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Father and Son

JACOB BERGMAN

Dust hissed through the knee-high grass and eddied into hot convulsing columns of grit that prickled Albert's face and made him grimace and wipe powdery mucus out of the corners of his eyes with his kerchief. He rubbed his lips and spat. Grains of chalky dirt ground between his molars. He spat again, then squinted at the plain from beneath the punctured shade of a sagging leather brim. Beyond his father riding ahead the earth sprawled in an undulating mat of baked grass and then bulged with rock-studded hills made gray by the distance and the dust. Above him the sun shone with no clouds to filter its heat.

Albert loosened the straps on his saddlebag. The leather was hot. He lifted the flap open and reached inside and pulled out a wooden canteen of water. The cork released with a squeal. Albert drank. Sparkling beads traced wet veiny trails through the dust on his chin.

Albert's father twisted on his horse to look back at him. The man's beard was powdery.

"Get up here close to me, son," he said.

Albert nudged his horse to a trot.

The man pointed. "See that break in the grass up there?"

Albert nodded.

"Could be person." The man reached for the rifle slung on his back with thin rope and lifted it over his head and held it across his saddle. "You stay right here by me."

They approached the spot of depressed grass. A shaded dimple in a rasping yellow ocean.

Albert wiped his face with his sleeve.



Some Horses | Emilee French | Block Print

His horse blinked away flies.

As they neared the spot the man stood in his stirrups and craned his neck.

“Ho,” he said. He sat down. “You stay right there, Albert. Don’t move.”

Albert brought his horse to a stop.

The man went on, slowly, then stopped too. He tilted back his hat and surveyed something in the grass Albert could not see. The man grinned.

“Would you look at that. Still gasping. It’s all right, Albert. He can’t hurt you now.”

Albert eased his horse forward and halted beside his father.

There was a thin young man lying on his back in the grass. He was naked. Sweat glazed his brown skin and caught the sunlight in rhythmic glimmers on his stomach as he sucked in air with hurting, panicked heaves. A neat hole in his side oozed blood onto a congealing stain in the dirt. More blood ran from the corners of his mouth as he opened it and closed it, open and close, open and close, flicking his enormous animal eyes from the man to Albert and back again.

“You know what that is, son?” the man said.

“No.”

“That’s an Indian.”

Albert had never seen an Indian before. He had heard men talking about them in Independence and calling them names he did not understand. But this one didn’t look cruel like the men had said. He looked very small and very afraid.

Albert’s father dismounted and stood over the Indian and looked at him for a while. The Indian’s long hair laid around his head in a wispy oil-black puddle. A bubbling sound escaped his throat. He clutched at the grass.

Albert watched the Indian.

A wounded dog.

Choking and bleeding and dying.

“They really are as beastly as they say,” the man murmured. The man licked his lips and blinked. His trembling fingers

reached for his knife on his belt, stopped, then reached again. The blade was so bright it hurt Albert's eyes.

The man blinked once more, then pressed his knee into the Indian's chest. He grabbed a fistful of the shiny hair and pulled it taut. The Indian gurgled louder, gripping the man's forearm. His bare feet writhed weakly.

Albert sat atop his horse and did not move.

The man's blade slid into smooth skin just above the forehead. The Indian tried to scream but only choked. Veins in his neck jutted like huge pulsing worms and his eyes rolled like a horse's and he arched his back in a maniacal contortion of agony, kicking up clumps of earth with his heels.

The man pressed his knee harder. His nostrils flared. Sweat quivered on the end of his nose.

A strip of scalp peeled away before the knife's sawing blade. Steel knocked against bone.

The Indian coughed a spurt of blood.

With a final jerk of the knife the strip broke from the bloody skull. The man stood and stepped back and nearly tripped, holding the flap of flesh in his hand. He gaped at the Indian, panting, then looked at his trophy. The hair fell through his fingers and fluttered in the wind.

For a long time the man said nothing.

At his feet the Indian clawed the grass and opened his mouth full of bloodstained teeth as if to scream then closed it, his lips convulsing, sputtering red foam. A tear rolled from the corner of his clamped eyelid.

"They do it to us," the man said. He looked at Albert and smiled faintly, showing his gums. His eyes bulged. "They do it to us."

The man re-sheathed his knife and smeared his hand across his mouth and walked a wide path around the Indian back to his horse. He stuffed the dripping scalp into his saddlebag.

"Let's go, boy. The buzzards will take care of him now."

The man spurred his horse to a trot and did not glance back.

Albert watched his father, then looked down at the Indian dying in the grass. Its eyes were open. It looked at Albert. A fly twitched on the blood drying around its mouth.

“Wa...”

It raised a sinewy arm.

“Wat...”

Its mouth opened and closed again, blood rattling in its throat, fingers grasping at nothing. The sun glowed on its skin.

“Wat...”

Albert kicked his horse and rode to catch up with his father.

