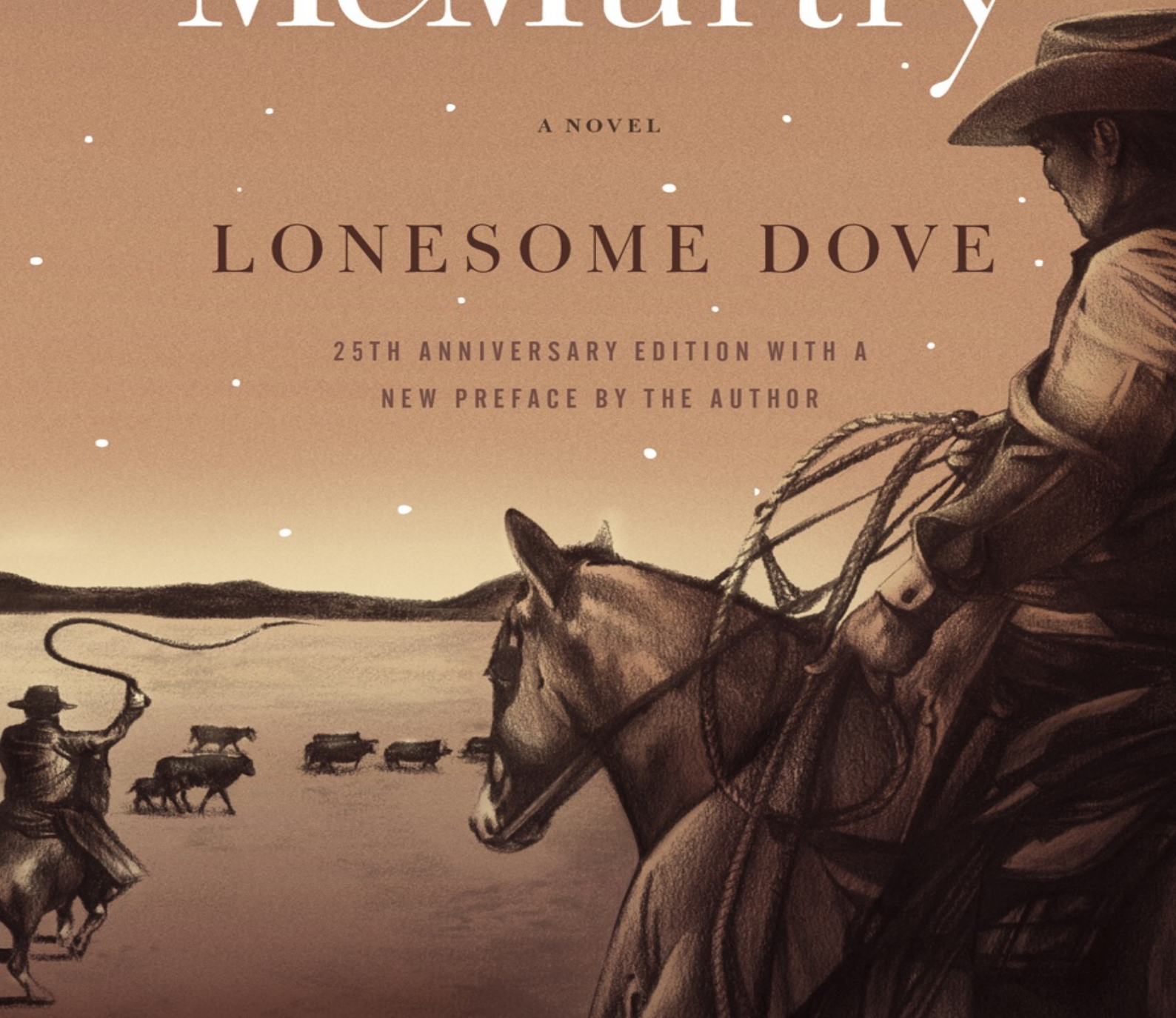


Larry McMurtry

A NOVEL

LONESOME DOVE

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Lonesome Dove



A novel by
Larry McMurtry

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For Maureen Orth,
and

In memory of
the nine McMurtry boys
(1878–1983)
“Once in the saddle they
Used to go dashing . . .”

Preface

Fictions—in my case, novels only, to the tune of about thirty—starts in tactile motion; pecking out a few sentences on a typewriter; sentences that might encourage me and perhaps a few potential readers to press on.

In 1975, at home in my house in Texas, I peated out this:

WHEN AUGUSTUS CAME OUT ON THE PORCH THE BLUE PIGS WERE EATING A RATTLESNAKE—NOT A VERY BIG ONE.

Once the blue pigs and the remnants of the rattlesnake had been sashed away I devote a few sentences to Augustus's partner, Captain Woodrow Call, who is in a nearby corral, trying to break an unruly young mare called the Hell Bitch, who catches him slightly off guard and takes a bite out of his shoulder.

Captain Call, a Stoic, says nothing about this mishap but Augustus, an Epicurean, makes several comments, none of them welcomed by Captain Call. Thus, casually, begins *Lonesome Dove*, by far my most popular novel, and one that allows me to join the small company of “respectable” writers whose fiction deals with the American West: Cormac McCarthy, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Tom Lee and a handful of others, below whom comes the vast desert of the pulpsters, the sons and daughters of Max Brand (Frederick Faust), Louis L'Amour and many hundreds of others.

But I was not considering literary ranking or even literary merit when I wrote that first sentence about Augustus McCrae, the blue pigs and the quickly consumed snake. I was just doodling at the typewriter, hoping to find a subject or a character that might hold my interest.

For quite a few years, there was, however, no sign of the *Lonesome Dove*. Two other books shoved ahead of it (*Cadillac Jack* and *The Desert Rose*) and my impulse to write about these two ex-Texas Rangers was feeble at first. I didn't even have a title, until, by a miracle, I got one. There was an old church bus sitting in seeming abandonment beside a Texas road I was driving along. The sign on the bus said LONESOME DOVE BAPTIST CHURCH. I knew, at once, that I had had a piece of luck; I drove straight home and wrote the novel. A good title can save a book, and the sign on the old fading bus saved mine; tragic though it is it has added some happiness to the world.

In the novel, *Lonesome Dove* is the small town in the Texas brush country from which Gus and Call, both ex-Rangers, and their crew, the Hat Creek Outfit, set out on their epic cattle drive to the sparsely inhabited Montana.

But, if one cuts more deeply, the lonesome dove is Newt, a lonely teenager who is the unacknowledged son of Captain Call and a kindly whore named Maggie, who is now dead. So the central theme of the novel is not the stocking of Montana but unacknowledged paternity. All of the Hat Creek Outfit, including particularly Augustus McCrae, want Call to accept the boy as his son.

Indeed, as I wrote on through a rather long book, I myself expected Woodrow Call to do the decent thing. I thought he would finally admit or acknowledge that Newt was his son. I kept expecting the redeeming scene to rise out of my typewriter some day.

But it never did! The closest Call would bring himself to making the admission was to give the boy his horse, the famous Hell Bitch.

And, in a later episode, the horse kills the boy, putting Newt beyond acknowledgement and making *Lonesome Dove* the tragic story it is.

Many moviegoers who know horses were bothered by the fact that the Hell Bitch was in fact a gelding in the film. I taxed the director, Simon Wincer—himself a horseman—about this and he said the wranglers wouldn't allow a mare in their remuda.

And the blue pigs walked all the way to Montana just to be eaten. Life ain't for sissies, as August might have said.

—Larry McMurtry, 201

All America lies at the end of the wilderness road, and our past is not a dead past, but still lives in us. Our forefathers had civilization inside themselves, the wild outside. We live in the civilization they created, but within us the wilderness still lingers. What they dreamed, we live, and what they lived, we dream.

—T. K. Whipple, *Study Out the Land*

Part I



WHEN AUGUSTUS CAME OUT on the porch the blue pigs were eating a rattlesnake—not a very big one. It had probably just been crawling around looking for shade when it ran into the pigs. They were having a fine tug-of-war with it, and its rattling days were over. The sow had it by the neck, and the shoat had the tail.

“You pigs git,” Augustus said, kicking the shoat. “Head on down to the creek if you want to eat that snake.” It was the porch he begrudged them, not the snake. Pigs on the porch just made things hotter, and things were already hot enough. He stepped down into the dusty yard and walked around to the springhouse to get his jug. The sun was still high, sullied in the sky like a mule, but Augustus had a keen eye for sun, and to his eye the long light from the west had taken on an encouraging slant.

Evening took a long time getting to Lonesome Dove, but when it came it was a comfort. For most of the hours of the day—and most of the months of the year—the sun had the town trapped deep in dust, far out in the chaparral flats, a heaven for snakes and horned toads, roadrunners and stinging lizards, but a hell for pigs and Tennesseans. There was not even a respectable shade tree within twenty or thirty miles; in fact, the actual location of the nearest decent shade was a matter of vigorous debate in the offices—if you wanted to call a roofless barn and a couple of patched-up corrals offices—of the Hat Creek Cattle Company, half of which Augustus owned.

His stubborn partner, Captain W. F. Call, maintained that there was excellent shade as close as Pickles Gap, only twelve miles away, but Augustus wouldn't allow it. Pickles Gap was if anything more worthless community than Lonesome Dove. It had only sprung up because a fool from north Georgia named Wesley Pickles had gotten himself and his family lost in the mesquites for about ten days. When he finally found a clearing, he wouldn't leave it, and Pickles Gap came into being, mainly attracting travelers like its founder, which is to say people too weak-willed to be able to negotiate a few hundred miles of mesquite thicket without losing their nerve.

The springhouse was a little lumpy adobe building, so cool on the inside that Augustus would have been tempted to live in it had it not been for its popularity with black widows, yellow jackets and centipedes. When he opened the door he didn't immediately see any centipedes but he did immediately hear the nervous buzz of a rattlesnake that was evidently smarter than the one the pigs were eating. Augustus could just make out the snake, coiled in a corner, but decided not to shoot it on a quiet spring evening in Lonesome Dove, a shot could cause complications. Everybody in town would hear it and conclude either that the Comanches were down from the plains or the Mexicans were from the river. If any of the customers of the Dry Bean, the town's one saloon, happened to be drunk or unhappy—which was very likely—they would probably run out into the street and shoot a Mexican or two, just to be on the safe side.

At the very least, Call would come stomping up from the lots, only to be annoyed to discover he had just been a snake. Call had no respect whatsoever for snakes, or for anyone who stood aside for snakes. He treated rattlers like gnats, disposing of them with one stroke of whatever tool he had at hand. “A man that slows down for snakes might as well walk,” he often said, a statement that made about as much sense to an educated man as most of the things Call said.

Augustus held to a more leisurely philosophy. He believed in giving creatures a little time to think, so he stood in the sun a few minutes until the rattler calmed down and crawled out a hole. Then he reached in and lifted his jug out of the mud. It had been a dry year, even by the standards of Lonesome Dove, and the spring was just springing enough to make a nice mud puddle. The pigs spent half their time rooting around the springhouse, hoping to get into the mud, but so far none of the

holes in the adobe was big enough to admit a pig.

~~The damp burlap the jug was wrapped in naturally appealed to the centipedes, so Augustus measured~~ sure none had sneaked under the wrapping before he uncorked the jug and took a modest swig. The one white barber in Lonesome Dove, a fellow Tennessean named Dillard Brawley, had to do his barbering on one leg because he had not been cautious enough about centipedes. Two of the vicious red-legged variety had crawled into his pants one night and Dillard had got up in a hurry and had neglected to shake out the pants. The leg hadn't totally rotted off, but it had rotted sufficiently that the family got nervous about blood poisoning and persuaded he and Call to saw it off.

For a year or two Lonesome Dove had had a real doctor, but the young man had lacked good sense. A *vaquero* with a loose manner that everybody was getting ready to hang at the first excuse anyway passed out from drink one night and let a blister bug crawl in his ear. The bug couldn't find its way out, but it could move around enough to upset the *vaquero*, who persuaded the young doctor to try to and flush it. The young man was doing his best with some warm salt water, but the *vaquero* lost his temper and shot him. It was a fatal mistake on the *vaquero's* part: someone blasted his horse out from under him as he was racing away, and the incensed citizenry, most of whom were nearby at the Dr. Bean, passing the time, hung him immediately.

Unfortunately no medical man had taken an interest in the town since, and Augustus and Call, both of whom had coped with their share of wounds, got called on to do such surgery as was deemed essential. Dillard Brawley's leg had presented no problem, except that Dillard screeched so loudly that he injured his vocal cords. He got around good on one leg, but the vocal cords had never fully recovered, which ultimately hurt his business. Dillard had always talked too much, but after the trouble with the centipedes, what he did was whisper too much. Customers couldn't relax under the hot towels for trying to make out Dillard's whispers. He hadn't really been worth listening to, even when he had two legs, and in time many of his customers drifted off to the Mexican barber. Call eventually used the Mexican, and Call didn't trust Mexicans *or* barbers.

Augustus took the jug back to the porch and placed his rope-bottomed chair so as to utilize the smidgin of shade he had to work with. As the sun sank, the shade would gradually extend itself across the porch, the wagon yard, Hat Creek, Lonesome Dove and, eventually, the Rio Grande. By the time the shade had reached the river, Augustus would have mellowed with the evening and be ready for some intelligent conversation, which usually involved talking to himself. Call would work until slat dark if he could find anything to do, and if he couldn't find anything he would make up something—and Pea Eye was too much of a corporal to quit before the Captain quit, even if Call would have let him.

The two pigs had quietly disregarded Augustus's orders to go to the creek, and were under one of the wagons, eating the snake. That made good sense, for the creek was just as dry as the wagon yard and farther off. Fifty weeks out of the year Hat Creek was nothing but a sandy ditch, and the fact that the two pigs didn't regard it as a fit wallow was a credit to their intelligence. Augustus often praised the pigs' intelligence in a running argument he had been having with Call for the last few years. Augustus maintained that pigs were smarter than all horses and most people, a claim that galled Call severely.

"No slop-eating pig is as smart as a horse," Call said, before going on to say worse things.

As was his custom, Augustus drank a fair amount of whiskey as he sat and watched the sun ease out of the day. If he wasn't tilting the rope-bottomed chair, he was tilting the jug. The days in Lonesome Dove were a blur of heat and as dry as chalk, but mash whiskey took some of the dry away and made Augustus feel nicely misty inside—foggy and cool as a morning in the Tennessee hills. He seldom got

downright drunk, but he did enjoy feeling misty along about sundown, keeping his mood good with tasteful swigs as the sky to the west began to color up. The whiskey didn't damage his intellectual powers any, but it did make him more tolerant of the raw sorts he had to live with: Call and Pea Eye and Deets, young Newt, and old Bolivar, the cook.

When the sky had pinked up nicely over the western flats, Augustus went around to the back of the house and kicked the kitchen door a time or two. "Better warm up the sowbelly and mash a few beans," he said. Old Bolivar didn't answer, so Augustus kicked the door once or twice more, to emphasize his point, and went back to the porch. The blue shoat was waiting for him at the corner of the house, quiet as a cat. It was probably hoping he would drop something—a belt or a pocketknife or a hat—so he could eat it.

"Git from here, shoat," Augustus said. "If you're that hungry go hunt up another snake." It occurred to him that a leather belt couldn't be much tougher or less palatable than the fried goat Bolivar served up three or four times a week. The old man had been a competent Mexican band leader before he ran out of steam and crossed the river. Since then he had led a quiet life, but it *was* a fact that goat kept turning up on the table. The Hat Creek Cattle Company didn't trade in them, and it was unlikely that Bolivar was buying them out of his own pocket—stealing goats was probably his way of keeping up his old skills. His old skills did not include cooking. The goat meat tasted like it had been fried in tar, but Augustus was the only member of the establishment sensitive enough to raise a complaint. "Bol, where'd you get the tar you fried this goat in?" he asked regularly, his quiet attempt at wit falling as usual on deaf ears. Bolivar ignored all queries, direct or indirect.

Augustus was getting about ready to start talking to the sow and the shoat when he saw Call and Pea Eye walking up from the lots. Pea Eye was tall and lank, had never been full in his life, and looked so awkward that he appeared to be about to fall down even when he was standing still. He looked totally helpless, but that was another case of looks deceiving. In fact, he was one of the ablest men Augustus had ever known. He had never been an outstanding Indian fighter, but if you gave him something he could work at deliberately, like carpentering or blacksmithing, or well-digging or harness repair, Pea was excellent. If he had been a man to do sloppy work, Call would have run him off long before.

Augustus walked down and met the men at the wagons. "It's a little early for you two to be quitting ain't it, girls?" he said. "Or is this Christmas or what?"

Both men had sweated their shirts through so many times during the day that they were practically black. Augustus offered Call the jug, and Call put a foot on a wagon tongue and took a swig just to rinse the dry out of his mouth. He spat a mouthful of perfectly good whiskey in the dust and handed the jug to Pea Eye.

"Girls yourself," he said. "It ain't Christmas." Then he went on to the house, so abruptly that Augustus was a little taken aback. Call had never been one for fine manners, but if the day's work had gone to his satisfaction he would usually stand and pass the time a minute.

The funny thing about Woodrow Call was how hard he was to keep in scale. He wasn't a big man—in fact, was barely middle-sized—but when you walked up and looked him in the eye it didn't seem that way. Augustus was four inches taller than his partner, and Pea Eye three inches taller yet, but there was no way you could have convinced Pea Eye that Captain Call was the short man. Call had him buffaloed, and in that respect Pea had plenty of company. If a man meant to hold his own with Call it was necessary to keep in mind that Call wasn't as big as he seemed. Augustus was the one man in south Texas who could usually keep him in scale, and he built on his advantage whenever he could. He started many a day by pitching Call a hot biscuit and remarking point-blank, "You know, Cal

you ain't really no giant."

A simple heart like Pea could never understand such behavior. It gave Augustus a laugh sometimes to consider that Call could hoodwink a man nearly twice his size, getting Pea to confuse the inner man with the outer man. But of course Call himself had such a single-track mind that he scarcely realized he was doing it. He just did it. What made it a fascinating trick was that Call had never noticed that he had a trick. The man never wasted five minutes appreciating himself; it would have meant losing five minutes off whatever job he had decided he wanted to get done that day.

"It's a good thing I ain't scairt to be lazy," Augustus told him once.

"You may think so. I don't," Call said.

"Hell, Call, if I worked as hard as you, there'd be no thinking done at all around this outfit. You stay in a lather fifteen hours a day. A man that's always in a lather can't think nothin' out."

"I'd like to see you think the roof back on that barn," Call said.

A strange little wind had whipped over from Mexico and blown the roof off clean as a whistle three years before. Fortunately it only rained in Lonesome Dove once or twice a year, so the loss of the roof didn't result in much suffering for the stock, when there was stock. It mostly meant suffering for Call, who had never been able to locate enough decent lumber to build a new roof. Unfortunately a rare downpour had occurred only about a week after the wind dropped the old roof in the middle of Hat Creek. It had been a real turd-floater, and also a lumber-floater, washing much of the roof straight into the Rio Grande.

"If you think so much, why didn't you think of that rain?" Call asked. Ever since, he had been throwing the turd-floater up to Augustus. Give Call a grievance, however silly, and he would save like money.

Pea Eye wasn't spitting out any mash whiskey. He had a skinny neck—his Adam's apple bulged so when he drank that it reminded Augustus of a snake with a frog stuck in its gullet.

"Call looks mad enough to kick the stump," Augustus said, when Pea finally stopped to breathe.

"She bit a hunk out of him, that's why," Pea said. "I don't know why the Captain wants to keep her."

"Fillies are his only form of folly," Augustus said. "What's he doing letting a horse bite him? I thought you boys were digging the new well?"

"Hit rock," Pea said. "Ain't room for but one man to swing a pick down in that hole, so Newt swung it while I shod horses. The Captain took a ride. I guess he thought he had her sweated down. He turned his back on her and she bit a hunk out."

The mare in question was known around town as the Hell Bitch. Call had bought her in Mexico from some *caballeros* who claimed to have killed an Indian to get her—a Comanche, they said. Augustus doubted that part of the story: it was unlikely one Comanche had been riding around himself in that part of Mexico, and if there had been two Comanches the *caballeros* wouldn't have lived to do any horse trading. The mare was a dapple gray, with a white muzzle and a white streak down her forehead, too tall to be pure Indian pony and too short-barreled to be pure thoroughbred. Her disposition did suggest some time spent with Indians, but which Indians and how long was anybody's guess. Every man who saw her wanted to buy her, she was that stylish, but Call wouldn't even listen to an offer, though Pea Eye and Newt were both anxious to see her sold. They had to work around her every day and suffered accordingly. She had once kicked Newt all the way into the blacksmith's shop and nearly into the forge. Pea Eye was at least as scared of her as he was of Comanches, which was saying a lot.

"What's keeping Newt?" Augustus asked.

“He may have went to sleep down in that well,” Pea Eye said.

~~Then Augustus saw the boy walking up from the lots, so tired he was barely moving. Pea Eye was~~
half drunk by the time Newt finally made the wagons.

“I god, Newt, I’m glad you got here before fall,” Augustus said. “We’d have missed you during the summer.”

“I been throwin’ rocks at the mare,” Newt said, with a grin. “Did you see what a hunk she bit out the Captain?”

Newt lifted one foot and carefully scraped the mud from the well off the sole of his boot, while Pea Eye continued to wash the dust out of his throat.

Augustus had always admired the way Newt could stand on one leg while cleaning the other boot. “Look at that, Pea,” he said. “I bet you can’t do that.”

Pea Eye was so used to seeing Newt stand on one leg to clean his boot that he couldn’t figure out what it was Gus thought he couldn’t do. A few big swigs of liquor sometimes slowed his thinking down to a crawl. This usually happened at sundown, after a hard day of well-digging or horseshoeing; at such times Pea was doubly glad he worked with the Captain, rather than Gus. The less talk the Captain had to listen to, the better humor he was in, whereas Gus was just the opposite. He’d rattled off five or six different questions and opinions, running them all together like so many unbranded cattle—it made it hard to pick out one and think about it carefully and slowly, the only ways Pea Eye liked to think. At such times his only recourse was to pretend the questions had hit him in his deaf ear, the left one, which hadn’t really worked well since the day of their big fight with the Keechis—what they called the Stone House fight. It had been pure confusion, since the Indians had been smart enough to fire the prairie grass, smoking things up so badly that no one could see six feet ahead. They kept bumping into Indians in the smoke and having to shoot point-blank; a Ranger right next to Pea had spotted one and fired too close to Pea’s ear.

That was the day the Indians got away with their horses, which made Captain Call about as mad as Pea had ever seen him. It meant they had to walk down the Brazos for nearly two hundred miles, worrying constantly about what would happen if the Comanches discovered they were afoot. Pea Eye hadn’t noticed he was half deaf until they had walked most of the way out.

Fortunately, while he was worrying the question of what it was he couldn’t do, old Bolivar began to whack the dinner bell, which put an end to discussion. The old dinner bell had lost its clapper, but Bolivar had found a crowbar that somebody had managed to break, and he laid into the bell so hard that you couldn’t have heard the clapper if there had been one.

The sun had finally set, and it was so still along the river that they could hear the horses swishing their tails, down in the lots—or they could until Bolivar laid into the bell. Although he probably knew they were standing around the wagons, in easy hearing distance, Bolivar continued to pound the bell for a good five minutes. Bolivar pounded the bell for reasons of his own; even Call couldn’t control him in that regard. The sound drowned out the quiet of sunset, which annoyed Augustus so much that at times he was tempted to go up and shoot the old man, just to teach him a lesson.

“I figure he’s calling bandits,” Augustus said, when the ringing finally stopped. They started for the house, and the pigs fell in with them, the shoat eating a lizard he had caught somewhere. The pigs liked Newt even better than Augustus—when he didn’t have anything better to do he would feed them scraps of rawhide and scratch their ears.

“If them bandits were to come, maybe the Captain would let me start wearing a gun,” Newt said wistfully. It seemed he would never get old enough to wear a gun, though he was well into his teens.

“If you was to wear a gun somebody would just mistake you for a gunfighter and shoot you

Augustus said, noting the boy's wistful look. "It ain't worth it. If Bol ever calls up any bandits I'll let you ~~my~~ Henry."

"That old man can barely cook," Pea Eye remarked. "Where would he get any bandits?"

"Why, you remember that greasy bunch he had," Augustus said. "We used to buy horses from 'em. That's the only reason Call hired him to cook. In the business we're in, it don't hurt to know a few horsethieves, as long as they're Mexicans. I figure Bol's just biding his time. As soon as he gains our trust his bunch will sneak up some night and murder us all."

He didn't believe anything of the kind—he just liked to stimulate the boy once in a while, and Pea too, though Pea was an exceptionally hard man to stimulate, being insensitive to most fears. Pea had just sense enough to fear Comanches—that didn't require an abundance of sense. Mexican bandits did not impress him.

Newt had more imagination. He turned and looked across the river, where a big darkness was about to settle. Every now and then, about sundown, the Captain and Augustus and Pea and Dee would strap on guns and ride off into that darkness, into Mexico, to return about sunup with thirty or forty horses or perhaps a hundred skinny cattle. It was the way the stock business seemed to work along the border, the Mexican ranchers raiding north while the Texans raided south. Some of the skinny cattle spent their lives being chased back and forth across the Rio Grande. Newt's fondest hope was to get old enough to be taken along on the raids. Many a night he lay in his hot little bunk listening to old Bolivar snore and mumble below him, peering out the window toward Mexico, imagining the wild doings that must be going on. Once in a while he even heard gunfire, though seldom more than a shot or two, from up or down the river—it got his imagination to working all the harder.

"You can go when you're grown," the Captain said, and that was all he said. There was no arguing with it, either—not if you were just hired help. Arguing with the Captain was a privilege reserved for Mr. Gus.

They no sooner got in the house than Mr. Gus began to exercise the privilege. The Captain had his shirt off, letting Bolivar treat his mare bite. She had got him just above the belt. Enough blood had run down into his pants that one pants leg was caked with it. Bol was about to pack the bite with his usual dope, a mixture of axle grease and turpentine, but Mr. Gus made him wait until he could get a look at the wound himself.

" 'I god, Woodrow," Augustus said. "As long as you've worked around horses it looks like you know better than to turn your back on a Kiowa mare."

Call was thinking of something and didn't answer for a minute. What he was thinking was that the moon was in the quarter—what they called the rustler's moon. Let it get full over the pale flats and some Mexicans could see well enough to draw a fair bead. Men he'd ridden with for years were dead and buried, or at least dead, because they'd crossed the river under a full moon. No moon at all was nearly as bad: then it was too hard to find the stock, and too hard to move it. The quarter moon was the right moon for a swing below the border. The brush country to the north was already thick with cattlemen, making up their spring herds and getting trail crews together; it wouldn't be a week before they began to drift into Lonesome Dove. It was time to go gather cattle.

"Who said she was Kiowa?" he said, looking at Augustus.

"I've reasoned it out," Augustus said. "You could have done the same if you ever stopped working long enough to think."

"I can work and think too," Call said. "You're the only man I know whose brain don't work unless it's in the shade."

Augustus ignored the remark. "I figure it was a Kiowa on his way to steal a woman that lost the mare," he said. "~~Your Comanche don't hunger much after señoritas. White women are easier to steal and don't eat as much besides.~~ The Kiowa are different. They fancy señoritas."

"Can we eat or do we have to wait till the argument's over?" Pea Eye asked.

"We starve if we wait for that," Bolivar said, plunking a potful of sowbelly and beans down on the rough table. Augustus, to the surprise of no one, was the first to fill his plate.

"I don't know where you keep finding these Mexican strawberries," he said, referring to the beans. Bolivar managed to find them three hundred and sixty-five days a year, mixing them with so many red chilies that a spoonful of beans was more or less as hot as a spoonful of red ants. Newt had come to think that only two things were certain if you worked for the Hat Creek Cattle Company. One was that Captain Call would think of more things to do than he and Pea Eye and Deets could get done and the other was that beans would be available at all meals. The only man in the outfit who didn't fart frequently was old Bolivar himself—he never touched beans and lived mainly on sourdough biscuits and chickory coffee, or rather cups of brown sugar with little puddles of coffee floating on top. Sugar cost money, too, and it irked the Captain to spend it, but Bolivar could not be made to break his habit. Augustus claimed the old man's droppings were so sugary that the blue shoat had taken to stalking him every time he went to shit, which might have been true. Newt had all he could do to keep clear of the shoat, and his own droppings were mostly bean.

By the time Call got his shirt on and came to the table, Augustus was reaching for a second helping. Pea and Newt were casting nervous glances at the pot, hoping for seconds themselves but too polite to grab before everyone had been served. Augustus's appetite was a kind of natural calamity. Call had watched it with amazement for thirty years and yet it still surprised him to see how much Augustus ate. He didn't work unless he had to, and yet he could sit down night after night and out-eat three men who had put in a day's labor.

In their rangering days, when things were a little slow the boys would sit around and swap stories about Augustus's eating. Not only did he eat a lot, he ate it fast. The cook that wanted to hold him for the grub for more than ten minutes had better have a side of beef handy.

Call pulled out a chair and sat down. As Augustus was ladling himself a big scoop of beans, Call stuck his plate under the ladle. Newt thought it such a slick move that he laughed out loud.

"Many thanks," Call said. "If you ever get tired of loafing I guess you could get a job waiting tables."

"Why, I had a job waiting tables once," Augustus said, pretending he had meant to serve Call the beans. "On a riverboat. I wasn't no older than Newt when I had that job. The cook even wore a white hat."

"What for?" Pea Eye asked.

"Because it's what real cooks are supposed to wear," Augustus said, looking at Bolivar, who was stirring a little coffee into his brown sugar. "Not so much a hat as a kind of big white cap—it looked like it could have been made out of a bedsheet."

"I'd be damned if I'd wear one," Call said.

"Nobody would be loony enough to hire you to cook, Woodrow," Augustus said. "The cap was supposed to keep the cook's old greasy hairs from falling into the food. I wouldn't be surprised if some of Bol's hairs have found their way into this sow bosom."

Newt looked at Bolivar, sitting over by the stove in his dirty serape. Bolivar's hair looked like he had had a can of secondhand lard poured over it. Once every few months Bol would change clothes and go visit his wife, but his efforts at improving his appearance never went much higher than h

mustache, which he occasionally tried to wax with grease of some kind.

“How come you to quit the riverboat?” Pea Eye asked.

“I was too young and pretty,” Augustus said. “The whores wouldn’t let me alone.”

Call was sorry it had come up. He didn’t like talk about whores—not anytime, but particularly not in front of the boy. Augustus had little shame, if any. It had long been a sore spot between them.

“I wish they’d drown you then,” Call said, annoyed. Conversation at the table seldom led to anything good.

Newt kept his eyes on his plate, as he usually did when the Captain grew annoyed.

“Drown me?” Augustus said. “Why, if anybody had tried it, those girls would have clawed them to shreds.” He knew Call was mad, but wasn’t much inclined to humor him. It was his dinner table as much as Call’s, and if Call didn’t like the conversation he could go to bed.

Call knew there was no point in arguing. That was what Augustus wanted: argument. He didn’t really care what the question was, and it made no great difference to him which side he was on. He just plain loved to argue, whereas Call hated to. Long experience had taught him that there was no winning arguments with Augustus, even in cases where there was a simple right and wrong at issue. Even in the old days, when they were in the thick of it, with Indians and hardcases to worry about, Augustus would seize any chance for a dispute. Practically the closest call they ever had, when the two of them and six Rangers got surprised by the Comanches up the Prairie Dog Fork of the Red and were all digging holes in the bank that could have turned out to be their graves if they hadn’t been lucky and got a cloudy night and sneaked away, Augustus had kept up a running argument with a Ranger they called Ugly Bobby. The argument was entirely about coon dogs, and Augustus had kept it up all night, though most of the Rangers were so scared they couldn’t pass water.

Of course the boy lapped up Augustus’s stories about riverboats and whores. The boy hadn’t been anywhere, so it was all romance to him.

“Listening to you brag about women don’t improve the taste of my food,” he said, finally.

“Call, if you want better food you have to start by shooting Bolivar,” Augustus said, reminded of his own grievance against the cook.

“Bol, I want you to quit whackin’ that bell with that crowbar,” he said. “You can do it at noon if you want to but let off doin’ it at night. A man with any sense can tell when it’s sundown. You’ve spoiled many a pretty evening for me, whackin’ that bell.”

Bolivar stirred his sugary coffee and held his peace. He whacked the dinner bell because he liked the sound, not because he wanted anybody to come and eat. The men could eat when they liked—he would whack the bell when *he* liked. He enjoyed being a cook—it was a good deal more relaxing than being a bandit—but that didn’t mean that he intended to take orders. His sense of independence was undiminished.

“Gen-eral Lee freed the slaves,” he remarked in a surly tone.

Newt laughed. Bol never had been able to get the war straight, but he had been genuinely sorry when it ended. In fact, if it had kept going he would probably have stayed a bandit—it was a safe and profitable profession with most of the Texans gone. But the ones who came back from the war were mostly bandits themselves, and they had better guns. The profession immediately became overcrowded. Bolivar knew it was time to quit, but once in a while he got the urge for a little shooting.

“It wasn’t General Lee, it was Abe Lincoln who freed the slaves,” Augustus pointed out.

Bolivar shrugged. “No difference,” he said.

“A big difference,” Call said. “One was a Yankee and one wasn’t.”

Pea Eye got interested for a minute. The beans and sowbelly had revived him. He had been very interested in the notion of emancipation and had studied over it a lot while he went about his work. It was obviously just pure luck that he himself hadn't been born a slave, but if he had been unlucky Lincoln would have freed him. It gave him a certain admiration for the man.

"He just freed Americans," he pointed out to Bolivar.

Augustus snorted. "You're in over your head, Pea," he said. "Who Abe Lincoln freed was a bunch of Africans, no more American than Call here."

Call pushed back his chair. He was not about to sit around arguing slavery after a long day, or after a short one either.

"I'm as American as the next," he said, taking his hat and picking up a rifle.

"You was born in Scotland," Augustus reminded him. "I know they brought you over when you was still draggin' on the tit, but that don't make you no less a Scot."

Call didn't reply. Newt looked up and saw him standing at the door, his hat on and his Henry in the crook of his arm. A couple of big moths flew past his head, drawn to the light of the kerosene lamp on the table. With nothing more said, the Captain went out the door.

CALL WALKED THE RIVER for an hour, though he knew there was no real need. It was just an old habit he had, left over from wilder times: checking, looking for a sign of one kind or another, honing his instincts, as much as anything. In his years as a Ranger captain it had been his habit to get off by himself for a time, every night, out of camp and away from whatever talking and bickering were going on. He had discovered early on that his instincts needed privacy in which to operate. Sitting around a fire being sociable, yawning and yarning, might be fine in safe country, but it could cost you an edge in country that wasn't so safe. He liked to get off by himself, a mile or so from camp, and listen to the country, not the men.

Of course, real scouting skills were superfluous in a place as tame as Lonesome Dove, but Call still liked to get out at night, sniff the breeze and let the country talk. The country talked quiet; only human voice could drown it out, particularly if it was a voice as loud as Augustus McCrae's. Augustus was notorious all over Texas for the strength of his voice. On a still night he could be heard at least a mile, even if he was more or less whispering. Call did his best to get out of range of Augustus's voice so that he could relax and pay attention to other sounds. If nothing else, he might get a clue as to what weather was coming—not that there was much mystery about the weather around Lonesome Dove. If a man looked straight up at the stars he was apt to get dizzy, the night was so clear. Clouds were scarcer than cash money, and cash money was scarce enough.

There was really little in the way of a threat to be looked for, either. A coyote might sneak in and snatch a chicken, but that was about the worst that was likely to happen. The mere fact that he and Augustus were there had long since discouraged the local horsethieves.

Call angled west of the town, toward a crossing on the river that had once been favored by the Comanches in the days when they had the leisure to raid into Mexico. It was near a salt lick. He had formed the habit of walking up to the crossing almost every night, to sit for a while on a little bluff just watching. If the moon was high enough to cast a shadow, he sheltered beside a clump of chaparral. If the Comanches ever came again, it stood to reason they would make for their old crossing, but Call knew well enough that the Comanches weren't going to come again. They were all whipped, hardly enough warriors left free to terrorize the upper Brazos, much less the Rio Grande.

The business with the Comanches had been long and ugly—it had occupied Call most of his adult life—but it was really over. In fact, it had been so long since he had seen a really dangerous Indian that if one had suddenly ridden up to the crossing he would probably have been too surprised to shoot—exactly the kind of careless attitude he was concerned to guard against in himself. Whipped they might be, but as long as there was one free Comanche with a horse and a gun it would be foolish to take them lightly.

He tried hard to keep sharp, but in fact the only action he had scared up in six months of watching the river was one bandit, who might just have been a *vaquero* with a thirsty horse. All Call had had to do in that instance was click the hammer of his Henry—in the still night the click had been as effective as a shot. The man wheeled back into Mexico, and since then nothing had disturbed the crossing except a few mangy goats on their way to the salt lick.

Even though he still came to the river every night, it was obvious to Call that Lonesome Dove had long since ceased to need guarding. The talk about Bolivar calling up bandits was just another one of Augustus's overworked jokes. He came to the river because he liked to be alone for an hour, and no place was always be crowded. It seemed to him he was pressed from dawn till dark, but for no good reason. As a Ranger captain he was naturally pressed to make decisions—and decisions that might mean life

death to the men under him. That had been a natural pressure—one that went with the job. Me looked to him, and kept looking, wanting to know he was still there, able to bring them through whatever scrape they might be in. Augustus was just as capable, beneath all his rant, and would have got them through the same scrapes if it had been necessary, but Augustus wouldn't bother rising to an occasion until it became absolutely necessary. He left the worrying to Call—so the men looked to Call for orders, and got drunk with Augustus. It never ceased to gripe him that Augustus could not be made to act like a Ranger except in emergencies. His refusal was so consistent that at times both Call and the men would almost hope for an emergency so that Gus would let up talking and arguing and treat the situation with a little respect.

But somehow, despite the dangers, Call had never felt pressed in quite the way he had lately been bound in by the small but constant needs of others. The physical work didn't matter: Call was not one to sit on a porch all day, playing cards or gossiping. He intended to work; he had just grown tired of always providing the example. He was still the captain, but no one had seemed to notice that there was no troop and no war. He had been in charge so long that everyone assumed all thoughts, questions, needs and wants had to be referred to him, however simple these might be. The men couldn't stop expecting him to captain, and he couldn't stop thinking he had to. It was ingrained in him, he had done it so long, but he was aware that it wasn't appropriate anymore. They weren't even peace officers: they just ran a livery stable, trading horses and cattle when they could find a buyer. The work they did was mostly work he could do in his sleep, and yet, though his day-to-day responsibilities had constantly shrunk over the last ten years, life did not seem easier. It just seemed smaller and a good deal more dull.

Call was not a man to daydream—that was Gus's department—but then it wasn't really daydreaming he did, alone on the little bluff at night. It was just thinking back to the years when a man who presumed to stake out a Comanche trail would do well to keep his rifle cocked. Yet the fact that he had taken to thinking back annoyed him, too: he didn't want to start working over his memories, like an old man. Sometimes he would force himself to get up and walk two or three miles up the river and back, just to get the memories out of his head. Not until he felt alert again did he feel that he could still captain if the need arose—would he return to Lonesome Dove.



After supper, when Call left for the river, Augustus, Pea Eye, Newt, Bolivar and the pigs repaired to the porch. The pigs nosed around in the yard, occasionally catching a lizard or a grasshopper, a snake or an unwary locust. Bolivar brought out a whetstone and spent twenty minutes or so sharpening the fine bone-handled knife that he wore at his belt. The handle was made from the horn of a mule deer and the thin blade flashed in the moonlight as Bolivar carefully drew it back and forth across the whetstone, spitting on the stone now and then to dampen its surface.

Although Newt liked Bolivar and considered him a friend, the fact that Bol felt it necessary to sharpen the knife every night made him a little nervous. Mr. Gus's constant joking about bandits—although Newt knew it was joking—had its effect. It was a mystery to him why Bol sharpened the knife every single night, since he never cut anything with it. When he asked him about it Bol smiled and tested the blade gently with his thumb.

"It's like a wife," he said. "Every night you better stroke it."

That made no sense to Newt, but got a laugh from Augustus.

"If that's the case your wife is likely pretty rusty by now, Bol," he said. "She don't get sharpened more than twice a year."

"She is old," Bolivar said.

~~"The older the violin, the sweeter the music,"~~ Augustus said. ~~"Us old folks appreciate whetting ju~~ as much as the young, or maybe more. You ought to bring her up here to live, Bol. Think of the money you'd save on whetstones."

"That knife would cut through a man's naik like it was butter," Pea Eye said. He had a appreciation of such things, being the owner of a fine Bowie knife himself. It had a fourteen-inch blade and he had bought it from a soldier who had personally commissioned it from Bowie. He didn't sharpen it every night like Bol did his, but he took it out of its big sheath once in a while to make sure it hadn't lost its edge. It was his Sunday knife and he didn't use it for ordinary work like butchering or cutting leather. Bolivar never used his for ordinary work either, though once in a while if he was in a good mood, he would throw it and stick it in the side of a wagon, or maybe shave off a few fine curls of rawhide with it. Newt would then feed the rawhide to the pigs.

Augustus himself took a dim view of the utility of knives, particularly of fancy knives. He carried a plain old clasp in his pocket and used it mainly for cutting his toenails. In the old days, when they had lived mostly off game, he had carried a good skinning knife as a matter of necessity, but he had no regard at all for the knife as a fighting weapon. So far as he was concerned, the invention of the Colt revolver had rendered all other short-range weapons obsolete. It was a minor irritant that he had to spend virtually every night of his life listening to Bol grind his blade away.

"If I have to listen to something, I'd rather listen to you whet your wife," he said.

"I don't bring her," Bol said. "I know you. You would try to corrupt her."

Augustus laughed. "No, I ain't much given to corrupting old women," he said. "Ain't you got any daughters?"

"Only nine," Bolivar said. Abruptly, not even getting up, he threw the knife at the nearest wagon where it stuck, quivering for a moment. The wagon was only about twenty feet away, so it was no great throw, but he wanted to make a point about his feeling for his daughters. Six were married already, but the three left at home were the light of his life.

"I hope they take after their mother," Augustus said. "If they take after you you're in for a passel of old maids." His Colt was hanging off the back of the chair and he reached around and got it, took it out of its holster, and idly twirled the chamber a time or two, listening to the pretty little clicks.

Bolivar was sorry he had thrown the knife, since it meant he would have to get up and walk across the yard to retrieve it. At the moment his hip joints hurt, as well as several other joints, all the result of letting a horse fall on him five years before.

"I am better-looking than a buzzard like you," he said, pulling himself up.

Newt knew Bolivar and Mr. Gus were just insulting one another to pass the time, but it still made him nervous when they did it, particularly late in the day, when they had both been hitting the respective jugs for several hours. It was a peaceful night, so still that he could occasionally hear the sound of the piano down at the Dry Bean saloon. The piano was the pride of the saloon, and, for that matter, of the town. The church folks even borrowed it on Sundays. Luckily the church house was right next to the saloon and the piano had wheels. Some of the deacons had built a ramp out at the back of the saloon, and a board track across to the church, so that all they had to do was push the piano right across to the church. Even so, the arrangement was a threat to the sobriety of the deacons, some of whom considered it their duty to spend their evenings in the saloon, safeguarding the piano.

Once they safeguarded it so well on Saturday night that they ran it off its rail on Sunday morning and broke two legs off it. Since there weren't enough sober men in church that morning to carry it inside, Mrs. Pink Higgins, who played it, had to sit out in the street and bang away at the hymn

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