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Opening Extract from...

Appaloosa

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It was a long time ago, now, and there were many gunfights to follow, but I remember as well, perhaps, as I remember anything, the first time I saw Virgil Cole shoot. Time slowed down for him. He fought with an odd stateliness. Always steady and never fast, but always faster than the man he was fighting.

Like my father, I'd been West Point, and I was good at soldiering. But soldiering didn't allow too much for expansion of the soul. So after five years in the Indian Wars, I turned in my commission and rode away to see how far

I could expand it. To keep from starving to death while I was expanding it, I shot buffalo for the railroad, and rode beside the driver on Wells Fargo coaches with an eight-gauge shotgun, and scouted now and then for the Army. I sat lookout for a while in a gambling parlor in Durango. I did a short turn as a bouncer in a whorehouse in Canon City. I got in a fight in Tres Piedras, and killed the man and had to move on pretty quick. I tried to find a little gold in the mountains in Colorado and didn't, and came down out of the San Juan Mountains, looking for something else to do. Along the way, I read a lot of books and fucked a lot of women, all of whom I liked. Now, with thirty dollars' worth of gold in my pocket, on a dark bay gelding named Sugar that I'd won playing poker in Esmeralda, I came on into Trinidad in the midafternoon on a summer day with the sun warm on my back.

It wasn't much of a town then. Two streets north and south. Three streets crossing east and west. Twelve blocks in all. It was one of those towns that existed mostly for people passing through. Cowboys who brought cattle to the railhead from the East Colorado grasslands. Soldiers on the way to Fort Carson. Hide hunters, teamsters, and miners occasionally, coming down to resupply. A few people trying to farm. People like me, moving from place to place because they didn't know what else to do.

As I passed the Rattlesnake Saloon on my left, the swinging doors burst open and a big man in a buckskin shirt came through them faster, surely, than he would have wished,

stumbled across the boardwalk, trying to catch his balance, and fell forward into the street. There was blood on one side of his face. Sugar shied a little, and I pulled him up. The man in the street had gotten himself onto all fours when the saloon doors opened more gently and a tall man came out wearing a black suit. The suit's coat was pushed back on the right side to expose a big, bone-handled Colt. I could see the badge pinned to his white shirt. Very dignified and deliberate, he stepped off the boardwalk into the street and stopped maybe six feet from the man in the buckskin shirt, and waited. Behind him, five or six other men pushed out of the saloon and stood on the boardwalk. He didn't seem to see them, but I noticed that he had turned slightly, so that he could look at the man in the street and the men on the boardwalk.

The man in the street was on his feet now. He was a big man, fat but strong-looking, with a black beard and long hair. His buckskin shirt looked as if he'd worn it since the buck was killed. On his belt, he wore a bowie knife and a big Army Colt in a flap holster. He smelled like a man who skinned buffalo. Some of the street dust had caked onto the blood on the left side of his face. He faced the man in the black suit.

"Goddamn you, Cole," he said. "You got no business hitting me with that gun."

"Time for you to come on with me, Bear," Cole said. "Until you cool down."

His voice was surprisingly light and soft.

"I ain't going with anybody," Bear said. "I paid that whore three dollars for an hour, and she fucked me once and said she was through."

"Bear," Cole said, "I would guess that you are only good for one an hour."

"Don't you rag me, Cole. Next time I see that sow, I'm going to gut her."

"No."

Cole's voice didn't get less soft, but something came into it that made the "no" crackle like summer lightning. Bear almost swayed for a moment. Then he steadied himself, and his eyes shifted to the other men on the boardwalk.

Somebody said, "We're with you, Bear."

Somebody else said, "Don't let him run you."

Bear turned his gaze back to Cole.

"I ain't coming with you," Bear said.

Cole didn't move. Nobody spoke. The light wind that had followed me out of the mountains drifted along the street, kicking up tiny swirls of dust and hay and dried manure. The force of his motionless silence was hard to explain. But I could see it pushing at Bear. The men on the boardwalk began to spread out a little. They were all hide skinners, probably come into town with Bear. Been sleeping on the ground with him, cutting buffalo with him. Eating bad food and drinking lousy whiskey with him. They couldn't back away from him now. One of the men slid the hammer loop off his Colt. I took the eight-gauge

from under my right leg. Cole saw me, I knew. Already, I could tell that he saw everything. If he thought I was with the skinners, the increase in odds didn't appear to bother him. I had no money on this one. But I didn't think Bear should gut a woman, whore or otherwise, and I didn't think one man should go against seven.

"Marshal," I said. "I'm backing you in this."

I said it softly, but it was so still that it almost echoed. Cole didn't stop looking at Bear, but he made a barely visible nod. Bear still watched Cole. The men on the boardwalk glanced at me when I spoke, and spread a little farther. I cocked both barrels on the eight-gauge and rested the butt against my right hip. Then I moved Sugar a little closer so that I was nearly beside Cole. Again, the silence arched over us, made more intense somehow by the sound of the easy wind.

Bear said, "Fuck you, Marshal," and went for his gun.

I brought the shotgun to my shoulder. Cole seemed in no hurry. Carefully, he drew the Colt, thumbed back the hammer, aimed at the middle of Bear's big body, and shot him in the center of the chest. He recocked the Colt as he turned a half-turn so that the big, bone-handled Colt was steady on Bear's supporters. Bear sagged and fell over, his gun half out of the holster.

Sugar didn't mind gunfire. Sudden movement scared him, but noise had no effect. He held rock-still where I had set him, so that both barrels of the shotgun were steady toward the men on the boardwalk.

"You men go about your business now," Cole said.

Nobody did anything.

"I won't tell you again," Cole said.

At the far right edge of the group, the right shoulder of the man who'd loosened his Colt made a kind of involuntary twitch and then froze. Everything teetered. Then the man turned and walked away, and the rest of the group followed him. Cole carefully let the hammer down on his Colt. He opened the cylinder, extracted the spent shell, put in a fresh one from his belt, closed the cylinder, and put the Colt carefully back in its holster. Then he looked up at me and nodded.

"Come see me in my office when you can," he said.

Then he turned and walked away without a glance at the corpse. I stayed there for a time, watching as some people came out into the street and looked at Bear and stood around, and finally a man in a white coat came along with a wagon, and four of us helped him put Bear in the back, and he drove off. I tied Sugar to the rail, took the shotgun with me, and went on in and had a couple of whiskeys in the Rattlesnake, and a plate of beans and bacon. Some people stared at me, but no one said anything and, feeling warmer inside, I went on down to the jail and sat in the front room where Cole kept his office, and we talked. He asked me my name and I told him.

"Everett Hitch," he said.

Like he was tasting it.

He asked me had I done much gun work, and said I had done some, but no law officering. And he asked me what I had done, and I told him.

"West Point," Cole said—not impressed, just recording it, like he did, and filing it.

"You didn't like soldier boyin'?" he said.

I told Cole that I liked some of it. I liked the men, and sometimes, on mounted patrol, I liked the space, and how far you could see, and the way it seemed like possibility was rolling out ahead of us. But most of the time, I said, it was sort of crampsome.

"Nothin' can cramp you," Cole said, "if you don't let it."

And I told him I thought that was right, which was why I quit soldiering and rode off to see what possibilities there might be. He nodded at that. I don't know if it meant he understood, or if it meant he approved, or if he was registering again. And filing.

"You quick with a handgun?" Cole asked.

I said I could shoot, but what I was really good with was the eight-gauge. Cole smiled.

"If she could pick it up," Cole said, "my Aunt Liza could be good with an eight-gauge."

I agreed that it was hard to miss with an eight-gauge.

"You ever hear of me?" Cole said.

I said I had. Cole took out a bottle of pretty good whiskey and two glasses, and poured us a drink. And we drank that drink and a couple more.

"I need somebody to back me up," Cole said. "You and the eight-gauge want the job?"

"Sure," I said.

Which is how, fifteen years ago, I got to be a peace officer and Virgil Cole's deputy. Which was why I was with him now, still carrying the eight-gauge, walking the horses down a long, shale-scattered slope toward Appaloosa.