

We, the Yellow Cowards of Section C, by Joshua L. Hood

:We, the remaining men of Section C, do hereby declare that the following accounting of events is true and proclaim its veracity before the eyes of God and the Provisional Government of the Oregon Territory:

Signed: Cpl. Edgar Estevez et.al.

1853

“We don’t have the luxury of a firing line,” Lieutenant Tully shouted at us, “so we’ve come up with a better use for you!”

We shivered without coats in the early spring air. It was morning. Ralston’s coffee percolated itself into the air like the perfume of a lost lover – today found with another man. If I were to be hung, or shot, or cast into the wilderness to die on my own, I would make my last request nothing more than a mucket of Ralston’s hot coffee to take with me. I wouldn’t be so lucky.

“Corporal Estevez! Front and center!”

I stepped forward, at attention, feeling like a sham as I tried not to shiver. I didn’t know if the shivers came more from the cold, or the fear, or the shame. “Sir!” I said, and the lieutenant sneered at the pretense.

“Your account of yourself, Estevez!” he demanded.

I almost said that it hadn’t changed since I’d given my report in the tent several hours earlier, but didn’t, so I just repeated myself. “The mission was being overrun, sir. Or so I thought. Retreat seemed...prudent, sir.”

“So you say. And was the mission overrun, corporal?”

“No, sir.”

“And was retreat prudent?”

“No, sir.”

“Then what do you call it?”

I didn’t answer, not knowing what he wanted to hear.

“Abandonment! Desertion! Cowardice!” he shouted, louder with each word.

I dropped my eyes from center for a moment, they moved of their own accord, lowering to the ground, another act of betrayal. “Yes, sir.”

“Twenty fighting men didn’t seem to think it prudent, yet you eight fled in the face of battle to let them die.” It wasn’t a question, just a fact.

“We didn’t expect them to have rifles,” I said, appalled at the weakness in my own voice.

“This is battle, Estevez. You don’t get to make the rules.”

“Yes, sir.” I looked up again and the lieutenant had his back toward us, thoughtfully studying the black pockmarks left by the musket balls in the whitewashed brick of the mission hall. There were spots of undamaged whiteness along the wall, roughly the height and width of the men who’d blocked the bullets from going any further. Blood still glistened in the dewy grass where they had fallen.

At length the lieutenant spoke again. “As the highest ranking coward, Estevez, you will head up the new section of all the cowards below you. It will be designated Section C, lest you forget your reason for being.” Several of the watching soldiers scoffed. I must have looked surprised because the lieutenant’s voice changed to specifically address me. “Don’t be relieved, corporal. This is not a reprieve. From here forth any duty you are assigned you will complete. You will do so without complaint and without hesitation. Failure at these duties will result in firing squad. Am I clear?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “From now on, any unpleasant work that needs done – latrines, mess, scouting, anything vile or untoward – you will do. You will spare the hands of decent fighting men any undue toil. Anything except for watch, for which you cannot be trusted.”

I winced at the last sentence, not knowing if it were true, hoping it was not. I resumed full attention and in my sturdiest voice answered, "Yes, sir!"

"Good, now get digging."

I looked at the long line of dead men who needed burying, one of them a parson, hands black with powder, blacker than mine, and realized just what it meant to do vile work. I wondered how much worse it could get.

"Yes, sir," I said again.

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We were denied Ralston's coffee, but were at least allowed back our coats. The letter "C," in bright whitewash, had been added to each blue sleeve. No one spoke as we dug and no one grumbled when we watched Ralston pour half a pot of rich, black coffee into the dirt. He'd made too much even though he'd made as much as usual. We all felt that it was right not to go to us. Ralston paid for that coffee himself, and it was a courtesy that he gave us any. Not to give it to us was the first time the lieutenant had ordered anything to do with the coffee one way or the other, and that meant something. It was like profaning the cross, it wasn't sacred anymore.

It wasn't until all the men were buried, the service had, and we were half way through breaking down the command tent that Private Bennington started to complain.

"We done nothing wrong," he grumbled at first. We all heard him, but pretended we didn't. That was a dangerous idea, and we knew it. "Nothing honest men wouldn't have done," he continued. "I mean, who can be asked to die for a building we can just retake when the regulars arrive. Why do we even need a mission in Indian territory, anyhow? Father Davis says they don't even have souls."

"Now that's bullshit," Private Coburn said. "All men have souls."

"But they ain't men!" Bennington whispered as loud as he could. "They're devils, and last night showed it!"

"They ain't devils," Coburn replied. "They're just savages. That's why we need the mission, to make them right with God."

"Then why'd you run, if you so sure we got God on our side?"

Coburn didn't reply.

"Alright," I said, taking my first shot at command, "let's not talk. We got plenty of work to do." Silence returned to our drudgery where I had fully expected backlash. The feeling of command was something I didn't like. Still don't. There's a type of person who likes to have control over others – the exact type of person that shouldn't. I ain't that type of person. If it were up to me we'd have razed that whole damned mission to the ground and been out of Indian territory for good. But that's why they call me a coward, I guess.

The whole company was now to numbers that we could fit inside the mission with relative comfort. We no longer took it for granted that the Indians wouldn't attack after nightfall, so the thick walls of the church were welcome. Section C had been given the duty of moving munitions and stores inside. The mess tent remained in the yard, but all the gear came in with us. It was messy work, moving the greasy griddles and blackened pots, and I'm sure it was unnecessary except as punishment to us, but we didn't complain. Bears and yotes hadn't been an issue since the Indians set up camp all around the mission. The wildlife seemed to know better.

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"My boots are dirty," a voice said in the dark. "Clean 'em." I felt a pair of leather soles slap against my face and tumble onto my bedroll. I'd been so tired that I hadn't even gotten inside to sleep. Cold and stiffness greeted me with the morning. I looked up to the soldier who'd dropped the boots. His reeking, socked feet were inches from my face. Initially, I thought of throwing the boots across the room and slugging him in the groin. But that passed quickly.

"Mine too!" a voice behind him called.

“Good thinking,” Lieutenant Tully’s voice said, “why don’t you clean all our boots. Good soldiers’ boots need a proper shine, so you’ll be spared at least your own eight pairs.” Laughter echoed through the hall.

Dim morning light was filtering through the high stained glass of the mission. Despite the darkness, it was an hour past reveille. No one had played us awake, the lieutenant wanted everyone to sleep. He really was a good man in his way.

Four of us were assigned to breakfast, the other four to cleaning boots. I was on boot duty, and grateful for it. The smell of fatback and coffee was a type of divine torture, even from a distance. We’d be the last to eat which meant we’d smell more than we’d taste. Our new role was becoming clear.

Ralston made his coffee again, and again the left over was put to the dirt. A wiry corporal, an actual soldier transferred from the Ohio gunnery division, had saved us a single cup. He painted a white “C” on the side and brought it to us while we waited for our turn at mess. “Here you go boys,” he said. Everyone else was watching. “Y’know what? I think it’s gone cold,” he took a sip and spit it back in. “Nope, it’s just fine. Drink up. Ye’ll have to split it.” He held it out to us. No one moved to take it, a couple of men looked at me. I was at a loss.

A few tense moments passed and the gunnery man started laughing. He tossed the coffee on the ground and returned to his grinning fellows. The cup with the white “C” became a spit cup after that, occasionally being offered to us when someone felt a cruel itch. There was little sympathy for the men of Section C from the others, even though we’d mostly all known each other for years now. We’d traded the morning paper out of Seattle, shared a chair at the barber, worked the same land – but now the strangers from the regular army were more like friends to them. They’d survived hell together, and were now comrades, soldiers more than militia. They spoke of the fort more often than their homesteads or claims or fishing grounds, despite never having been there.

It was then that I began thinking of redemption, some way to recover ourselves in the minds of our fellows. The soldiers be damned, but I loathed the idea of living through this and having to face the townsmen every day in the market. I knew opportunity takes time, so I waited.

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This boredom and toil went on for three days. The silence was rarely broken, for all ears were keen for the sounds of approach. Each hour that went by got us quieter and quieter with apprehension, so that the only sound was pines creaking in the wind. We told ourselves that each day that passed brought the regulars from Fort Vancouver a day’s march closer, but it also gave the Indians more time to rally. Without a dispatch from the fort we didn’t know how long they would be – a day, a week, never. We wouldn’t know who’d come over the hills on any given day, friend or foe. It was a race that put our very lives at the finish line. For three long days we saw no one, and to be honest the quiet was wearing our nerves to a jagged edge.

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On the third day of tense waiting we heard the sounds of human voices in a pitched battle drifting on the wind. It was mid-afternoon and the day was lazy and tense. The only busy hands were in Section C, sewing up holes in the command tent that we weren’t even using.

Ghosts of musket fire drifted in, slowly at first, through the trees. To a man, we peaked our heads up like startled cats, but none of us were sure we’d heard anything. Then the shots became more rapid, followed by the unmistakable screeches of mad braves on the warpath. The valley made for confusing echoes so that it was hard to tell exactly where they came from, but we knew it was distant; a couple of ridges south we guessed – the opposite direction that the regulars should have been coming from.

Had they somehow been diverted by the Indians? Or was it a supply train, settlers, being ambushed? Did they need our help? Or more frighteningly, was it a ruse to get us to leave the mission

so the Indians could catch us unprotected? Or maybe they'd just tear the whole damned thing down in our absence.

They blamed the missionaries for the pox and measles in their villages. They said the white god's holy men had called up the spirits of disease on their people, and they hated the mission more than they hated the soldiers.

Maybe it would have been for the best, actually. If we had had a good reason to all leave together, then the natives could have the mission and we could go home. We'd go as losers, but so be it, we'd all go alive. Of course, those're the same broken thoughts that got me to where I was.

I decided instead that this was our chance for redemption. I volunteered Section C to scout out the sounds, and after three days of abusive labor, none of my men disagreed.

"And should you run? Then what?" Lieutenant Tully asked.

"We won't. I swear it on that cross," I said, pointing to the stone cross atop the mission. Tully seemed unsure. "Look," I said, "if it's a trap, then you won't be short any fighting men when it's sprung. If it's the regulars needing help, we'll call for it and you have nothing to lose cuz we won't run if we're not in harm's way. We need this, we gotta make amends, Lieutenant."

"Fine," he acquiesced, "be quick. Take the trumpet and sound one blast to call for help, two to stay put and fight, three for coming home safe." Sounds of muskets echoed more rapidly. "Take the horses. Go, now!"

There were only three horses left alive in camp who hadn't been lamed in the pitch three days earlier. It was common for the natives to cut loose or kill an enemy's horses. Six survived too injured to ride and were being kept alive in case rations ran short, but three of those chased off came back in good health. I sent two men on foot straight up the mountainside south. The rest of us rode doubles, one pair back up the road to where the regulars should have been coming, two pair up draws that might hide our approach and shorten our search.

I rode with Bennington up an eastern draw that would drop us over the crest of a bare hill that would provide good visibility beyond. It occurred to me on the way that we would be exposed once we left the tree line and stepped onto the rocks of that bare hill. I'd chosen the most dangerous route for myself and my most skittish soldier, a strange realization. Was it beneficence, leadership or just coincidence? I don't know.

Either way, by then there was no one to spot us. Just as we reached the bare hill the musket fire had stopped. Only a faint blue mist of smoke a half mile down a trickling streambed gave any indication that anyone was anywhere.

"We gotta check it out," I said to Bennington.

"It's a trap. I can feel it," he replied.

"Maybe, but it may be too that folk need our help."

"What folk? There's no one here but us and them. They probably just caught a bear or something, best case. Or they're hiding down there in the mud, worst. Either way they're still there, I can feel it."

"Like enough," I realized. "So what do we do?"

"You're the captain, corporal," he said.

"Well, shit," I said.

"So what? Maybe we just git. Ride on till we're out of Indian territory."

"Well...shit," I repeated. "Then what? Get captured by our own, most like."

"We'll fly a white flag."

"Couldn't go back to town. Not ever."

"True enough. So what then?" Bennington repeated, though I knew the itch had gotten to his feet and he'd take for the hills first sign of trouble. He wasn't going to be no good in a scrape, which is likely what was waiting.

"I'll tell you what, Benni," I said. "I think you're right, but all the same I gotta do something. I've just gotta. But you want out of this whole thing right now then you can get down and go. I won't think less of ya', and I won't say a thing to the men. I'll say *they* gotcha. You got any family, Benni?"

"Not to speak of."

"Good, then go east, or south. Lose the uniform, avoid the tribes, avoid the towns, get out of here for good. Maybe San Francisco, or back east. Your choice."

"You mean it?"

"I do."

Bennington was quiet for a long time. Then, without another word, he slid off the back of the horse, sighed deeply, and walked back into the tree line. I was happy for him right then, but I felt awfully lonely when I couldn't hear his feet tramping branches anymore. I thought of leaving too, but knew I couldn't. It was an honest fear of battle made me run four days earlier, panic of the moment, but I had no such excuse right then.

To think now what'd have happened if I had left makes me wonder how things'd been different. I know I was no bigger coward than Bennington, and I think that if only one of us would have met the disease, it'd been him. So what'd have come of me? A better fate, or worse? Sometimes it's as impossible to see the past as it is to see the future. Because even looking back, I find it hard to believe that we weren't alone on that bald top, though certainly we weren't. It was already there. Passing right by me as I rode on.

* * *

The blue mist was almost gone in the breeze, so I marked the location in my mind, and went toward it. At the bottom of the ridge I tied off the horse, slung my rifle and drew my pistol. Best guess I was a half mile from the battle.

I heard a tumble of rocks from a slope on my left and spun my barrel towards it. Staring back at me from a hundred yards were the two men I'd sent on foot, Coburn and Ellis. They raised their rifle in salute and I pointed ahead. They signaled back that they understood began slowly flanking the mountainside above the stream as I walked the brush beside it.

We trod slowly for half an hour. Mosquitos and ticks jockeyed for free ground on my skin, I didn't dare slap them away. The smell of black powder grew on the wind. It was soon accompanied by the cloying, metallic scent of blood – white or red, it's impossible to tell.

The first body was clearly one of theirs, its long braid unraveling in the bubbling stream, blood seeped out of it, dying a rivulet of water red as it reached out and frittered in the ripples like it was trying to get away from the horror.

I pushed on, slowly. More bodies were soon evident in the bushes and shadows where the stream had meandered out a flat landing over the course of its years. I didn't count the number, maybe half a dozen. A small fire pit lay kicked to ashes, and in the distance I could make out wooden boxes half obscured under a bush that had the bold black letters T-N-T on the side.

It was impossible to know how long these braves had been waiting here for the call to attack. I shuddered at the thought of a dozen camps like this one spread out through the wilds surrounding us, armed with muskets and dynamite that they shouldn't have had. The mission stood no chance if the regulars didn't arrive soon.

"Where are the regulars?" a voice whispered from the shadows as if it read my mind. I jumped, but held my barrel low, immediately recognizing the voice of Private Coburn.

"I don't know. They should be here any day," I whispered.

"No, I mean where are the bodies?" he replied. I hadn't noticed until then, but he was right. Every body lying in the brush that day was a brave – no soldier amongst them. I didn't know what to say, but the weight of command forced me to invent something.

"A successful ambush, it would seem," I guessed.

"Then where'd they go?" Ellis asked from another shadow. I started again, then blushed embarrassment. Considering how easily those two managed to sneak up on me, I wouldn't have been surprised if an entire brigade had whispered by without my knowing. How I ever survived playing soldier I'll never know.

I shrugged.

"Indians must've fought it out themselves," Coburn speculated. "Looks like bullets and knives by the wounds."

"Those wounds aren't from bullets," Ellis whispered. "They're boils. They were sick."

"Maybe," I said. "But no matter. If we heard the reports, then you know another Indian camp did to. They've got to be on the way."

"How should we signal back to the mission, sir?" Ellis asked.

I thought, glanced at the vast stretch of wilderness rising on both sides of us, looked to the shadows of the gulch downstream where anyone could be just out of earshot. "Don't trumpet yet. We'll signal when we get back to the ridge. Let's git." I was whispering so low I could barely hear myself. "Oh, and don't call me sir. I'm not an officer."

"Right, sorry," Ellis replied. I felt his ease in my command slip. He became tenser, more alert. That was good. I didn't want anyone putting the confidence of their safety in my hands. I didn't need that right then.

"What about the other scouts?" Coburn asked. "They'll be rounding on this camp soon enough."

"They'll be sounded off by the horn. We'd better go," I said.

* * *

We walked out more quietly than we walked in. Imagine that. You're sneaking toward an unknown battleground, quiet as you've ever been, unknowing if a barrel full of grape is pointing right your way – but then you find nothing, and that's somehow worst of all. I think the human mind has a way of knowing some things – some things that just ain't right.

Back at the ridge where Bennington took off we got the horse then trumpeted twice to hold back our troops, and three times for a return to camp, then got on our way back to the mission.

It had been well over an hour, almost two, when we spotted the mission again. We knew something was wrong when no one greeted us as we called 'friend' from the trees. The whitewashed building stood out starkly in the clearing cut just for it. Smoke from the fires had cooled to black threads slithering into the sky. The injured horses were hobbling nervously in their corral some two dozen yard beyond it, but nothing else moved. We hesitated in the lengthening shadows of the trees, watching the stillness and waiting for the signal that we wouldn't be shot as soon as we stepped clear of cover.

"Friend!" I called again. "It's Estevez and C! We're coming in!" But we didn't go right away. Protocol demanded that we receive clearance, and plus we were just plain put off our ease. So we hedged until the sound of hooves crunching through the underbrush came up behind us. Privates King and Galouye crawled down from their mount silently and roped it to a tree next to mine. The horses were silent too. Something about that moment necessitated silence.

"We didn't find anything," Galouye whispered in my ear.

"We did," I whispered back, "a bunch of dead warriors, no white men. But now we can't seem to rouse the Lieutenant."

"Why are we waiting?" he asked.

"I called friend, but got no reply. Don't want to get shot," I said.

"Then call again, Ed," Galouye said. I took a breath to shout for a third time and saw him brace like I was preparing to sock him in the face. Glancing back, I saw the others blanch too. They didn't want me to break the silence anymore than I already had.

I let out the breath slowly. "We'll wait for Fielding and Row."

"Sure, Ed," he replied.

Tom Fielding and Westin Row, the two men I'd sent back down the ruts that constituted the only road to or from the mission, never returned. I hope they gave into nerves and made a clean break of it, I truly do.

Ten minutes of waiting and we were all getting restless. Not so much as a cough or sneeze sounded from inside the mission. Not a man of the thirty stepped out to the latrine or just to spit. Private Coburn, bespectacled eyes keener than most, noticed after a time that the tall double doors of the mission were open a touch. Not much, mind you, but a splinter of darkness separated the two. Had they been that way before? I couldn't recall.

"Well I'm going in," Coburn said. "No use standing out in the brush all night – cold is coming on."

"Sure," I said. "We'll all go. Get your pistols."

We stepped into the dying light and didn't get shot, which seemed like a good thing at the time.

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By the time we reached the doors I had it all figured out. The Indians had used the distraction to try and draw us from camp. They came in to find that most of the standing men were still here. The men took refuge in the mission, but the barricade was too late, or too weak, and the raiders made it inside where they had a slaughter, maybe down to the man, and that was it. I knew what we'd find then, opening up those doors, dozens of dead, all crammed into the small assembly hall, flies and rot already setting in. We halted before the door and listened. Silence. More damned silence.

Why hadn't we heard gunshots?

Coburn pushed lightly on the right door and broke the evening stillness with the rusty creak of laden hinges. We braced for the worst, and got something just next to it.

For some reason I was surprised to find out that I was right. Even in my own convictions I expected to be wrong, people usually are. But there they were, amongst broken pews, a toppled cross, scattered war gear, lay the bodies of our men, coagulating in their own death, interspersed with the bodies of bare-chested braves still clutching knives and axes. Still clutching... boy, I was green, wasn't I?

The sconces were cold, but a window opposite our approach had been broken out and let in enough of the evening sun to cast the whole scene into a chiaroscuro of horror. Ellis and King retched without turning away. I stepped back, the world swirled around in a confused haze as I endeavored to survey the yard, the trees, anything of the bleak wilderness surrounding us that may give indication to the inevitable danger that we must have been in. I wished desperately for someone to give me orders. Fear and panic rose and I started to shiver. I realized then just how alone we were in the land of the enemy.

"We should check for survivors," Coburn's voice broke through my haze. He was looking at me with sympathy, but also sternness. They all were.

"Um, okay," I said. "Lets...get some light."

"Lanterns are inside," Coburn said. "Galouye, get a match from the fire. I'll bring some out."

Coburn disappeared behind the door and could be heard shuffling around along the wall to the left. The shuffling stopped briefly and I almost called out his name, but the clank of lanterns jostling against each other echoed out of the hall and he emerged holding two in each hand.

"Good job..." I started to say, then noticed the look on Coburn's face. He rapidly sidestepped until he was in front of the closed door and not the open one. His eyes wide open, face pale, he began to shiver.

I started to speak again, to ask what was the matter, but was silenced by Coburn violently shaking his head and making a shushing shape with his mouth.

"Get those matches, Galouye," he said loudly, stilted, forced. Galouye was already standing at my shoulder and holding long smoldering punks, looking confused.

"O... Okay," he muttered and shrugged.

Coburn glanced back toward the door. He mouthed something without sound. I thought he was saying, "They arrive."

I looked toward the road, expecting maybe to see Fielding and Row, maybe the army itself, but the forest was just as still as it had been. When I returned my gaze there was another face hovering right next to Coburn's in the black space behind the open door. The face was dark skinned, scowling, yellow toothed, and staring right at me.

I stepped backward and pointed with my empty hand, suddenly realizing and repeating what Coburn had said, "They're alive!"

We raised our pistols.

Loud whooping erupted from the dark hall. Painted warriors, some dozen or so of them, leapt to their feet and rushed us with axes and knives brandished. A few of them pointed muskets or even rifles taken from the dead men in the hall. We stood in stunned shock glancing about wildly. So far they hadn't shot, and I didn't want to start the pitch myself, so I held my fire. My men did too, from innate self-preservation most like. Braver men would have accepted their fate and committed to death in battle. Woe be to them.

Within seconds Privates Ellis and Galouye started to run. Three braves sprinted past us and tackled the fleeing soldiers within a few strides while the rest disarmed us and knocked us to the ground. Coburn and King put up a struggle and were cuffed unconscious for their trouble.

Many of the Indians showed the unmistakable signs of early stage small pox. I don't know why I noticed that right then, but I did.

"We surrender! We surrender!" I shouted, truly not from cowardice this time, but because it was necessary – redundant perhaps, in retrospect.

"You are leader of these men?" a warrior shouted to me. The whooping ceased, along with the protestations from Ellis and Galouye.

"Yes," I said, "just these men – not those in the mission. We're not with the mission. Not army."

The warrior leader scowled. How much he understood was unknown to me, but he looked at our uniforms and seemed unconvinced.

"You are not army. Not priests?"

"No, not priests. I'm a farmer. I don't mean to be here. We were drafted by the provisional government. We're just militia. Take the mission. It's yours."

The leader spit on the door frame. "No priests. No need for you." He gestured to the brave pressing down on my shoulder, dragging a thumb across his neck.

"No! Wait..." I began, but was interrupted by a muffled voice from behind me. "I'm a priest!" Galouye shouted. The leader held up a hand to his men and they all looked at where Galouye lay face down on the earth. "A minister, rather," he stuttered. "Presbyterian, not Catholic, but...the same. I'm a holy man... Is that okay?" he asked. The lead Indian didn't answer, but studied the private for some time. I could tell that he hoped that the revelation would spare our lives, but wondered if it might have the opposite effect. The Indians held the most animosity against the mission leaders for bringing the diseases to their homes, I feared that they might have some prolonged sacrificial horror in store for us. The image of a man holding his still beating heart came into my head, stories of the Spanish explorers down south.

"Too many labels," the leader said at length. "Do you command your spirits?"

Galouye hesitated a moment then said, "Yes?"

"Good. You will undo this thing." He gestured back into black gulf of the mission hall. The warm light of the setting sun had given away to a chilling blue.

"Um, undo?" Galouye tried to stand, but was pushed back into the dirt by his captor. "I can't undo death."

“Undo this now!” the leader shouted. He barked orders to his men in his native tongue and we were roughly dragged to our feet. Some of the braves struck up the lanterns and we were pushed into the mission hall.

In the meager light of the lanterns we saw more of what we'd glimpsed from the door, dozens of dead soldiers in bloodied uniforms strewn about the place. The Indians led us toward the front of the hall, stepping over bodies flickering in the unsteady light. The smell of the blood, the fatigue of danger, darkness made deeper by the little orange fires in the Indians' hands, all these things caused a tremendous oppression of spirit to settle into that mission hall during that walk. The others felt it too, I could tell.

It's a feeling I've become very familiar with over the years. I've felt it many times since that night, and now know that I was feeling what those other men had felt moments before their deaths. And those braves in the war camp along the creek. They knew the feel of death lingering in the shadows, and I must wonder if they knew any better than I did what it was just before it came to them.

It must have been at the window, in the darkness of twilight, or perhaps above us in the rafters, or maybe standing amongst us, another form in the darkness, unheeded by our rigid focus on the altar. That feeling is how we've come to know when we're close, but we never get close enough.

I digress.

When we finished the bleak walk through the gruesome scene we saw a sight worse yet. In the pitch three days prior, we'd lost several of the missionaries, including one priest, to the Indians' bullets. Only Father Andrade and two deacons were left from the mission's original founders. Around the altar, itself covered in dark stains that I knew weren't there before, those three holy men knelt rigidly upright with their faces staring up at the ceiling in pious repose that, had their heads not been held to their bodies by only the bare bone that glistened through their severed throats, would have appeared to be the height of reverence.

The braves' leader spoke again. His voice was dry and he had to clear it, a significant gesture amongst men who revile fear. “Minister, undo it or we will do to you as the disease did to them.” He pointed at the priests.

Galouye stuttered, “Undo? What do I undo? What have you done?” Panic and shock was creeping into his voice.

“Relax private,” I said, “just do whatever you can.”

“We did not do this,” the brave said, gesturing a lantern to around the room. In that moment I caught my first glimpse of Bennington since he left me on the mountain and met the disease. The glimpse was brief in the flash of the light, his wry, grinning face flickering in frame of the broken window for just the briefest of seconds. I sighed in relief then. Can you believe it? In relief! I thought we had a chance then. Bennington, for all his faults, had come back to rescue us. He'd seen our plight and must have been working on a way to get us free. I nodded a smile to Coburn who still bore a dazed expression.

The leader pressed on. “The priests brought great evil upon us, upon you. Banish the spirits they made. Or die like them, Presbyterian.”

Galouye didn't move.

“Just go ahead,” I goaded. “Say a little prayer for all of us, Galouye. It couldn't hurt anything.”

The shivering private walked up to the altar slowly. He started to lower himself to his knees, then gave an unwary glance at the three men who'd died in the exact same posture. He stuttered something and began to stand again. I could feel the warriors at my side bristle in impatience. “Go ahead, private,” I said.

He lowered himself, removed his hat and began saying a silent prayer. The Indians began looking around the room, as if they expected the lightning and thunder of God, theirs or ours I don't know, to come dashing through the roof.

At first nothing happened, but when it did it wasn't thunder and it wasn't from the heavens. It was a low gurgling from Galouye's throat. He'd tensed, white knuckles practically glowing from his clasped hands. He shivered harder than before. Veins and sinew drew rigid lines in his neck. Sweat beaded in his hair despite the cold and gooseflesh, reddened lumps that reminded me of measles flared across his skin.

"Galouye?" I said, but got no further before he reached out and snatched up a revolver that had been concealed in the shadows near the altar. With a ravenous and snarling face he spun it towards the Indian leader and babbled some gibberish in a language I couldn't make out. The braves reacted instantly, two knives suddenly appearing in his heaving chest as the two men who'd thrown them rushed to tackle him. They didn't make it before Galouye turned the gun upon himself, angling it downward against his forehead and liberating the contents of his skull upon the altar behind him.

I may have shouted something, but I don't remember.

We were subdued, knees on our backs and ropes on our arms and legs before Galouye's body had even slumped to the ground.

"It is the same as they!" the leader said to us, but pointing to the priests. I saw from my new vantage point on my knees that each holy man clasped a long red knife in one of his hands. "Now you see the evil your spirits have brought!" He was shouting directly into my face.

Somewhere the thing that was once Bennington was smiling grimly.

* * *

If I wanted to sleep through that night I could not have. Tied to trees, gagged, we whiled away the dark hours listening to the echoes of gunshots in our memories, watching the agonized face of our comrades as they died before profaned altars. Invisible shadows, manifestations of our own minds perhaps, perhaps not, crept through the woods that night.

We listened to the warriors cough and retch in their bedrolls in the dark. They had built no fire, which I greedily longed for. I managed a brief sleep, troubled by a dream wherein I looked down upon us at that moment. I could see everyone clearly, Indians tucked away in blankets, hidden amongst the shrubs, the four remaining members of Section C tied to the rough bark of pines, and something, almost a feeling more than a sight, creeping through the darkness amongst us. In the way that dreams have, I could feel it as it went about touching the heads of certain warriors – selectively as a shopper in a boutique, creeping around and grazing each select one with a long finger. Though I couldn't see it, I knew it wore Bennington's face. Startling awake I saw only darkness.

* * *

The morning sun greeted us in slow degrees, eventually rousing the Indians who hadn't died during the night. Those who didn't awake were the ones who bore the signs of disease, the very same who'd been touched by the feeling in my dream. Three in all. They were covered with blankets by their not-very-surprised comrades and left where they'd perished. King and Ellis began to cough.

The leader of the band of raiders didn't slit our throats as I thought he would, but neither did he release us right away. The mission yard lay a hundred yards through the brush, and the whitewashed walls could be seen glinting through the trees. He sat with his knees at his chest and a blanket around his shoulders, staring in the direction of the mission, deep in thought.

"What happened at the mission yesterday?" I finally asked across the camp.

He stayed quiet for a long time, then answered, "I believe we have...failed."

"Failed?"

"Yes."

"How so? You have your land, the mission is no more."

"We are the ones who are...living but dead. Sick...with your missionary's pox. It was our hope – to stop the bad spirits. But I think now that it will not go away as it long ago had. Our people will die."

"I don't understand. The missionaries didn't cause your disease. Spirits don't cause disease," I said.

"They did, and they do," he replied, more confident than I.

"Then why didn't you get better when you killed the priests? Come with us. We have doctors, medicine men. We can help you."

"We did not kill your god men. The disease did."

"They didn't die by disease. You must know that."

"We do not need your medicine. We will die."

"You're not making sense to me. Tell me what happened, what happened to my men?"

"We came through the window when the fighting started over there." He pointed toward where Section C had discovered the small war camp full of dead braves.

"The gunshots over the mountain?"

"Yes. We thought you had all gone to fight, so we came with dynamite."

He lapsed into silence, so I goaded. "And."

"The priests were praying. Your warriors were dead. Except one. A man with a smile. Your man did what you saw. I believe he killed them all. Then he made your holy men kill themselves as they prayed against him. He feared them. Maybe your holy men can undo this as they have done it. Undo this spirit. But for us it was too late. Now I don't know. The Presbyterian died, but your man with the diseased spirit was not there."

I didn't know what to say so I let the silence drag until it became too heavy. I knew who he was talking about, the smiling man, but couldn't believe it. "With the diseased spirit? You mean Bennington?" I asked.

"I do not know your names."

"I think it was Bennington," I said, surprised by my own confession. Was I really willing to believe that a spirit possessed man had killed my comrades when it was obvious that the raiders themselves had done it? Except that the priests had been holding the knives themselves. I remembered my dream and realized that, while I maybe didn't believe it, I didn't disbelieve either. "And yes, he was there, I saw him. At the window."

The Indian looked surprised and nodded, but sat silently.

"We went to the gunshots over the mountain," I continued. "Just eight of us, the rest remained behind. Your men at that camp died the same way, I think."

He still didn't respond.

"We call them demons," I said, "not spirits."

"Too many labels," he replied, "too many names for things that should have none."

"We have coffee in the camp," I said to change the subject, "I know where Ralston kept it." He actually reacted to this. He turned, approached me. With deft fingers he untied the bonds that held me to the tree. My wrists ached as blood flowed freely to my fingers.

"Get your coffee, or don't. Go," he said, then untied the other four as well. They thanked him profusely as the other warriors looked on. Those who'd only shown the first signs of sickness the night before had now become pale and leaned against trees to stay upright.

I led our men quickly back to the mission, lest the Indians change their minds. Coburn went into the woods and found our two horses, dead on their tethers. He said they had bitten themselves to death, but I didn't confirm that. The lame horses were alive, but their wounds had festered and reddened until they had lay down in the sun and whinnied pitifully. Horses shouldn't lay down like that. We should have shot them, but for some reason we still feared breaking the silence.

The Indians disappeared into the woods, but didn't go far. The sick ones made traveling impossible. I could occasionally hear their clipped, strange language drifting through the trees, likely wondering what to do next.

A pot of Ralston's coffee was soon percolating on a fire at the far edge of the yard. Where once we'd jockey in line to get a dreg, there was now so much that we felt lonely watching the pot boil. Ellis and King's conditions worsened quickly. They sat in the dappled sun, leaning against a rock.

"We ought to get back to town as soon as possible," I said. "After breakfast. We can take frequent breaks, since none of us slept," – I didn't mention the obvious illness that beset itself upon the two – "but we should be quick nonetheless."

"Do you believe that hoodoo about the demon and the priests?" Coburn asked.

"No," I said, "but I don't disbelieve either." I paused. "But I know that Bennington is out there somewhere right now."

Coburn looked surprised. "I wasn't going to ask about that, but where'd Benni get to anyhow?"

"He split before we took the draw yesterday. I didn't stop him," I replied.

"And you're saying he's still around?"

"I think so. I thought I saw him lingering around the mission yesterday, but didn't mention it because of that Indian who speaks English. I was hoping for a rescue, but I guess that was foolish."

"Well," King wheezed, "he didn't stay alive this long because he's a hero."

I chuckled.

"All the same," Coburn pressed on, "there seems to be a powerful sickness about. Those braves came down with it mighty quick after that to-do in the hall yesterday, so did you guys," he gestured to the two red-splotched men. "You think maybe he's right? Maybe there's the devil's hand in this."

"Don't be a fool," I said. "Why aren't we sick, then?"

"I don't know," Coburn replied. "Not everyone gets sick all the time, but I've been thinking about one thing. I've known religious types to do some shifty things when it comes to proselytizing. Real bad stuff. If the priests were praying up a plague against the villagers, strange prayers in a raw land where they had no right being, that they don't know, where no consecrated foot has ever stepped, who knows what they conjured. Maybe more than they anticipated. Maybe something *did* get... summoned. These missionaries, they don't think, they don't consider that the land they stand on isn't the same land they know. They don't know who, what could be listening."

"Coburn, c'mon now..." I began.

"Just listen. We're the intruders here. We're the ones who don't know well enough what to leave alone. We think that because this dirt is like other dirt that all the places on the earth are just the same, right? But these places are old. Older than we've a chance at knowing. There are things in the earth that not man or beast controls. It says so in the Bible, even."

"You're not kidding about having given this some thought," I said.

"Just listen. Now you're saying you let Bennington go yesterday. Well I haven't mentioned it, but in the battle four days back I... I ran right past a brave coming up behind one of the parsons. I could have warned him, maybe even saved him, but I was scared. I was so scared I wasn't thinking of nothing but myself, so I kept running – and I heard the scream. The parson died because of me. Maybe that's why we were spared, because in our own small way we helped it. You gave it Bennington, and I let die a holy man."

"I didn't *give* it Benni. He left of his own accord."

"All the same. If you'd have stopped him, then the spirit would have wandered unbodied. I've studied some, it's not beyond the lore of the tribes."

"It's true," Bennington said from the far side of the fire. Coburn and I started at his appearance. Neither of us had seen him arrive. King and Ellis didn't respond, they were motionless under their blankets. "I happened to be looking for a new home just as you and your friend were passing by. If you hadn't sent him back, Ed, I may have just disappeared into the wind. It takes a very special kind of person, you see, pitiful and full of weakness." He looked at the whitewashed "C" on his arm and smiled like a mother smiles at a child. "You did me a good turn, and I'll forever be grateful."

A million questions flooded to mind that I will be forever regretful of not asking. Coburn was silent as well. Bennington smiled, revealing bleeding gums and yellow teeth. His skin was covered in pustules, his eyes dark rimmed. Where his hat was askance clumps of hair were seen to be missing.

"Benni," I said, "you need a doctor."

Bennington, the thing that was Bennington, just smiled. I noticed then how his blue uniform was muddied with dried blood. Yellow cakes of puss had dried around the edges of the brown stains. His rifle and pistol were gone, but a long hunting knife hung from his belt. He must have caught me looking, because he waved away my gaze and said, "Don't worry, I have much work to do. We have been still for far too long. I just wanted to stop by and say thank you, both." He stood up to leave.

"We? There are more of you?" Coburn asked at my side.

"Oh, don't be surprised. We've been with your kind forever, since you first sought to subjugate the land for your own. Where you go, we awake. Like a wave across the world. We travel on your ships, on the backs of your rats, in the larders of your civilized places. The more you control, the more we control. You fight us, but we persist. We will always persist where conquerors tread. We like you for that. These others," he gestured in the direction of the Indian camp, "are not so... agreeable. But they will become acquainted, thanks to you, and they will fall to us in droves." He smiled and breathed in a raspy breath like smelling a fresh pie. "I can sense it now, a long suffering for them, and new sufferings for you. Raw land, full of potential." He stood up and turned away. "Goodbye." And with that, Bennington, or the thing that was once Bennington strode briskly into the shadows where the plants wilted at his passing.

* * *

That was seven years ago. King and Ellis didn't survive the day. Reinforcements arrived, and the mission was brought back to life, but we were long gone by that time. Guilt has dogged our steps since then as ardently as we have dogged the steps of the thing that kills with madness and disease. The tribe we fought is all but vanquished. Where white bullets have failed, white sickness has prevailed. The leader and his men who survived the mission that day have taken the few survivors into the woods where the yellow fiend has yet to follow. Coburn and I have hunted our ex-compatriot since that day, seeking to put an end to what we had started. We follow the fiend by following the yellow death itself.

For the first time since that day we've seen Bennington in person. How many others like him we've seen we will never know, for they always bear human faces and always exist among many others fighting and thriving at the end of a trail of pestilence. But Bennington we know, and hopefully we can stop. If nothing else, we can at least set him free.

New Orleans is warm tonight, as warm as the fever that's running through the town. The fiend likes it warm. Coburn and I will confront it soon. Can it be killed? We will try. We will pray and we will shoot, but what good will come of it we do not know. You may, if you hear this story, though it's not likely. As the thing that was Bennington said, where our kind go, their kind awakes. We are the destruction that travels across the lands of the world, and we aren't going anywhere any time soon.

:God be with us, the Cowards of Section C. Guide our hands and lead our hearts against the enemy. And absolve our sins. Amen.: