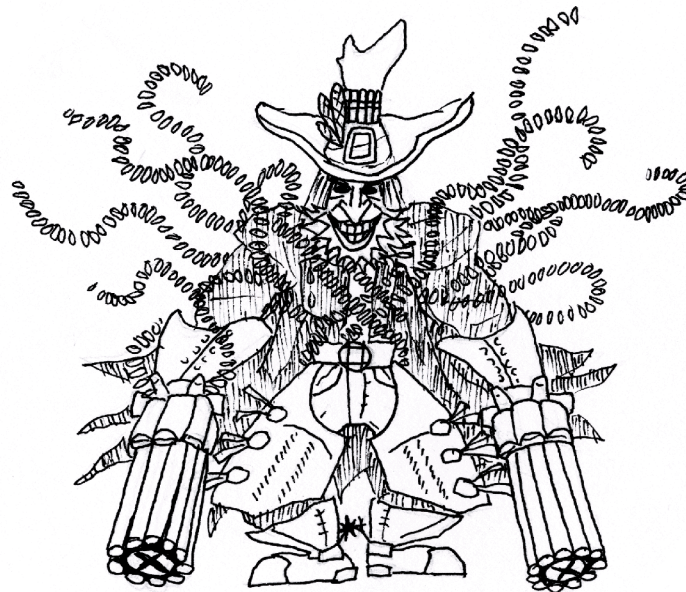


Never Go West



There is sand in my teeth. I can feel it. I can taste it. It grinds when I talk. It grinds when I breathe. I can't never seem to spit it all out. The grinding cuts my nerves like a knife. I haven't been talking much. I haven't been breathing much neither. I'm a little worried 'bout that.

First thing I remembers is stumblin into town with sand in my mouth an' cactus in my boots. I ain't never seen a town quite like this before, but I can't quite put my thumb on what's wrong with her. Trouble is, no matter how hard I think, I can't remember what any other towns I ever seen looked like. Like that one place in... dang it! There it goes again. I just had it, an' now it's gone.

So I waits for the trains to clear out, an' then I run cross the street, an' go into this big false front with the double-doors that says it's a saloon. I figure somebody in there can tell me where I am.

"Hey bartender!" I says, "Whats the name of this here town?" an' then I spits dry, cause I can feel the sand.

An' the bartender, big heavy guy with shoulders like an ox, he's washing a whiskey bottle, an' when I talk to him, he don't look at me, he just tenses up an' shakes, an' he drops the bottle, an' I hear it break behind the bar. Then he ducks down real calm like, an' picks up a big piece of it, an' keeps washing it like nothing happened. an' I can see the whiskey dripping out of it, an' coloring the rag he's using, an' I wonder why he was washin a full bottle o' whiskey in the first place, but I don't say nothin, I just spit dry again, an' wait to see if he is gonna answer.

an' after a minute, he says "I reckon you're new to these here parts. This here is New-Neo-Double-West-Sagebrush Township, an' I reckon there ain't any place closer to hell than here, 'cept maybe everything west o' here."

"That bad, huh?" I say, an' spit. "Why'sit called New-New-Double Whatever Township?"

An' he looks at me like he's surprised I'm still standing there, an' after another minute, he says "New-Neo-Double-West-Sagebrush Township. Thats what we call 'er. Thats just 'er name. That, an' New-Neo-Single-West-Sagebrush Township was already taken." an' he goes back to washin his chunk o' bottle.

I let that sink in, but it don't make nothin' make no more sense. "Gimmie a shot o' whiskey" I says to him.

He uncorks a whole bottle 'n gives it to me, an' I take it. I ain't got no money, an' he don't ask for none. Not yet anyhow, but I don't let that worry me.

There weren't no other people in the saloon 'cept me an' the bartender, but when I sits down at a table, all of a sudden there is three other guys sitting there too, an' the whole room is full of people drinkin, an' there is noise 'n shoutin' an' singin' an' music, an' I can see this dancin' girl out o' the corner of my eye, an' she woulda deserved more'n half my attention, 'cept for these three ugly gents at my table, all starin' at me like they was ready to kill me. an' then the one in the middle, he says "Deal 'im in, Billy." an' he smiles at me, but it don't make him look like he wants to kill me any less.

The cowboy on my left has a deck o cards, an' he deals me a hand. He's a young fella, with a big hat hangin' down his back on a string from his neck, an' his face is so burnt-red I'll bet he don't never wear that hat no other way. The guy on my right looks like a chinaman, an' he's got a red scarf wrapped round his chin an' it covers his nose an' his mouth an' his neck, an' runs down his shoulders. It's like just the top of his head sticks out. I see where the scarf is dark red an' wet like around his mouth, like he's been drinkin right through the scarf instead o' pullin' it down. But he ain't got no drink, just his cards. He glances at me, an' coughs, real dry an' hoarse like, so it makes my skin crawl, an' I remember the sand in my teeth, an' wanna spit again, but I just swallow instead.

An' the man in the middle, the one who said "Deal 'im in", I can tell right off he is a gunfighter. A real desperado. I can't see his guns, but there's ammo belts all over him, inside 'n outside his coat. an' he's got deep black eyes where there ain't no part of them thats white, not even round the edges, an' he's got sticky black hair that hangs down from under his hat, an' he' got a beard that looks like it ain't made of hairs, it looks like there's just a bunch o' big thorns growin' right out through his skin.

So I look at my hand, 'n I got five aces, 'n three of em are spades. I take a big drink o' my whiskey. It's so warm I almost spit it out. It ain't whisky at all. It's

warm an' salty-sweet, an' thick almost like syrup. It ain't bad, whatever it is.

The youngster with the red face throws down one card, an' gives himself another. The desperado with the thorny beard shakes his head an' says "None for me, Billy." an' then he grins at me. The chinaman coughs an' lays down two cards, an' then Billy deals him two. I put down two of my Aces of Spades, an' he deals me an Ace of hearts an' the Queen of Spades.

"I reckon intruductions are in order." says the desperado. "This here is Billy Infernos," he says, aimin' his hand at the red-faced youngster who's been dealing the cards.

"Howdy." Says Billy, 'n when he says it, smoke curls outa the corners of his mouth, but if he's got a smoke, I can't see where he's hidin' it.

"an' this here is Nine-Life-Moon," he said, pointing at the chinaman with the scarf. Nine-Life coughs real hard twice, an' doubles up like it hurts him, keepin' his cards in close the whole time. The desperado leans in over the table, an' whispers real loud like "He don't speak no english!" an' then he settles back in his chair an' says "An' they call me Caiphus Jackson, coldest killer in New-Neo-Double-West-Sagebrush Township. Together we's the 'Never-Go-West Gang'".

Seems to me if a man wants ta brag, he would brag on bein' the biggest killer in some place bigger than just the town he was sittin' in, but I don't say nothin' bout that.

"Show yer cards." says Caiphus.

"Don't'cha want ta know my name?" I says.

"No. You ain't got one. Now show yer cards." says Caiphus.

Now I ... dang it! He's right! I ain't got a name! At least not one I remembers. I take another big drink o' my bottle that ain't whisky to hide how shook up I am about not havin' a name. Feels like I ought ta have one. Feels like I used to have one.

I show my cards. "Four of a kind. Read 'em an' weep, boys", I says.

Billy slams his cards down. "I fold." he says.

Nine-Life drops his cards, an' coughs till he chokes.

Caiphus holds up his five cards right up in front o' his grin, an' thumbs through them like he's countin' them. Then he starts layin them down one by one. He starts with the two o' diamonds, an' then the three o' diamonds, an' keeps on going right up through the ten o' diamonds. Then he puts down the Jack, Queen, an' King, still diamonds, an' then an Ace o' diamonds just like the one I had, an' then he tops it off with a great big card almos' twice as big as the others, an' it's got a skeleton on it holdin' a sickle in one hand, n' an' hourglass in the other.

"Thats a long royal straight death flush," says Caiphus. "I win again."

"Hey, what was the bet?" I asks. "We never even ante'd up."

"That game was fer yer soul!" shouted Caiphus, standing up. "I thought you

knew the rules of draw poker when you sat down!"

"Whoa, there Cai!" I says, "I never bet my soul on that hand!"

"The name's Caiphus Jackson," said Caiphus. "Say it all, or don't say it at all."

Then Billy pipes up. "Cut him some slack, Boss. He's new in town."

I realise the music 'n shoutin has died down, an' people are lookin' at us. I glance around. The dancin' girl has stopped, an' she's starin' at me.

"Look, Caiphus Jackson," I says, "I didn't know we was playin' fer souls. That was a right good hand you had there, so I don't blame you fer bein' mad. But I ain't givin' you my soul. Let's we start again, 'n play fer somethin' else."

Caiphus grinned an' sat down. "I ain't lettin' you out of that bet, but I'll play you double 'er nothin'."

"Double or nothin'?" I asks "How the hell is that supposed to work!? I ain't got no more than one soul."

"Double means yours, 'n one more of our choice" says Caiphus.

Billy laughs, 'n Nine-Life laughs an' then coughs. I spit dry.

"No." I says.

"Don't nobody says 'no' to the Never-Go-West gang!" shouts Caiphus, jumpin' up again.

Fer a second, I thinks he is gonna whip out his guns an' shoot me right there, but he don't. He just stands there with his hair an' his coat flapping out behind him like he's a standin' in a high wind, cept of course there ain't no wind, on account of we's still inside the saloon.

An' he says, "I'll take that soul from ya here at the poker table, or I'll take it out o' you on the street in a fair fight!"

So I stands up an' I spits sand, an' I stares him in the eyes, an' I ain't never seen colder deader eyes before.

"I ain't got no guns." I says.

"Give'em yer guns, Billy!" says Caiphus.

Billy scowls fierce, an' I gets a whiff o' smoke, but sure 'nuff, he unbuckle's his gunbelt, an' throws her on the table. Two big silver revolvers in leather holsters, with flames painted on 'em.

"That all you need, stranger?" asks Caiphus. "You ready?"

I spits again, an' I takes a swig o' my not-whiskey, real causal like, an' I says, "High Noon. Out in the street."

Caiphus, he tenses up, an' he shows his teeth, an' them thorns he's got fer a beard they look like they is growin'. Billy, he slams his fist on the table, an' sends that deck o' cards flyin, an' I swear if half o' the cards don't catch fire. Nine-Life has another one o' his coughin' fits, an' that makes me wan't to spit sand again, so I do.

An' Caiphus shouts, "You think yer funny, stranger?!", an' his voice sounds

like there's two or three o' him inside sayin' the same thing at the same time outa the same mouth.

"I reckon High Noon is as good a time as any fer a gunfight." I says.

"I'll make you sorry you said them words!" says Caiphus, still talkin' like a chorus. "We fight one hour before dawn! You be there! We'll be waitin'!"

An' once he's said that, he vanishes inta thin air, like he weren't never even there. An' Billy stands up, an' scowls at me, an' he vanishes too. An' Nine-Life stands up, an' he don't look at me, nor say nothin', he don't even cough. He vanishes too. So there I am standin' alone, with a bottle o' not-whiskey in my hand, an' a pair o' guns sittin' there on the table in front o' me with smoulderin' playin' cards spread all round.

An' I looks around the room. Everybody is starin' at me, but now that it's just me they lose interest, an' go back to whatever they was doing before. An' as they do it, they vanishes. Old feller at the next table looks away an' picks up his drink, an' he's gone. Cowboys at another table looks away, an' theys gone. The feller with the fiddle in the corner puts his bow back on the string, an' he's gone. Two notes out o' the piano, an' the player's gone. Pretty soon there ain't nobody left besides me, the bartender, an' that dancin' girl.

I looks at the bartender, an' he looks at me fer a second, an' then he goes back to cleanin' the neck o' the whiskey bottle he's holdin', an' he vanishes too.

Then the dancin' girl, she steps down off the stage, an' she walks at me, red dress swishin'. She's right pretty girl, but her eyes ain't got no middles, like Caiphus's didn't have no edges.

"Name's Jezebel of Spades," she says, "an' this here is my saloon."

"Pleased ta meet ya, Miss." I says.

"Y'all just picked a fight with the Never-Go-West gang." she says. "So I reckon I'm gonna let you have that bottle on-the-house, on account if it'll be the last drink you ever has."

"I say it was them what picked a fight with me." I says.

"Whatever." she says. "It's all the same." An' she picks up Billy's guns. "You know how to use these?" she asks.

"Yes, Miss." I says. "I been in a few gunfights before."

An' she shakes her head sorry-like. "But you ain't never fought no-one like Caiphus Jackson before. You ain't from around here, so you don't know what kinda gunman he really is."

"I ain't from around here," I says, "so he don't know what kinda gunman I am." I felt the sand in my mouth, an' I wanted ta spit, but I held back on account o' the lady.

She hands me the guns, an' I take em, but I don't look at em, I just sling the belt loose over my shoulder.

"You shoulda given him your soul at the card-table." She says. "Woulda gone

easier for you in the long run."

"You think I can't beat him?" I asks.

"You can't beat him." she says. An' she says it so quick 'n flat 'n clear that I can't help but believe her.

"Then why don't I just skip town?" I says.

"Don't." she says.

"Why not?" I asks, takin' another swig o' my not-whiskey.

"Cause if you go West, you can't never come back," she says, "an' if you go East, you won't find nothin' that you ain't seen before."

"So what?" I says.

She puts her hands on her hips, an' says real stern-like "You can't go West, cause if you do, you can't come back. an' you can't go East, cause that'll just take you back where you been before."

"That don't make no sense, Miss." I says. "Anyway. What about north 'n south?"

"You really ain't from around here!" she says. "You ain't from around here at all! There ain't no such things in these parts."

I can't take it any more, so I turns my head an' spits sand. "Sorry, Miss." I says. "If I can't run away, I reckon I'll just have to fight." I drains the last o' my bottle o' not-whiskey. It's powerful warm. I wipes my mouth with the back o' my hand, an' when it comes away, I see it's all smeared red.

Miss Jezebel don't say nothin' more. She just folds her arms.

"I reckon I best be goin'." I says. I puts down the bottle, an' I takes Billy's gunbelt an' fastens it round my waist, an' I makes for the door. I can't remember what time it was when I come in, but I thought it was light then, but it's dark out now. I looks back at Miss Jezebel. She's still standin' there, arms folded round her middle.

"One question." I asks. "Why'd it burn Caiphus so much when I said I'd fight him at High Noon?"

"Don't be sayin' things like that." she says. "You best be leavin' now." An' then she vanishes.

So I steps out into the street. An' it's dark like night, but there's lanterns all up an' down the street, an' there is all sorts of folks standin' along the boardwalks on either side o' the street, like they is waitin' for a parade. A freight train barrels past one way, an' a lone engine chugs past the other way, an' then the street is clear. I steps out a few paces, an' I sees three fellas standin' in the open a little ways down.

The one on the left is tall, an' his hat's off. The air above him is cloudy, like he's smokin'. The one on the right is short, an' all wrapped up, leanin' on a long-rifle. His shoulders keep bunchin' up, but I can't quite hear his coughin' from this distance. An' the big one in the middle can't be nobody but Caiphus Jackson. I

can't feel no wind, but his coat's flappin' like he was standin' on a mountaintop in a hurricane.

I walks towards 'em. As I go, a pair o' trains comes up from behind me, one on my left, an' one on my right, an' they go ragin' past me at the same time, so I feel like I'm movin' backwards even though I'm walkin' forwards. An' the trains are like walls o' a tunnel, with the Never-Go-West gang standin' waitin' for me at the far end.

The street is wide. I reckon it is wide enough for a dozen trains side-by-size, an' it's laced with twice that many train tracks. I knows that while we is fightin', I'm gonna have to pay as much attention to the trains as I do to the bullets.

When I gets close enough so I can see 'em clearly, Billy Infernos, he goes left to the side o' the street, an' Nine-Life-Moon, he goes right to the other side o' the street, an' that leaves Caiphus right alone in front o' me.

Another train goes by, an' we waits fer it. I spits sand an' pulls on my gunbelt. I weren't plannin' on dyin' in a gunfight today, but ain't nothing been goin' quite right today anyway. I tries to remember what the last thing what happened before I walked into this here town with a mouthful o' sand was, but I can't remember nothin'.

"One hour 'till dawn!" shouts Caiphus. "You ready to draw!?"

I just nods. Might as well get this over with. I hovers my hands over Billy's guns.

I still can't see Caiphus's guns. His coat's flappin' like a tornado, but I reckon they're in there somewheres. His ammo-belts start to slide 'round him, slitherin', like they was snakes, an' the loose ends o' them lifts up in the air an' curls round. An' he crosses his arms, an' plunges his hands into that big flappin' coat o' his, an' I draws one gun an' fires it at him, BANG! but I misses. an' his hands come out o' that coat haulin' the biggest guns I ever seen. They each looks like a dozen shotguns bundled round a cannon, an' those ammo belts waving in the air round him dives into the guns like rattlers divin' into a rat-hole. An' them guns spins an' fires like a long peal o' thunder, an' the air 'round me is full o' bullets like flies round a corpse. I dives an' rolls across the tracks, right in front o' a train.

So fer a minute I got a train between him an' me. An' I check myself out. I been cut by a few bullets, but none o' them has gone through me.

The train passes, an' I let fly with a second bullet the moment I sees him, but it don't hit him. An' as soon as he see's me, them big guns spin, an' there's another storm of bullets 'round me. I can't even aim to shoot back at 'im.

Suddenly there's another train between us, an' it takes me a second to make sure I ain't dead yet, but I ain't taken three breaths, an' I feel a sting in my leg. He's shootin' between the wheels o' the train. I jump an' run along with the train a ways, but I can't run far, cause I'm shot now. I can feel it in my leg, but I tries not to pay it no mind.

The train passes while Caiphus is still shootin' under it. He don't see where I am. I takes a third shot at 'im, an' this time I wing 'im. His hat flies clear off his head, but before it hits the ground, he's sprayin' bullets at me. I feel some of em hit me, an' next thing I know, I'm lookin' up at the sky. The sky's dark, but there ain't no stars out, an' dawn is still a long way away. There is another train rumblin' by, an' it's the only reason Caiphus ain't shredded me to pieces yet.

I feel the tracks under my back ringin', an' I know another train's gonna cut me in two in a second if I don't get up. So I rolls an' I stands, an' I steps back, an' the train screams by.

I aint shot so bad as I thought. I can stand up, an' I can see straight. I spit some sand, an' try to guess where Caiphus is gonna be when the trains pass by.

Another train goes by the other way, an' I'm trapped between the two o' them. There's thunder overhead, an' I see Caiphus fly from the top o' one car to another, an' bullets rain down an' pop against the sides of the cars, an' thud against the dirt, an' ping off the rails. An' Caiphus flies right over my head from one train to the other, an' disappears on the other side.

I hear him shout over the roar of the engines, "You been countin' my bullets, Stranger?" he says. "You been countin' them good? Maybe yer askin' yerself, 'Was that seven hundred an' ninety-eight bullets I heard? or seven hundred an' ninety-nine bullets?'"

An the train passes, an' sees him there, coat flappin' hair flyin', wearing a big grin in the middle o' that thorny beard. His ammo-belts is all hangin' empty an' limp like they is dead, but one more full one leaps up off his back an' dives into his right hand gun, an' he lets it rip. an' I run. The lead in my leg is burnin' me, an' all the places where I been nicked an' grazed is burnin' me, an' my lungs is burnin' me so much I wonder whether I mighta taken a bullet in one o' them too, but I run anyway, an' dive behind the next train, but I jump right back up again an' keep runnin, 'cause he's shootin between the wheel's again.

But this ain't gettin' me nowheres. I turns around, an' runs with the train, an' I tries to catch ahold o' the railin' between cars, but it's goin' too fast, an' I can't catch it, an' two, three, four cars they get past me. I jumps at the last one, but I slips, an' tumbles across the next set o' rails.

An' there's Caiphus again, all wind an' fury, but he ain't shootin', he's just standin' there.

I picks myself up, an' dusts myself off, an' spits sand, but he ain't shot me full o' holes yet. An' I walks over to where the gun fell out o' my hands when I was jumpin' fer the train, an' I picks it up, but he still ain't shot me yet. He's just standin' there.

"What's the matter?" I shouts. "You run out o' bullets? Yer a hellofa bad shot, Cai! A man puts that much lead in the air, ought ta be able to hit me more'n twice."

I limps towards him. He just stands there with his coat flappin' like fire an' his ammo belts hangin' down heavy like gallow ropes. He lets his two bug guns slide out o' his hands, an' they hit the rails with a clang.

There ain't no trains comin' now, an' the folks lined up along the sides of the street is watchin' real quiet like. I wonder why they'd want to stand out there an' watch if they knew Caiphus was gonna be shootin' fer a whole army. I wonder how many o' them he hit.

"This is how we do a fair fight where I come from." I says. I takes the other gun, the one I ain't used yet, out o' the holster, an' I throws it to him.

Caiphus catches it. "Oh, lordy, you ain't from around here!" he says with a great big grin full o' fangs.

He snaps up that barrel so fast I don't see his arm move, an' I hears;

CLICK!CLICK!CLICK!

Caiphus's grin falls a notch, an' he goes;

CLICK!CLICK!CLICK!

"Dammit!" he shouts, "Dammit Billy, when I said Half-ammo, I mean't three bullets in one gun, an' three bullets in the other! not six bullets in one an' none in the other."

BANG!BANG!

I shoots him once in each eye, an' down he goes. The folks along the street all cheers at once, all of em, like they'd been wait'n fer that moment all their lives.

But the sound of the cheerin' gets drown out by the sound of the train that goes by behind me, an' the other one that goes by between me an' Caiphus. An' when they pass, it's quiet. There ain't nobody watchin', just lanterns lightin' the empty boardwalks, an' me standing there in the street among the rails. I can't see Caiphus's body neither.

"Maybe I was wrong 'bout you," says Miss Jezebel, from right behind me.

I turns around.

"I saw what you did there." she says. "You don't belong here."

"I reckon I don't." I says.

"Maybe you can go West after all." she says, an' vanishes.

Sudden-like, the sky goes red, an' the sun comes up, an' it don't wait there, it climbs right straight up in the sky till it's High Noon, an' when it gets there, all the buildings fade away, an' the rails fade away, an' the gun in my hand, an' the gunbelt with the flames painted on it, they fade away too. An' then the sun starts to drift down West, gentle an' slow like it's supposed to go, an' I follow it.

I spits, but there ain't no more sand in my mouth.

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