

Johnny Yesno

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This is an excerpt from an old Weird Western novel I was working on back in the late 1990s. I liked this chapter the best and I wanted to see if anyone else thought it has merit before I consider re-doing the novel in a new direction. It's the introduction story of an autistic savant in the wild west. The illustration is not mine.



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Chapter Seven; Idiot Child

Johnny Yesno leaned on the pick and drew his breath. The worn grip of the tool reached well above his waist, but he handled it with ease. A good three hundred pounds of rock and ore lay in a heap before him, waiting to be loaded into the cart and brought up to the surface. Pap Gundersen would be pleased. Johnny hoped Gundersen would be up and able to help him sort the worthless rock from the precious metal that lay within.

A week ago, the old man had fallen down in the mine. Johnny dragged him, with much difficulty, up to their shack and put him to bed. He had slept for two days and when he woke, he was changed. He talked as if he was dead drunk, and could not move the left side of his face and body. Johnny could no longer understand him, but he knew that Pap Gundersen would be mad if Johnny quit their mining and waited for him to get better. The mine was everything to the old man. So Johnny worked all day every day on the vein of ore they'd uncovered. In the evenings, he'd go back to the shack and care for the animals and clean and feed Gundersen. Johnny felt strange taking care of Gundersen. The old man had always looked after him before, made sure his overalls were mended and his face was clean, cooked for him and doctored his scrapes.

Rafe Gundersen wasn't really his Pap, but he was the closest thing Johnny had ever had. One day just outside Fort Griffin, Texas, nearly two years ago, they had found each other. Gundersen was a hide-hunter at the time, and he'd been accosted outside a whiskey tent by a loafer Indian, a poor wretch fallen to drink. The loafers had given up allegiance to any particular tribe. They lazed around forts and trading posts, begging for a handout. They were hated by whites and other Indians alike. This particular specimen approached Gundersen, who was passing by the tent with his ponderous bulk balanced precariously atop his claybank nag.

The loafer was dragging a small dirty boy. The child was clad in a filthy mixture of Indian garb and white man's castoffs. His greasy mud-colored hair was done in ragged braids. He was either a breed or a white child captured by the loafer some time before he'd given up the lance for the bottle. By means of signs and pidgin English, the Indian had made it clear that the boy was for sale for whatever it took for him to stagger into the tent and buy a dipper of firewater.

Gundersen was a softhearted man, and he paid the Indian a silver dollar for the boy. He took him back into town and got him cleaned up, bought him a meal and a pair of overalls. He looked to be about thirteen, but small and stunted in his growth. With his hair shaved to rid him of lice, his ears stuck out a country mile. The boy could say nothing but yes and no. Gundersen tried out what Kiowa and Comanche he knew, but the kid only said yes or no to whatever he asked. The same went for Swedish and Spanish.

He took Johnny along on his next hunt, and taught him how to skin a buffalo. He tried again and again to get the boy talking, but all he ever got was yes or no. He resigned himself to the fact that the kid was never going to be much of a conversationalist.

Finally, Gundersen gave up and named the boy Johnny Yesno. He wrote something on a piece of buffalo hide and gave it to Johnny, telling him to show it to anyone with a kindly face if something should happen to Gundersen. Johnny said yes. He treasured that scrap of hide and carried it everywhere, tucked in the bib pocket of his overalls.

Johnny had hidden talents, though. Gundersen entered the tent one evening to find that Johnny had gotten hold of a pencil and a ledger book from deep in the old man's packs. The kid had drawn Gundersen from memory, and not even a box camera could have captured his likeness better. From then on, Gundersen had

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made a point of adding pencils and paper to their supply list. Johnny spent the evening hours of every day turning out amazing sketches of hide hunter's life. The buffalo seemed to charge off the page. The guns he drew looked as real and lethal as Gundersen's Sharps .50. The hunters looked ready to spit a chew and launch into a tall tale.

One day, Gundersen let Johnny try a few shots with the Sharps. Not at a buffalo, just at some old airtights he'd propped up out on the prairie. The boy hit the cans from any distance, dead center, standing, kneeling or prone. He was a natural born marksman, and he loaded, aimed and fired in a fraction of the time it took Gundersen. Until the old man gently broke him of the habit, Johnny would jump up and caper and prance like a buffalo calf after each hit. He worked the singleshoot weapon almost as fast as a Winchester. He placed extra cartridges between his knuckles, like long brass fingers, and transferred them easily to the rifle's smoking breech. There was no explanation. His skill, like his art, was a God given gift. Gundersen took him out as a shooter on the next hunt. Their yield more than tripled. The boy loaded and fired until the rifle was hot enough to burn his hand, bringing down a buff with each shot, then he pissed down the barrel to cool it and did it over again.

Gundersen let the boy shoot full time and relegated himself to skinning duties, but he was old and stiff and the work was hard. He hired a couple of skinners and bought a brand new Sharps for Johnny. With the two of them shooting, Lord, how the money rolled in. Gundersen was rich for the first time in his life, and he owed it all to Johnny Yesno. "Best damn dollar I ever spent," he'd often say, ruffling the boy's tousled hair fondly.

But as itâs said, all good things must come to an end. Gundersen and Johnny returned to camp one day from a scouting trip to find their tents burning. Don and Andy, the skinners, lay nearby. Each man had so many arrows in him that they looked like a pair of porcupines. They had been butchered and scalped. The Comanche and Kiowa were growing tired of losing their livelihood to the hide men. The buffalo business had turned deadly.

Gundersen called it quits. He buried the skinners and collected what remained of his gear, and he and Johnny drew their money from the bank and headed south. Gundersen was at loose ends. He was the kind of man who shouldn't be rich, and with no routine to keep to he began to drink and gamble and frequent whorehouses. Every night, the old man would head out to the bars. Johnny would say no, but Gundersen didn't listen. They were soon down to their last three hundred dollars, out of several thousand.

They met a strange man in a saloon in El Paso one night, who was dressed all in black and even wore a pair of dark sun-goggles. The man told Gundersen that he had a little silver mine hidden in the hills just over the border, a few day's ride. He showed them a handful of nuggets he'd pulled right out of the wall. Sure sign of a rich vein just a little deeper in. He was going to have to sell, because his poor old mother back east had fallen ill, and he had to rush home to her. He said it was a damn shame, because the mine was sure a winner. All it would take was just a little more time, and it was bound to pay off. He really had to sell, though, because he didn't have the cash to get back to Boston. He'd never be able to live with himself if he didn't see his dear mother once more. For three hundred dollars, he was willing to turn it over, lock, stock and barrel; tools, supplies and all. He even had a few sticks of dynamite down there.

Gundersen was quite drunk. He reached into his shirt and drew out his wallet. Johnny was at his elbow, saying no, no, no. He had a bad feeling about the man, but of course, he couldn't put it into words. Gundersen pushed the boy away. That was the only time he'd ever raised a hand to Johnny. He agreed to pay the man on receipt of the mine, and the next morning, they all headed down to the diggings together. When Gundersen was satisfied, the man in black took the money, tipped his hat and rode away.

The work in the mine was backbreaking. Gundersen knew a little about mining, but much of the labor was beyond him. He spent most of the days in the shack, sweating out the booze under the tin roof. He had gone

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dry the minute they took over the mine. Johnny worked the pick all day, returning in the evening to draw, and listen to the old man talk. Gundersen said things would be different this time, when they struck it rich. Johnny believed him.

One day, Johnny uncovered the beginnings of a shiny, beautiful vein of yellow metal. He dropped the pick and raced up to the shack, "Yes!", he hollered, "Yes, yes yes!"

"What the hell, boy? What's the damn fuss about?" asked Gundersen, hitching up his suspenders.

Johnny was leaping from foot to foot. "Yesyesyesyesyes!", he shouted.

"Did you find it, son? Did you find the silver? Did yeâ strike the mother lode?" Gundersen bent over the boy, placing his hands on his shoulders to still him.

Johnny stopped bouncing. "No!" he cried, but his face was happier than ever.

"Goddamn, Johnny, sometimes I wish you could talk like a normal human being. Just what's eating you? I hope you're not playing tricks on your old Pappy."

Johnny looked around in frustration. Then his face lit up like a sunrise. He stabbed out one dirty finger, right into Gundersen's mouth. He rammed it flush against the old man's gold front tooth. "YES! YES! YES!" he roared.

"Oh, Sweet Jesus, Johnny, you found *gold*? How in hell...? Leave it to an idiot child to find gold in a silver mine! Lead the way, sonny!"

The two of them raced back to the mine. Gundersen was red faced and panting by the time they reached the gleaming streak in the wall. Johnny Yesno capered like a circus clown, pointing at the metal and babbling that one word over and over.

"Hold that damn light still, Johnny. I can't see a goddamn thing with you hopping around like a sick frog." Gundersen squinted closely at the color in the rock. He reached out and rubbed it, holding his finger close to his eyes. Then he bent over and licked the vein of metal. He straightened slowly.

Johnny stood stock-still. He was so happy he couldn't bear it. At last they were going to have all the things Pap Gundersen had promised.

"Rooked, by God! Pyrite! Fool's gold for a fool, Johnny!" Gundersen's face turned purple. He swept off his hat and dashed it against the rock. He took a step toward the boy, and then he fell over, slow and steady, like a toppling tree.

Since then, Johnny had kept on working. He picked at the vein all morning and loaded up the ore cart every afternoon. He worked so hard that nothing could distract him. Then he'd struggle out of the mine with the heavy cart and go to check on the old man. He intended to keep it up until Gundersen was able to sort out the gold. Johnny figured they were already rich, but more wealth sure couldn't hurt. Gundersen had called it fool's gold, but Johnny wasn't selfish. Johnny intended to share every cent's worth with the old man.

He sat down on the mine floor and poured a tin cup of stew from a battered bucket. He held it over the tiny flame of his lantern to warm it. The stew was Johnny's specialty. He had invented the recipe after Gundersen took ill. He put in a can each of tomatoes and peaches, some salt pork, dried apples, and coffee beans, with a few dried chili peppers for flavor. It wasn't as good as Gundersen's, but Johnny was proud of it anyway.

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Johnny was raising the cup to his lips when a huge invisible hand lifted him up and slapped him against the wall. There was a mighty bang and the lantern went out. Johnny lay stunned for a long time, then lifted himself gingerly, checking his arms and legs to see if he was still all there. His forehead smarted and his face was wet, but he was otherwise intact. Choking on dust, he found the lantern. The glass was smashed. Johnny felt around a bit more and got hold of his pick. Gundersen was going to be so mad!

Johnny groped his way to the exit. Dust fell from the ceiling above him. The mouth of the mine was clogged with rock. Fortunately, the damage was limited to the last ten feet before the outside. There was a smell of burnt powder in the air. Johnny clambered up the slope of rubble and began to dig. He noticed that the rocks made no sound as he rolled them behind him. All he could hear was a high-pitched ringing. He spent a long, long time moving rocks. His hands became swollen and bloody, and every now and then the pile would shift and Johnny was afraid he'd be crushed to death.

Just when he was about to give up, he moved one last rock and saw the stars above him and breathed the cool, fresh air. He had sat down to his soup at noon, and from the sky he saw it was now almost midnight. In the faint light, he noticed a black scorch mark around the entrance of the mine. He sucked in his thin belly and wriggled through. There were a lot of boot tracks in the dust and they led up the hill to the shack.

Johnny dragged his weary bones up the hill. He noticed that the corral was open and his mule and Gundersen's horse were gone. Maybe the old man had been so mad at Johnny for wrecking the mine that he'd up and left him! Johnny mustered his strength and ran to the shack. The door stood open on its old leather hinges. Johnny went inside.

The shack was a mess, and far more so than usual. Their belongings were tossed all over the place. Gundersen's bunk was empty, and soaked with blood. Johnny saw the old man's red footprints where he'd gotten up and walked outside. Johnny was relieved. At least Gundersen was feeling better at last. He'd obviously coughed up all that bad blood, which was making him sick, and gone into town for supplies. Their stocks of everything were running low. Then Johnny remembered that Gundersen wouldn't have had any money to buy anything! All they had in the way of wealth was Johnny's gold. Maybe the other men whose tracks he'd seen outside had given the old man some money, but Johnny couldn't be sure.

Johnny ran back to the mine and wriggled inside. Just then, his ears popped and he could hear again. He realized he couldn't see anything, and returned to the shack for another lantern. Back in the mine, he picked up a few manageable chunks of gold and carried them out to the shack. He gathered up what food he could find and stuffed it into his pillowcase along with the gold and his paper and pencils. He made sure his scrap of hide was safe in his bib pocket.

On impulse, Johnny went out back to the tool shed and checked the dynamite crate. There were three brown paper sticks left in the crate, which was hidden far in the back. Johnny looked to the shelf at the door. The two sticks the old man had placed there for use in the mine were gone. Johnny thought for a while. Gundersen must have blown up the mine, maybe to keep it safe while he was gone. Johnny couldn't figure it out, but he was sure Gundersen had a good reason. Johnny just wished he'd told him about it first. He took the last three sticks, got the blasting caps and coiled fuse from the shack, and added them to his bundle.

He filled his canteen from the water barrel and eased his Sharps .50 out from under his bunk. Johnny loved his Sharps, and took better care of it than he did of himself. Gundersen had wanted to sell it when cash got tight, along with his own, but Johnny refused. He filled his cartridge belt with bullets, took up the rifle, canteen and pillowcase and walked barefoot into the desert, one eye on the horizon, and one on the tracks.

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