SHORT STORY

The Frontier Incident

by Mario Marčinko



"Looking Up" by Emmelia Haskin

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“How much more until we get out of the woodlands, Tim?” Con asks inquisitively.

“If we set out tomorrow morn at an earlier time, it could be in the evening the day afterwards.”

Day three in the wilds since we left Prescott. We have been travelling fast and with little rest, covering a lot of the track in little time. Should arrive in Flagstaff somewhere around noon. Planning on staying there for the rest of the day and overnight. We also need food and water, as well as some supplies for the trek. Prospecting is not a tricky trade once you get used to it. The tricky part, however, is getting used to it. A lot of the success in finding gold depends on a certain sense that you develop after some time — self-trust, if you want.

As a cartographer, my duty is being the pack’s compass. The region has already been mapped, so my responsibility is restricted to reading that map with slightly more skill than the others. Con, my brother-in-law and best friend, asks the most questions and acts as our organizer, but is of little help with arriving at our destination. Sal, on the other hand, complements my sense of orientation with his tracking skills and notices details in the surroundings no one else would.

“Then we enter Navajo territory, *amigos*,” Sal reminds us. “Should be careful then.”

“No need to,” Cyrus rumbles with his deep and raspy voice, matching his authoritative speech. “Prospect Westfield is a peace zone. The locals cooperate with the Redskins.”

Cyrus, the oldest and by far most experienced of us, should know best as the *de facto* chief. Con also keeps shut, but he is just biting his tongue. His doubts were heard several times since our departure, as the town is unheard of. I do not blindly believe Cyrus, but towns are being built all the time, especially near gold and oil sources. Besides, I am open to new experiences.

“Let us hope that has not changed,” I inquire. “Flagstaff is rising in the horizon. Keep going.”

We arrive shortly past noon. We eat and hydrate ourselves, then acquire the remaining supplies. After a strangely calm and uneventful afternoon of speaking to the locals, we settle in our room. It seemed economic to rent just one for the night, each of us having enough space and comfort. We converse for a while and share what little information we have gathered. I say what I know:

“I asked the Inn lady downstairs. She never heard of the Prospect and doubts its existence.”

“I spoke to some travelers from the northeast,” Con adds to my statement. “They said the same. For a town so promising, it does not have quite the gathering around it.”

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“You folks need faith,” Cyrus sighs. “No shame in not finding gold; we might someplace else.”

“Who told you about the town in the first place, Cyrus?” Otto interjects with his insufferable intonation. He is a second-generation German from Munich, whose family left Europe for a brighter life in Pennsylvania, where their kind is common. He grew up to become a salesman, but was never specific about his exact trade. When he heard about the prospecting business, Otto left Pennsylvania to try his luck in the western states. His success is, as of yet, still pending. As a salesman, he is in awe at the trade options of a truce territory between settlers and Navajo.

“Abraham, my mentor from my early prospecting years. When I started, he taught me everything he could about looking for and finding gold. The man is a natural talent. He participated in the California Gold Rush and the Pike’s Peak Gold Rush. After I started looking for riches on my own, he decided to keep providing me with potentially useful information.”

Cyrus Crawford, a hardened man with nerves of steel, fought in the War for the Confederacy, though his views do not align with his side in the conflict. Born and raised in the Deep South, Cy was just another pawn in just another war. After a few years of recovery at home in Texas, he joined Lady Justice. As the Deputy Town Marshal, Cy could have given Wyatt Earp a run for his money. He served the law for eight years, then entered the prospecting business. Following twelve successful years, he has made himself quite a name. Cy founded the group when he went around town in the search for fellow prospectors. That is how the four of us met.

“But how did *he* get the hint?” Sal inquires. Salvador Ignacio Francisco de Santiago y Rivera—a cluster of a name I personally find both amusing and confusing — moved to Prescott a few years ago to make money, leaving his wife behind in Presidio Paso del Norte. Understandably, he wishes to return as soon as possible with as much loot as possible — just like everyone else.

“He has been there, he said. Abe is a trustworthy fella, believe me that.”

“I *do* believe you, *jefe*. Was just curious.”

“Fair enough. Everybody now stop questioning the matter at hand,” he demands assertively.

“As you wish,” I say in a half-joking manner, changing the topic to avoid further tensions. “Con, Abby told me you are planning to move away. Is that right?”

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Abigail is my wife, and Cornelius Adalbert Fletcher, her brother. Quakers — preferably "Friends" — are heartily persecuted in the east, so their family moved west. We met and — come a few months — Abigail Fletcher became Abigail Daugherty. Con and I started doing small-time business together at every chance. When Cy told us about his hint, we joined in immediately.

"I will have to. Prescott has nothing to offer. Perhaps I will go to Phoenix. Everybody does, ever since the Territorial Legislature was moved there last year."

"Good idea," I answer absently, my mind drifting off. The three get engaged in conversation, while I lose myself in my thoughts. My attitude towards our goal has not changed a bit. In fact, I am more skeptical than ever before. I ignore it and go to bed. The others soon follow my lead.

We arise in the early morn, around seven. Unwilling to lose time, we have breakfast, pack up and leave Flagstaff. We are all unrested and still stiff from the walk, but we have to keep going. Keeping up yesterday's pace, we should reach the Prospect tomorrow evening — if it exists.

Coconino is a serene and picturesque woodland. We stop once to rest and drink from a creek. Otherwise, we are restlessly fueled by the greed of many Rushers before us. Though now is not the time of a Rush — at least nowhere in Arizona — we trust Cy and his informant on this one. Not much is said, only when I need to give directions or when Sal finds a possibly crucial track. Con stopped asking questions and Otto talks little in general. Cy is the quietest, not speaking beyond necessity. His focus and sincerity effectively glues the bunch into an organized group.

An hour or so after dawn, we call it a day and make a camp. Otto, Con, and I look for firewood, while Sal and Cy set up an alarm trap out of wire, a steel pot and a wooden switch on the earth. They also look for something edible, as we must save rations. We will be out here for a while. Hunting game was a fleeting matter of debate, but this region seems void of life and we agreed it would be a waste of time. The bigger sticks end up in a makeshift fence for yet more security. We are sitting around the campfire an hour later, eating rationed meat, berries and mushrooms.

The serene cinders of the fire is the only tune for a while, then it is broken by the coyote's cry, a harrowing howl echoing away into the night. I tremble, Con cowers, Otto ogles around and Sal sits up — but the eerie sound costs Cy barely one moment's notice in the returning silence.

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“Calm down, chickenshits. Coyotes never go near fires and groups of folks, and we have both.”

“Fear is a stranger to you, *Confederado,*” Sal chuckles, the atmosphere giving way to relief. “You have the cold of one, but not the dead gaze. How come?”

“When you fight with people who would kill to preserve enslavement, you have seen it all,” Cy mutters into the ceasing fire ahead. “Greenback is great, but it kills people before they die.”

The wise man’s words transform fear into both insecurity and melancholy, which we settle for. After the meal, we lay down on our packs. Weary as we are, Morpheus takes us right away.

Shortly before dawn, I awake to steps — conscious and calculated steps of either paws or of feet, crushing the leaves and branches on Coconino’s cold earth. My eyesight is useless in the dark. Evermore attentive, I lay down again. Sleep turns into a vain venture for the remaining hours.

In the early morn, when I finally decide that sleep is not going to return, I get up. Everybody else is awake to a degree. Cy seems to be the earliest riser, as he is already gathering his things. The others are still in the process of finding themselves again.

“Anyone else heard noises?” I ask as my nervous gaze scurries across the desolate domain.

“Nothing unusual.” Cy answers bluntly. The rest of the group is not yet in the state to respond. We pack up and get going, much earlier than we planned. Turns out everyone heard the sounds, resulting in a bad attempt at rest for all of us — well, save for Cy.

The journey continues. We consciously avoid the pre-made paths every now and then in order to walk in a more straightforward line northeast, so as to save time. Looks like it was worth it, for we are out of the woodlands by late afternoon. The trees, which were decreasing in numbers and size yesterday, make way for a canyon-esque landscape. Now we enter the Navajo Nation.

Conversations have been as sparse as the day prior, if not even more so. Silent tension is rising among the members of the group, but I bear it no mind. No use in getting caught up in doubts, or else we would not be going to a place which may not even stand before us once we arrive. The distance to the marked point on the map is reducing. I peek into the horizon and see a shape. A few minutes of walking later, I recognize the structures as buildings — we all do: It is a town.

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Then, out of nothing, something crosses our path — a coyote. We stand still in freezing fright. In a blur, Cy reflexively reaches for the handle of the revolver on his hip. The animal halts as well and turns its head into our direction. After what seems like a minute of sapient inspection, the creature resumes its lonesome walk in the twilight. Collective exhalation. Confederate Cy is carrying a six-shooter, Bandito Sal one of those huge bowie knives. Nobody else is armed. The need for violence has fortunately not arisen until now. Hopefully, that will not change.

A couple of hours later, we reach the town. Beside the entrance is a wooden post with a sign.

PROSPECT WESTFIELD

The whole group rejoices and laughs at the relief of finally knowing the town actually exists. Cy has been telling the truth all the time. He always does. We all thank him, but he tells us to cut the bullshit. Otto, standing the closest to the sign, gets distracted by a second look at it.

“Friends, do you see this?”

We do not know what he means until we gather around the post. Then it gets clear to all of us. Scratched over the name of the town with thin marks stands another word:

Diiyá

“Is that the Native’s way to call the place?” Sal wants to know. I turn towards Con, whose useful affinity for languages did not get lost on me. He started learning Navajo right after his family arrived in Arizona. I see the look on his face and assume that he already understands.

“Con, can you read this?”

He nods with a terrified mien.

“’Leave’.”

We are quiet for a couple of moments. I break the silence:

“Cy, did you not call this a peace zone?”

“I did and it is,” he gruffly retorts. “Or, well… it *should* be. Let us go inside and be careful.”

We trespass the gate. The saloon is not far and we enter, finding it to be very tidy and modern. However, what strikes us as odd is the absence of *anybody*: no receptionist, no workers, no one. We decide to go right up and see about any vacant rooms. All of them are. No trace of guests. The town must be freshly built. It strays far from the path, so any roads leading to and from it must still be in the construction process, explaining the lack of guests. That is what I tell myself.

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We get comfortable in the rooms — every man in his own, as there are enough to choose from. Except for Cy, everyone in the group is hesitant to close the door at first, doing so reluctantly. We are all aware there is no sign of life in this place, but neither are there any signs of a threat. I am not willing to ignore the dreadful message. But I still forget about it for the night.

The next day, I finally feel rather rested. The others also appear alert. Before we go to work, we go downstairs to see if someone showed up. Still nothing. We inspect the town up and down. It is a skeleton settlement, with eight of nine immaculate and clean objects evenly distributed left and right. There are six homes, the saloon, a bank and a sizable office at the center end. There is no dust or mud, no wind or crickets; just a town. We conclude that it is utterly deserted.

"*Puta madre*," Sal grunts angrily. "You led us to a fucking ghost town, *Confederado*."

Cyrus does not answer. Instead, he stares into the distance, the glimmer of focused thinking ablaze in his eyes. I would rather not get on Cyrus Crawford's bad side for two reasons: First, you might end up dead. Second, without his help, one is screwed. You might lose your life or his aid. And in a scenario where you delve into the unknown, that means one and the same.

"Do you know how this can be, Cy?" I carefully ask.

"Beats me. Something must have happened — but it does not resemble a shooting range."

He is right: No violence can have come about without traces. And one affecting a whole town's population? Also, if Sal did not find anything, we can be assured nothing like that was the case. Despite the disturbing odds, we decide to keep going. The question of whether the place is populated or not does not affect our mission, although it is an unforeseen occurrence.

Not even a mile north of the ghost town flows a creek, which I suspect is an offshoot from the Little Colorado River. We get it on, mining the stream bed deposits for any valuable material. Delicately and precise, we use gold pans to filter the minerals. The mineralization of the ground indicates the presence of potentially precious metals in both the region along the river as well as the hills nearby. But today, only the creek matters. The chances of success are good. Approximately three hours pass before one of us signals that he found loot.

"Hey, comrades!" Con shouts from afar. "How does this look?"

We interrupt our work to inspect his findings.

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“Fucking gold!” Otto exclaims. We erupt in joy; the first step of a prosperous quest for riches. Delaying the celebrations, we excavate as much as we can; everyone finds some gold.

Later that evening, we fete with moonshine and a satiating meal of cold chicken and potatoes; fresh from the tavern’s storage room. From an opportunistic perspective, the premises are ours. We are the only population, so no one can keep us from owning the Prospect. For that reason, Cy, Sal and Otto serve themselves from the shops, though that is a tad undue for Con and me.

Another uninterrupted night goes by. Today’s plan is to mine the surrounding hillside with our pickaxes and shovels. We go north again, slightly more east this time, along the path where the amount of mineralization on the ground increases steadily. We end up somewhere unexpected: Instead of finding hills, the remains of a cart track welcome us. After we follow it for a few minutes along the uneven and ever-changing terrain, it seriously leads to the entrance of a mine.

“I am just going to say it straight away,” I remark. “I have no idea what to expect anymore.”

“Abe did not tell me it is a mining town,” Cy adds.

“He seems to not have told you many things, *gringo*,” Sal answers provocatively

“Shut it, Mexican!” Cy hisses in anger. “Let us go inside and see what we find.”

Sal does not dig any further — wisely so. I feel a creeping nervousness rising inside me, like a malicious portent of inexplicable danger. I still go along, having no choice than to push forward, like the others. We collect pieces of wood from the debris on the ground for making torches, using flintstones from our packs to light them.

As we progress into the darkness, the feeling grows exponentially, the unease transitioning into complete paranoia. The mine leads far, but there is no cart in sight — neither is any sort of equipment or any traces of human beings for that matter. The air is getting more humid and dense after a while. We walk on, not intending to stop without finding something. *Anything*.

After almost an hour of slow walking, the walls take on a different hue, signifying minerals that appear at deeper levels of mines. Then, all of a sudden, the cart track gets cut off. The tunnel widens and heightens, the ground evens. We proceed, the walls getting gradually replaced by the silent darkness. Then we reach the end; and at the end are bones — many and many bones.

That one skeleton sits against the stone wall, with the clothing suggesting that it was a man. Now, a dead body in a mine is no truly unusual sight, yet the panic among us is almost

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tangible. Then we spread a bit inside the cavernous tomb and we see the full scale of the terror beneath: dozens and dozens of decaying dead, most of them fully skeletonized, the rest on the way.

“What in the hell is this?” Con whispers, his voice quivering with fear. We return to the first body, seeking security and comfort in the group. Cy kneels beside the body and inspects it. The collective light of our torches shines upon something on the wall that evaded my sight before. With dried blood, written in broad and thick letters, stands another word in Navajo:

m??ii

“Con?” I ask timidly, attempting to hide my horror, but audibly failing. “What does it mean?”

“I… I do not understand… I mean, I can read it, but…”

“What does it say, Con?!”

“‘Coyote’.”

Before anyone else reacts, Cy jumps up, his face void of color, as if he recognizes the remains.

“Go. Go! *Go*! We need to leave *now*!”

The panic combusts as we run, but even like this, my curiosity does not waver:

“Cyrus, what is happening?!”

“This is *Abraham*!”

Cy sprints faster than I would have thought possible for a man his age. We follow in a frenzy, running for our lives, faster than our lights reach, putting us in danger of crashing somewhere. We run for a full fifteen minutes, before we are out of breath. I stop, as do the others. I see some waning daylight shine through the entrance far away, but we need a break. Cy begs to differ.

“*Beat it*, for God’s sake! We are almost there!”

An alien and terrible sound rises in the dark below, an unholy fusion of a berserker scream and insane laughter. When Cyrus grabs his revolver and aims into the void, the echo vanishes and silence returns. We halt, waiting for the inevitable — but when nothing happens, we pace on. Then, as he turns around, Sal is suddenly snatched from behind and pulled into the nightmare. His receding death throes are accompanied by demonic roaring, a sound I have never heard before and will never forget. Shouting and crying, we hurry forth again, ignoring our fatigue. Cy, however, stands idle and fires three deafening blasts into the

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malefactor’s direction. Overtaking him and the haunting horror, we reach for the scarlet light of the incoming dusk.

Outside, we drop to the soil, worn out in body and spirit. As we come to our senses, Cy steps out of the mine at a snail’s pace, his visage framed in shadow by the twilight of the sinking sun.

“Did you see it?” I pant in panic. “Did you *kill* it?!”

He slowly lifts his head. Formerly concealed by the shade of his wide-brimmed Stetson hat — I now see his face and the blank, empty look in his eyes, and him staring into the distance with a sense of finality. Without losing stride, Cyrus lifts the barrel of his gun to his mouth and offs himself. His lifeless body falls behind, the wind carrying his famous hat off his destroyed head.

The three of us linger for several minutes, unable to grasp what just transpired. When we turn towards the town, we see it gone, without one trace that it ever existed. We pack up and leave. Fuck the gold. Fuck getting rich. We need to return home alive. Trying to rationalize the events only increases our terror. Whatever told Cyrus Crawford about this place was not his friend, but the thing that killed and impersonated him — and killed Sal. The same unspeakable entity whose mere sight made the coldest, most resilient son of a bitch I have ever met shoot himself. Now, I do not know for certain what the Navajo pray to, though it is certainly no mere animal. It must have been trapped underground, until miners accidentally released it into the world.

I, Timothy Obadiah Daugherty, will tell the story — if we make it back home. That is for certain. Those who believe it shall be wary. For those who do not: May God have mercy on their souls.

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