seen their robbers, which is the only reason Red was able to convince Big Mike not to kill them. Not to mention killing them would probably mean Pinkerton's being sent down to investigate.

"You keep hitting that horse," 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 past Tabletop. Then we'll be out of posse range and can stash the loot at our hideout. So what's the problem."

"I don't rightly care so much myself," Red Wade countered, "Cept it's still a few miles to Tabletop. If he dies now, we'll have a hell of a time carrying them sacks over to the

hideout. We'll have to roll everything into the brush and hide it till we find better transport. That'll take a while."

"We'll make it," Big Mike growled. Whack, whack.

VI.

"Hey, I been meanin' to ask you," Miles said to Jacob as they rode the low trail east turning up 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 your feet 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 the Paiutes."

"I told him I didn't care if the federal government had ordered 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 we had come out last year and map all the land we bought as part of the tax assessment. 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 owe the government in taxes."

"Well, part of that parcel he surveyed along Big Snake showed signs of older habitation, along with some buried Indian tools and buffalo skin lodge remnants. And when he did some checking, he learned a tribe of Paiutes occupied that land for generations. But they were moved out under the Jefferson Relocation Act.

"That weren't in the report."

"No, I asked him to keep it out to avoid any legal issues."

"So what's this 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, 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 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 this beforehand. But who says it was the right thing? This has nothing to do with right or wrong. It's land."

"Think about it. We ain't gonna develop that land, right? It's too narrow and out of the way."

"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."

"I didn't say deed. I said give. Allow them to use – to hunt and fish and live 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 local Mormons surely won’t like it. Not to mention, we’ll still be paying taxes on the land when the government taxman comes for his tribute.”

“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 the hard way during the Cayuse wars?”

“Well, feeling guilty doesn’t justify giving them 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 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 they can’t officially own is helping them?”

“If that were us and our people, we’d have fought like hell too. Just like them. And we would’ve wanted our neighbors to fight with us, not turn their backs on us. With this land gift, now them Paiutes know they have neighbors who care.”

“You aren’t doing them the favor you think. Just delaying the inevitable. The indigenous indian way of life is doomed. And it ain’t coming back. Not in this century. Not ever. The sooner they, and you, face that, the better we all will be. All you’re going with this gift is prolonging their pain, and setting us up conflict with the Mormons. Because, what? You feel guilty they can’t hunt anymore?”

Jacob was about to answer his brother when he heard a loud howling not too far up ahead – off to their right – which made the mules jump.

VII.

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

"Alright, truce. *Owww-whuuuuuuuu!!!*" Tannu howled 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 even says I might even be better than Besah, and that's saying something. *Ouw-ouw- ow-wwwwhuuuuuuuu!!!*"

"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 through 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. 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."

X.

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

Not even a mile closer to Tabletop, the lead horse faltered and dropped. 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. He then walked up to the crying beast and plunged his knife square into the horse's forehead. A tremendous blow, piercing the beast's 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. Maybe, if the missus is at home, we'll have ourselves a little entertainment before we leave."

When Big Mike heard the sound of a wolf howling, he cursed, "Oh dammit all to hell! What now?"

XI.

"That cain'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. That'll 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 there's a dead horse attached to a wagon in the middle of the trail, but nobody around."

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

"Not the horse, but maybe what or who it was carrying? I didn't want to get too close yet or the crows would've kicked off and alerted anyone still in the vicinity. But, to me, it looked like that horse had its head caved in. And I could see a bunch of drag marks off into the brush though I don't know what was being dragged. It was heavy though judging by the drag trails."

"You think someone got robbed and killed? And then they were dragged off into the brush? And then they killed the horse? Why not just take the horse and buggy and drive off after."

"I don't know. Someone definitely killed the horse so it stands to reason there is a someone who killed that horse still around."

"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 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 up ahead and lie in wait to ambush us."

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

"No, that would take us more than a week to get around."

"Then we keep going and fight off whoever might be around if they come at us."

"I'd prefer not without some way to cover ourselves. And you said it yourself. All we have is the Winchester with less than ten rounds, that single shot buffalo gun and our side arms. I got a plan though. There's a butte up there near the escarpment high up. 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. You rest the mules a sec and then head off at a fast pace. I'll be able to cover you for most of the way. It shouldn't take more than an hour to get around. So when you get clear, I'll head down to re-join you on the other side, and we'll push hard for home."

"You think that'll work?"

"Yeah, I think it's our best option. Hopefully, whoever killed that horse is far gone. But if they're lying in wait up ahead, I'll be able to spot them before you reach the area and send up a couple of warning shots. If you hear that, turn and head the other way. Once I deal with them, and hopefully it's all just a big misunderstanding, then I'll catch up with you later. 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.

XII.

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

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

"Whaddidjajuscallme?!"

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

"Shut yer mouth before I shut it fer ya'."

"Like hell ya' will. Spit tobacco in my direction again and I'll kick the living shit outta ya. Then I'll make you lick it off my boot!"

"You couldn't kick shit." Big Mike argued moving toward Red. But then they heard the sound of horses coming their way from up ahead.

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

"Yeah. We could use a couple of horses right now, fer sure. Maybe our luck is changing. Get in the bush and flank them when I stop them on the trail."

"Got it."

XIII.

Saaches and Tannu came around the High Water Pass trail to 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 mentioned. But before he could finish, 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. Saaches landed and rolled away.

"Now boy," Big Mike called out to Tannu, "you gonna get down off'n that pinto and hand 'er over or is I gonna 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."

"Weren't asking," Big Mike replied cocking back the hammer and sending a spat of tobacco juice down the trail at him.

Red pulled Saaches' pinto back several steps, unholstered his own pistol and pointed it at Saaches. "You *injuns* must be some kinda *stupid*. If ya' haven't figured it out, we's robbin' you of your horses."

"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 ya' dead right where ya' stand. Two more dead injuns don't matter much ta' me."

A round exploded in the dirt at Big Mike's feet along with the report of a gun 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 for Jacob. "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 is well within our rights to take our property back."

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

Red spotted the escarpment Jacob was shooting from and glanced over at Big Mike to let him know. He nodded his head in Jacob's direction and gave Big Mike the shoot sign. Big Mike spun unexpectedly, firing his pistol in the direction Red motioned. Only the hole that opened up in Big Mike's chest from the .308 round Jacob fired back testified Big Mike wasn't fast enough. He flew back landing flat – as good as dead. Red dove for cover and simultaneously fired off two rounds up at Jacob. 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 in their ears.

"I think you got them both, mister," Saaches called out. "We're gonna stand up now, okay?"

Jacob dropped down to the trail and checked 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 inside one of the sack Red had, labeled Denver Dry Goods. "There's a lot of gold coins in here, mister. And that fella has three more with him."

Saaches waited for Jacob to come down and recognized him from the buffalo hunt and feast not even three days ago. "You are....*Jacob Fitzgerald?*"

"I am. You boys are from the tribe we just visited. I don't know what you're doing out this way, but you were lucky. I think we all were today. Except them of course. They were bad men for sure and those sacks of gold coin testify to that."

"Yes sir."

"I'll have to load them up in my wagon, along with the other buggy they left a mile back, and take everything with us. You boys should come with me for now and we'll report everything back to the Marshal."

"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 him up here, I'd appreciate it. It'd save me considerable pain trying to catch up with him."

Saaches turned to Tannu. "You grab River and Ember and bring them here. Then ride for this man's brother. I'll stay and help him with these ugly *wacheechoo's*."

Tannu grunted and took off after the pintos.

XIV.

"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 eaten buffalo either, just deer, elk, and cow. But Uncle Miles says it tastes like beef. Just a little sweeter is all."

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

"I already told you, 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!”

I wanted to run too, but, being the oldest, I had to maintain a certain decorum. Owen, though, held no such pretense and took off at a gallop the minute he saw the wagons too.

As I walked toward the ranch, I looked around and thought about the years ahead -- when Frankie would grow up and go on his buffalo hunt. And Owen would go off to college, then to 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 Beatrice and Uncle Miles, Momma and Poppa, 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 as vast as the sun setting on the horizon. And as rare as an Indian head nickel.

The End.