

The Outlaw and the Apache (Mundayk's Short Story Challenge)

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It was the last bank Tom planned on holding up and then he would settle down with Rosa in Mexico. His short ride from El Paso to the Rio Grande changes everything for Tom when he encounters an Apache Indian in the desert.



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He rode across the plains on his appaloosa. Dust trailed and swirled in the air as they galloped away. The sun would soon be setting and he drew a deep sigh of relief as he made his way across the open range. It seemed he had once more eluded the law and now with the gold and money he had stolen from the bank in El Paso he was set for life. All the years of bank robberies would come to an end. He pointed his horse toward the Mexican border and the two pushed on racing to freedom.

The horse and rider made their way effortlessly across the desert swiftly. Hot, acrid air seemed to try to steal his breath as they made the trek to Mexico where Rosa would be waiting for him. Still feeling uneasy about his narrow escape Tom took a moment to turn in the saddle and look behind him. He could see nary a trace of a posse.

“That’s good,” he said to his horse pulling in the reins and dropping the pace down to a canter, “Seems we outdistanced them fella.”

Tom grabbed his canteen and took a long swallow of water. Taking off his kerchief he saturated it sparingly with some of the water and wiped the sweat from his forehead. It would be a short ride to the Rio Grande and he paced his horse so they would be there sometime by the next day.

As the pair traversed their way across the wasteland of sand, rock, and cactus plants Tom reflected on his life. He remembered the beatings his father had subjected him to and his mother who was part Apache watching in silence until the act was completed. She would never interfere while the beatings took place and even afterward when Tom tried to extract comfort his mother remained cold and distant.

“Better dry it up, son,” she would say to him, “Your Pa will get you good if he sees you crying.”

Tom had grown up tough and hard. The white children could never accept him, because he was after all part Apache, and his mother’s tribe offered no welcoming arms. So he had lived a life of solitude and isolation always feeling he was no one. Tom once he reached the age of sixteen ran away from home. He hooked up with a gang of outlaws and soon became a part of their clan. They robbed and pillage every small town within

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a twenty mile radius. Even though Tom joined them and they taught him how to ride and shot, he never felt comfortable around the group of bandits.

He left the group after a hold up at a small bank in Laredo. Up until that fateful day no one had ever been killed. An over zealous banker took it upon himself to shot and wound one of the gang members. Chaos ensued and soon three people including a woman and the banker lay dead or dying. Two days after the incident Tom left his comrades and with his share of the money headed for Mexico. He found all a man could want in Rosa. She was his heart's desire and more. They took some of Tom's booty and bought a small ranch just outside of Juárez where they planned on raising a family. Money soon got tight and short, so Tom would from time to time cross the border and holdup a bank. He was never greedy or careless and Tom never saw the need in injuring or killing anyone.

This had been his last trip across the border to steal. Soon Tom and Rosa would be able to live off what the land provided once he bought a few head of cattle and some other livestock. He could see his woman's smile and feel the silkiness of her long dark hair tickling his nose. Her scent rose up from the desert he was riding through and a sense of peace and longing overcame him.

“Ah Rosa,” Tom sang to his horse and the desolate terrain he traveled through, “It will be so good to hold you again.”

Twilight approached and the cool night air sent a shiver up Tom's spine. He would make camp just ahead and cross the river at dawn. Thoughts of Rosa and their life together caused a flood of emotions to run through him. As the day waned and nightfall advanced, Tom saw the glow of a campfire just ahead.

“Let's go take a look,” he said to his ride, “Wonder who would be out here this time of the evening?”

As Tom neared the fire he heard chanting and even though he had not spent much time among his mother's tribe, he knew well the sound that he was hearing. It was the song of the dead, a ritual performed for the dead or dying by the Apache. He could see the Apache warrior as he drew closer to the fire's glow. Though the desert air had grown colder the warrior adorned with a traditional black mask, chanted and danced around the blazing fire his brown skin beaded with sweat. Just as suddenly as the chanting had started it stopped and the warrior turned in Tom's direction.

“Looks like trouble ahead,” Tom whispered to his horse, “Maybe this was not such a good idea after all.”

The Indian instead of reaching for his weapons, which lay next to a blanket spread on the desert sand, motioned Tom forward in a friendly manner.

“Da go Te',” the warrior called to Tom, “Come rest here by the fire, my brother.”

Hesitant at first to approach Tom studied the Apache with a keen eye. He did not appear to pose a threat, but with the Apache one never knew. Although Tom's mother was part Apache, Tom still felt out of place among her people. The night air continued to get colder as stars began to fill the heavens and the moon spread its ghostly mantle across the wasteland.

After assessing the situation and deciding the Indian posed no real danger Tom raised his hand and returned the greeting, “Da go Te'! I come in peace.”

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The warrior motioned for Tom to come closer to the fire. An aroma of fresh meat roasting enticed Tom's growling belly. Slowly, still keeping a wary eye on the Apache, Tom dismounted and inched toward the fire's warmth.

"Sit," the Indian warrior said in broken English, "I have rabbit cooking. Join me, brother."

"Thank you kindly," Tom replied as the warrior handed him a good portion of his kill.

The meat though not quite done tasted heavenly. Tom wolfed down what the Apache had handed him with gusto. His new friend handed Tom a gourd used for carrying water and Tom took a long deep drink.

"My name's Tom," he said to the warrior wiping some of the liquid from his chin, "Much obliged for sharing your supper."

"I am Nantan Lupan, the grey wolf," he replied taking a drink as well, "It is good to have a companion for supper."

Tom stared into the fire and for a moment it felt as if the world had disappeared. A lone coyote howled to the moon in the distance. An odd sort of feeling began to manifest itself in Tom's brooding thoughts.

"What brings you here to this spot?" Tom asked looking at the Apache warrior with curiosity.

"I am here to help you on your journey," Nantan Lupan replied with a wry smile on his face, "I have been waiting for you."

A feeling of panic gripped Tom and he started to reach for his revolver. Nantan Lupan waved his hand as if to say there was no need for his intended act of self defense. Tom relaxed slightly though his hand remained on his pistol's handle in the event the Indian jumped him.

"Help me on my journey?" Tom replied standing up and glaring at Nantan Lupan, "What are you talking about? I think I can find my way to Juárez just fine. I don't need a scout."

"You won't be going to Juárez," the Apache said under his breath, "You see brother, you are dead. They shot you in the back as you left El Paso. I am here to take you with me."

The earth seemed to drop out from under him and with a thud Tom found himself back in a sitting position.

"Are you crazy?" Tom screamed at the Apache, "How can I be dead? I am sitting here with you not an hour from the Rio Grande. We just ate supper together. If you mean to kill me, good luck, I'm pretty good with my six-shooter."

"They shot you in the back and got your horse when you were riding out of El Paso," Nantan Lupan replied empathically, "Take your shirt off and you'll find the bullet hole. Then go and check your horse. They shot him through the heart."

In disbelief Tom removed his shirt and there he indeed spotted the tell tale black markings of gunpowder residue and a hole where a bullet had pierced his clothing. He stared at the Apache with a quizzical look as if he still did not understand what was happening.

Nantan Lupan motioned for Tom to inspect his horse. Tom reluctantly made his way to where he had left his horse. With his right hand he brushed across the animal's chest and there just as the Apache had said was

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the bullet hole. His horse whinnied as Tom traced the spot with his right forefinger. Tom stood motionless. His face had gone an ashen grey color as he thought about the things he had just learned.

“Is this death then?” Tom asked Nantan Lupan still not sure if all he had told him was real.

“Yes, brother,” the Apache answered a tone of sadness in his voice, “You will remain here with those who would not accept you in life. We will ride the plains eternally.”

“I can’t be dead,” Tom choked out the words and shook his head, “What about Rosa? She needs me and this money. She’s waiting for me in Mexico.”

“It will be taken care of,” Nantan Lupan reassured Tom, “Come, we must go now.”

They mounted their horses and rode westward into the desert.

Two days later a young Apache boy knocked on a door at the small ranch just outside of Juárez. He had a saddlebag slung across his shoulder which he handed to the woman who opened the door. The boy offered no explanation of how the saddlebag had come into his possession.

“He is with his people in the desert and won’t be coming back,” the boy stated to the woman and then the Apache boy left as quickly as he appeared.

Rosa never married after she found out Tom was dead. His body was never recovered and his horse never turned up anywhere. Rosa used the money to maintain the ranch the two of them had hoped to live on.

The town folk of Juárez stayed clear of Rosa as much as they could. They thought she was a witch, because many a night up until the day Rosa died, she would ride into the desert late at night and cross the Rio Grande. The town’s citizens were not sure why Rosa did what she did, but they believed she went to visit the spirits that roamed the range.

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