

My Pony on My Boat

Scout stepped up onto the treadmill fifteen minutes ago and is now in a lathered trot, setting the paddlewheel into motion. I am forced to man the tiller, not a prospect I relish as I have just opened a bottle of white wine and was hoping for a relaxed cocktail hour over a game of solitaire. I well know Scout needs his twice daily exercise, yet it does often cut into my own plans. Still, it's a beautiful late afternoon, large clouds puffed up in regal pride and the ocean a calm rippled plate of glass, and after slapping him fondly on the withers, I settle in at the aft bench with my chilled Sauvignon Blanc, guiding the *Kemo Sabe* toward the island of Culebra on the horizon, and let my mind wander to the strange set of events that has delivered us here.

The true beginning was perhaps ten years ago, 1870 or 71, when I had taken up the notion of exploring the western frontier to make a new start. It was then I first met Clayton Moore. He was a handsome man, for a Caucasian, tall and well-proportioned with a face, I'd soon learn, the white girls went for.

I had just tethered White Feller to the hitching rail and was about to enter a saloon in Shawnee, a place called Roy Roger's. I was new to this town and realized at once that I'd need to keep my wits about me, as I'd not seen another Native American anywhere on the streets.

A blubber-jowled miscreant slouched in a chair on the porch, the seat legs at a precarious angle, his shoulders and head leaning against the wall. Oddly, his Stetson—which

was resting on his lap—was red and bore a slogan I did not at that time have the inclination to decipher.

“White’s only,” he said, almost in a whisper, as if it might be a secret incantation.

I turned my full attention to him.

“I beg your pardon?”

A face full of fiery eruptions stared back. Then, he said, louder and with snarly conviction, “You heard me. Whites only. Get your Injun ass off the porch.”

I entered into a brief internal debate concerning the merits of sweeping the chair legs out from underneath him versus delivering a side-thrust kick to his grisly head, when boot heels clacked on the steps behind me, diverting my attention.

“He’s with me.”

I looked slowly over my shoulder. It was him. Clayton Moore. Though I would not know his name for yet another five minutes.

He pushed through the swinging doors and I followed, but not before throwing a hostile glance and a shrug at hog-jowls.

I joined Clayton Moore for a couple fingers of fire water on ice. I enjoy calling it fire water. Lends ethnic distinction to social situations, very much like wearing a headdress. Even a single feather in a strap of rawhide will do in most cases.

Clayton Moore introduced himself to me, stammering the way white guys do when they’re testing your ability to speak English. “Me, Clayton Moore...” Here he poked a finger into his sternum. “Lawman.” He pulled a silver star from his vest pocket. “Lawman,” he repeated.

“And you...” Of course, with this, he stuck his finger toward, but thankfully not into, my sternum.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Moore. My name is Jay Silverheels.” I held out my hand and in due course he shook it. “Mohawk. From Toronto, Ontario.”

“Ontario? You mean, like in Canada?”

“I don’t mean the lake.” I touched my eyebrow with a thumb.

He spat what passed for a chuckle, then fetched papers and a pouch from his other pocket and commenced to roll a cigarette. Not a habit I could ever imagine indulging in. Nor could I fathom the rationale others conjured up to justify inhalation of burning leaves. Of course, at the time I could have no notion that my descendants would someday smoke manufactured cigarettes while walking the erected iron girders of future skyscrapers. With hip flasks.

“Canada,” he mused. “Long ride. What brings you to Oklahoma?”

“Not the food.” I grinned, sorting out how much I wanted to tell this guy. I certainly wasn’t going to tell him I was on the lam after bilking some robber-baron clients out of a good chunk of their fortunes. “Some investments went bad. I needed a change of scene.”

I thought back to the horribly uncomfortable train ride from Toronto to Sioux City, and the livery man who, upon my arrival, eyed my three piece suit and asked if I’d ever ridden before. I’d played polo at Yale, but I wasn’t going to tell the livery man that. It did dawn on me though, that I’d need to get rid of those clothes.

“I can ride,” I said. “How much for the pony?”

“White Feller? Fifty dollars.”

“White Feller? What sort of name is that for a pony? He’s a pinto for chrissake.”

“Beats me. I didn’t name him. Some guy name of Striker sold him to me.”

I’d stashed most of my dough in an offshore account but had kept a couple thousand for walking around money. I paid him the fifty and led the horse over to Evan’s General Store. The owner, Dale, gave me a three dollars credit for my suit toward a full set of buckskins, a saddle, bridle, blanket roll and a few sundries. And a Winchester and a Colt.

Now, at Roy’s, Clayton Moore clacked his glass on the table. “You want another drink?”

“No thanks,” I said.

He ordered one for himself and we small-chatted for a few minutes. He downed the rest of his drink, stubbed out his smoke on the floor with a boot heel and got to his feet. That’s when I noticed the silver bullets in his gun belt. “I’m going across the street to Kitty’s to get some chow. You want to join me?”

I started to stand up and realized that my sleeve fringe had gotten tangled in the crook of the chair arm. “Sure. I’ll be right there.” I struggled to free my sleeve, then followed, the chair skittering behind for a few minutes before totally releasing the fringe.

The lowlife on the porch still occupied the chair but had fallen asleep. I espied, then snatched, a Brown Recluse from its web at the porch eave and tossed into his hat. If Clayton Moore saw it he did not indicate as much.

At Kitty’s Diner, Clayton skipped the menu perusal and ordered the slow-cooked baby back ribs. I still hadn’t gotten used to the time change so my tastes were running more toward lunch fare. I settled for a grilled cheese with free range bacon on Jewish rye. Hand cut fries.

“I have a proposition for you, Jay.” He wiped barbecue sauce off his mouth then his fingers, stroking each one individually. “I’ve just inherited a silver mine in Paoli. Think I might need a hand convincing the court of my identity, though. Thought maybe you could do me a little favor.”

I feigned nonchalance. “Like what?”

“Ride up to the court in Oklahoma City with me and testify as to my identity.”

“Why would the probate court judge believe me?”

“You’ve got your Native American photo ID, don’t you? Your Res Card?” He tossed his napkin onto the red and white checkered tablecloth. “Course, I’d make it worth your while.”

I barely knew the guy and he wanted me to testify as to his identity? I dragged the last French fry through what remained of my ketchup. “How worth it would you make it?”

“I see you as a guy who likes a big return, Jay. What would you say to a thousand dollars?” He eyed the fry covetously.

I hovered it near my mouth. “Maybe I should get a stake in the mine. You know, be an investor.”

“Maybe. I’ll think on it.” He seemed to take on an angry tone. “You going to eat that thing?”

#

We each got a room upstairs at Kitty’s. He had at least one visitor. Probably two, as it sounded like two distinct female giggles. There were the usual skin slapping and bedspring noises, some squeals and groans then finally the unlatching and latching of the door and the stockinged tip-toeing down the hall. White people can be so overly civilized at times.

Next morning, I waited at the breakfast table for Clayton Moore to arrive. He appeared a bit hungover, but cleanly shaven and attired in a freshly pressed Ranger's shirt. For my part, I had donned my newly habitual buckskin outfit and moccasins but had changed into my last set of clean underwear and a fresh headband.

"Morning, Clayton Moore."

"Morning, Tonto. Did you sleep okay?"

"Tonto? Where the hell did that come from?"

"Came to me in a dream. It was either Tonto or Kato. So, I settled for Tonto." He scraped a chair across the floor and dropped into it.

"Wait. You're giving me a Spanish nickname?"

"Spanish?"

"Look it up."

"Whatever. Have you decided if you're in?" He looked over at the waitress who was flipping jacks on the griddle. "Coffee, Rita?"

"Sure thing, *Quien No Sabe*."

"*Quien No Sabe*?" Fluent in Spanish, I was shocked at this insult.

Clayton shrugged. "Yeah. Kemo Sabe. Potawatomi for trusted friend."

"Let you in on a little secret here, *Kemo*. Rita over there is Mexican, not Potawatomi."

His look was quizzical for a moment, then the coffee arrived. He took a slug, then rattled the cup into its saucer. "You decide if you're riding with me to Oklahoma City?"

"What's my cut?"

"I can give you fifteen percent. All you need to do is swear my name is John Hart."

“Now that I know that, you’ll need to make it twenty-five percent.”

He shot me a squinty-eyed glance and skewed his lips sideways. “Twenty.”

“Fine.” I scraped the last of the Benedict sauce from my plate and spooned it into my mouth. “I’ll get White Feller and your horse from the stables.” I stood.

“White Feller? That’s your horse’s name?” He got to his feet and twisted his pistol belt slightly to the right. “Shit, that won’t work.”

“What? Now you want to rename my pony?”

“Got to. Doesn’t sound authentic.” He snatched his Stetson off the table. “How about Scout?”

“Whatever. Get something to eat. I’ll meet you out front.”

#

We’d only been on the trail about two hours when dust in the distance attracted our attention.

“Morning stage from Oklahoma City,” Clayton said.

“Maybe we should give them wide berth to avoid their dust.”

“Nah. Let’s dismount and wait until they get past.”

We moved off to a copse of Desert Willows, hitched the horses and waited for the stage. I stepped to the other side of the copse to relieve myself and when I returned, damned if Clayton wasn’t sporting a mask. It covered just his cheeks and nose. He looked like the negative impression of a cabinet photograph of a raccoon.

“What the hell...”

He slipped his Winchester from the saddle straps and moved over to the trail as the stage approached, the four horse team in a lather, the coach bucking and twisting in a tortured course.

He took a bead on the coach. My god, was he going to shoot? I'd read enough about this sort of thing that I knew he'd go for the Shotgun and not the Whip. But to my astonishment, when the coach was nearly on top of him, Clayton shot the Whip through the throat, the man's head unhinging and crashing back into the strong box.

The reins flew free and the team lurched, then stampeded, racking and snapping the singlebars from the whippetree. The horses were free then, and galloped down the road, their traces flying behind them like shredded black capes. The coach tumbled down the road shoulder, one wheel caught a large rock and the whole box listed, then slowly collapsed on its side, door and panels cracking with the sound of a bull whip. There were moans and screams from inside the carriage and then suddenly the *whack whack* of two rifle shots. A tree next to me took both rounds, the bark shredding, pulp blistering. I kneeled and unholstered my Colt, concentrating on the coach. The Shotgun was hunkered behind the boot.

"Eat lead, you goddamn Injuns!" He shouldered his rifle and peeled off two more rounds. Even though I'd had nothing to do with this entire mess, I felt it would be imprudent of me to try to reason with the man and crept behind a tree.

From my vantage point I could see Clayton walking slowly up behind the man. When he was within fifteen feet he aimed and fired his Winchester, blowing a hole the size of a hen's egg in the back of the Shotgun's head. "Eat *silver*, asshole." He strode to the mostly shattered strongbox, kicked it open and yanked out the cash bag.

He dropped the bag next to the coach, lifted open the door, pointing his rifle down through the opening. "Get out." He stepped back and a man in a business suit hoisted himself out and then in a helpful, even if not dignified, way, he assisted a young woman in a wide-bustled dress out and to the ground.

By this time, I was approaching the wreck. The woman caught sight of me, blanched, screamed twice, then yelled, "Wilfred, it's a savage! Oh my God, Wilfred don't let that filthy animal near me."

Clayton wagged the tip of his rifle at her. "Shut up and take off your jewelry. And you, Lord Fauntleroy, I'll have your purse, rings and watch."

They did as he told them, though not without considerable whimpering, muttering, and tears. I was astonished. I had finally grasped the brutal gravity of the last few minutes.

"I thought you said you were a lawman. You just killed two men in cold blood. Are you out of your mind?"

He kept his attention on the two travelers. "Alternative definition of law, Tonto. This is the law of survival. We need some pocket cash." He wagged the rifle tip. "Put that stuff into the bag, girl."

She held her hand out for her companions' belongings, then bent to drop them, along with her jewelry, into the open satchel.

"The ring too." Clayton growled.

In a look of abject misery, she twisted the band off her finger. Two black sapphires stared out like rattler's eyes from each side of a large diamond as she dropped it in the bag.

"Are you going to kill us?" She bit her lower lip and started to cry again.

“Don’t have much choice, do I? You could identify us.”

“No. No, don’t you see. We could never identify you. You’re wearing a mask.”

Clayton turned his gaze to me. “What about him? He’s not wearing a mask.”

The man chimed in. “Right. But, you know, they all look alike.”

“Hmm. I don’t know. Seems easier just to shoot you.”

This brought about full-throated sobs from the young woman.

“Clayton, you can’t do this,” I said. I hated using that beseeching tone of voice, but you do what it takes, you know?

He stared at me for a long moment. “Okay. But it’s on you. And you’ll need to give me back ten percent of our deal.”

“Fine. Let’s go.”

Clayton picked up the cash bag and strode off toward the horses.

I paused for a minute with the victims. “You folks will be okay. Just wait over there in the shade until the next stage comes along.”

The young woman put her hands on her hips. “And you can shove it where the sun doesn’t shine.”

Ahh, white girls.

#

We arrived in Oklahoma City two days later, the sun baking the whole town into a cornbread-thick stupor.

He reined Silver over to the first saloon we came to. “Let’s get a drink.”

“You go ahead, Clayton” I said. “I’ve got some business at the Indian Affairs Office. I’ll meet you back here later.”

“Fine. But it’s time to drop the “Clayton”. I’m John Hart now.”

“Right. John Hart.”

It took me two hours and a couple hundred dollars to get my papers updated and stamped at the Affairs Office. The moccasins were killing me. You know. No arch support. I had dinner and returned to the saloon where I’d left Clayton. He was at a table with a couple other sots, and had a dance girl on his knee.

“Hey, Tonto! Come on over here and meet my friends.” He seemed pretty loaded. “How do you like my new outfit?” He stood, wobbly legged and the dance hall girl tumbled to the floor. He had on a cheap three piece suit. “Got to be looking my best for our little performance tomorrow.”

I offered the girl a hand and pulled her to her feet. “Uh, John. Just a quick word in private if we might.”

“We’re among friends. We have no secrets.”

I shrugged. “Just want to make sure our *belongings* are safe. You want me to keep them with me tonight?”

He stared at me, one eye half closed, the other eyebrow raised. “Don’t you go worrying about our *belongings*. They’re locked up in the post office safe.”

I could see this might turn into a whiskey-laced tirade. “Fine. I’m going to turn in. What time do you want to meet at the courthouse tomorrow?”

“Looks like it could be a late night. How about eleven?”

“That works.”

By noon the next day, I was riding north. I'd had it with the idea of making a go of it in the new west. The creak of the saddle and the click of the bit in the horse's mouth was not all I had imagined it might be. With any luck I'd be in New York in a week or so, where I'd buy a sail boat and make for some small island in the Caribbean.

It had been a very busy morning for me that last day in Oklahoma City. I'd risen early, had a big breakfast and arrived at the court by nine. I grin now as I think of Clayton arriving there at eleven only to find that Mr. John Hart had already claimed his stake earlier that morning with a freshly stamped Indian Affairs ID. My business had concluded there much earlier that morning and afterwards I made a brief stop at an attorney's office to sign over the silver mine to Whip's and Shotgun's newly widowed wives. Then, my timing perfect, as at that moment Clayton was stammer-shouting at the judge, off to Clayton's room to change into his clothes and ransack his saddlebags for his mask. I stopped very briefly at the post office to make a withdrawal, then returned to Clayton's room once again to change back into my buckskins. My final stop was the stage company office to get a look at the passenger list and leave a small parcel for a Miss Daisy Bellwether, albeit one piece of jewelry less than I imagined she would have liked. Then north.

#

Now, aboard the Kemo Sabe, I pick the ring off my chest, lift it on its leather neck strap into view. The sapphires *do* look very much like rattler's eyes.

Scout has stepped down from the treadmill and the boat is slowing. I'm thinking about lofting some cloth, as a breeze has sallied, and I'd like to make landfall before dark. For one thing, the ice block in the forward hold is all but gone. Nothing worse than warm Sauvignon Blanc. But my plans for setting the sails change as Silver steps onto the treadmill and slowly breaks into a canter.

I give him a good-natured slap on the rump. "Hi-Yo, Silver! Away!"

And we are.