

MISERY
PLAZA

AN EXCERPT

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*M*y father was a good man. A decent man, despite what you may have heard about him through folklore or maybe read about him in your history books. That's not to say he wasn't an inherently flawed individual, as many of us can sometimes be described. I mean heck—back in those days, who wasn't? I would defy you to prove me otherwise. Now, don't get me wrong, he was no Saint. Poles apart from. I know this. A mere product of his egregious environment. And I'm certainly not going to stand here and begin to justify any of the things he did or those I happened to be privy to. Some of which still stays with me to this very day. Things I couldn't explain at that time. Things beyond what you good folk would rightfully call rational comprehension. Now, I truly don't mean to harp on such things, but I would be completely remiss not to mention the impression he left on my brother and me. Especially me. There are some folks who can tell you their earliest memories being three, maybe four years old; even some as far back as a year—year and a half, if you can believe it. I am not one of those folks. Maybe it's something they refer to as repressed memory, but all I can tell you is that I don't remember much before I was nine years old. I can recall my mother's burial. I remember the Big Flood. I

*remember the first time I saw Joseph Griffin, my father, a broken soul,
cry. I will never forget the second time.*

That's when we moved to Missouri Plaza.

PROLOGUE

Potter walked behind Eugene McCormac, about three feet back, with the filed down barrel of a sawed-off splatter-gun, waist height, pointing at his lower back. Every few minutes he'd slow his pace a bit, enough to allow some slack between himself and his captive. Just in case McCormac decided to make a daring dash as they entered the heavily wooded area. Firing such a gun at close range meant spending the rest of the day picking Lord-knows-what from your clothing, all kinds of awful, and Potter knew better than most that a good clean change didn't come easy. And blood? Those pearly whites—the one of only two pairs he owned—well, they'd be as good as horse shit.

Through the slits of tall, narrow trees, Potter caught a glimpse of the sun sinking down behind the silhouetted Pikes Peak range. Rays of golden light exploded from behind the jagged mountains, a partially hidden projection illuminating the distant northwest skyline, before the fresh spring growth completely obstructed his view.

They had walked quite a distance through the tranquil grove in silence, save for the irritating clink of McCormac's crooked boot spurs with every bowlegged step. Shrill calls from birds of prey

circling high above the treetops punctuated the quiet, along with small woodland creatures rustling through the brush as they passed. Katydid, just beginning their evening song, resonated through the shaded proliferation. Their trilling slowly grew, encompassing the pair the further they walked into the timberland.

McCormac's fingers—which had been behind his head, interlaced—separated, and his hands began to lower.

“Keep'em up,” Potter ordered, his voice rolling out low, deep, and slightly broken. He hadn't spoken since riding up on McCormac an hour earlier.

McCormac stopped. “I gotta itch.”

The mosquitos, which trickled out only moments before, now flew out of the woodwork in droves. McCormac waved a hand around his head, paused, then began to turn around.

“Epp... eyes forward,” Potter commanded with a slow wave of the gun. “Keep moving.”

“What you planning on doing with me once we get to where we goin?” McCormac's hands rested at shoulder level, head tilted just enough for Potter to see the white of his right eye below the frayed brim of a black Stetson.

Potter had no idea. Well, some idea. He knew exactly what he wanted to do, what he should do. Whether that was going to happen, he just had to wait and see. He didn't like the situation this *chance encounter* with an old acquaintance had now put him in. Everything was fine. Everything was going fine—fine as he supposed things could go, all things considered.

The men trudged on. By this time, the sun had completely vanished behind the Front Range as the navy skies of civil twilight bled down from the upper atmosphere, nonchalantly blotting out the remains of the day. Potter hadn't brought a lantern, and if he progressed further, as he now realized, making his return could prove difficult. He was armed—heavily armed at that—but just the same, nobody wants to stumble upon the business end of a grizzly bear in the dark. At least it wouldn't be his first time. He shook his head, not wanting to dwell on memories best left for another day.

“Stop,” Potter uttered, following a moment later with “turn around.”

It was as good of a place as any.

“When did you know?” McCormac said.

“Does it matter?”

“Just surprised is all. Been here a few weeks now. Neither one of us looking like the men we once was.”

“How did you find me?”

“I-I didn't. Just dumb luck, I s'pose. It's a big country. We was bound to cross paths again at some point or another.”

“Apparently not that big. I guess we were *destined* to do this dance, is what you're sayin'?”

“Huh?”

“I'm supposed to believe it was coincidence you stumbled upon Bennett's Mine?” Potter, gun in hand, slowly backed McCormac against a tree.

The other man held his arms out, hands crossed, as if to keep Potter at a distance.

Potter peeled back both hammers of the sawed-off.

2

“I-I swear I was just passin through,” McCormac pleaded. “That’s all! I-I-I was never gonna say nuthin to nobody. Honest! I was plan-nin on leaving in a day or two, anyway, you-you know? I did what I came to do—now off to the next town, same-ol,’ same-ol,’ know what I mean?”

Potter stared down at him from under a weathered brown hat, motionless, eyes barely visible. Vacuous. The man’s empty gaze bore into McCormac, and his heart stuttered. He’d never forgotten that look, despite the twenty years that passed since he’d seen it.

“Besides, what would I stand to gain by sayin’ somthin? Ruh-ruh-right?” McCormac stammered, his filthy hands—still held out—beginning to quiver before his eyes. Whether his trembling stemmed from the chill in May evening air, or just fear poisoning his blood stream, he couldn’t say.

“You stand to gain everything,” Potter said, sliding a leather sack down from the heavily worn shoulder of his long brown overcoat.

The bag hit the ground with such force, McCormac wondered—mostly feared—what it might hold.

Without another word, Potter pushed his coat aside, sliding his sawed-off into a handmade leather thigh sheath. A waist pistol sat holstered just above it. McCormac recognized its checkered walnut grip; its twin doubtless rested on Potter’s opposite hip. His own Colt

protruded from behind the buckle of Potter's gun belt, tucked away to the side of his groin.

Potter squatted and reached into the satchel, pulling out a length of twine. "Arms behind the tree."

The katydids' music, pervading the woodlands, amplified. McCormac could barely hear his heart, suddenly hammering against his sternum, while Potter disappeared behind the old Cottonwood, binding his wrists to the trunk. The rigid bark and tauged rope dug into his skin, and something warm hit his thigh and dripped down his quivering shins. He'd pissed himself.

The stench of ammonia filled the air as Potter reappeared from behind the tree. A short smirk brushed his bushy, silver cheek, revealing that he smelled McCormac's fear too. But any trace of a smile vanished as he reached for his tattered black gun belt, hung low on his narrow hips. Pulling McCormac's own silver Colt from behind the holster, he raised it a foot from the man's face, aiming for his forehead.

"Christ Almighty," McCormac squeaked out. His chest heaved with labored breath, the warm fog of his gasps visible before him in the chilly air.

"I used to think there were only two men in this world, Mac—or whatever it is you call yourself these days," Potter said. "The hard truth of it all is there's only one. I'm convinced of that now. I truly am." Potter sucked in a breath and exhaled deeply, shaking his head. "It's plain as the Denver day—is—long. And at the end of it, we're all just chasing the same thing, whether we care to realize that. Or not."

“Tuh-tuh-two-two men?”

“One that walks away. And one that doesn’t.”

Potter took a step back, twigs snapping under the Cuban heel of his black Wellingtons. “Now, who else you tell? You be straight with me; I’ll make this nice and quick.”

McCormac didn’t need to consider the alternative. The Colorado woods at night, defenseless, tied to tree could prove to be a fate worse than death. And it if wasn’t the elements—even in May—it was whatever *thing* lurked in the dark.

“Oh-oh-okay, okay, okay... I-I sent cuh-correspondence buh-back home. Tha’s it! Said I-I thought I might’a seen’t ya, but wasn’t sure, ya-ya see.”

3

Potter’s heart sank in his chest. That had not been what he’d expected to hear. Not so quickly, anyway. He’d figured McCormac would lie through gapped teeth, and he’d spend the night smacking him around to free himself of doubt—and even then, he didn’t believe this fool would really have the audacity to cross him.

To whom didn’t make much difference. Potter knew the game, having heard more than enough tales around campfires. A thief or otherwise unsavory character would locate the whereabouts of an accomplice—usually the outcast of an old gang, long removed—and reach out to a friend or extended family member. The contact would

tip off the local marshal, then cash in on the reward money and split the proceeds with the snitch. *Not a bad hustle.*

Sigh...

Now, all he could wonder was how much time he had.

The occurrence of this ever-fleeting unit—the measure of a man’s existence—had always seemed to elude Potter. To be honest, the man had just never paid it any mind. Not until the passing of his wife. He was no stranger to death, having seen many lives taken. Having taken many a life himself. But when Elizabeth met her untimely demise two years earlier, he felt it. The Clock. It was as if his hourglass had turned, beginning his true countdown.

Potter had no illusion he wasn’t a mortal man—and oh, he was certain he’d crossed paths with the man in the black tattered cloak. Brushed shoulders, even. He liked to think the pale rider trotted past in fear, its hooded head turning to glance back each time he passed by—but by now, he’d eluded death so many times, he *had* to wonder. Was he?

“I—I’m ready,” McCormac said.

And Potter could tell that he was. McCormac squeezed his eyes shut still, bracing as if about to be struck by a hand. His upper lip curled, revealing a sliver of checkered teeth—what was still intact, stained brown. With the creeping night unfolding around him in its ritual consummation, he waited in silence, ready to pay for his sins in eternity once he got to where they both knew he was headed.

Potter, struggling to see the barrel’s end through the darkness, took an additional step back for safe measure. Pulling the hammer, he took aim—best he could. His index finger grazed the polished

steel trigger, feeling for the perfect position to pull, but eventually found himself, instead, slowly caressing it.

The enchanting tune of the katydids waned, fading into the melodic whirr of a chill breeze shifting down between the trees. Through the surrounding brush, the Cottonwood's fledgling leaves rustled. The woodlands spoke. And with the mellifluous sounds came intermittent, tiny flashes of amber light, which seemed to delicately drift about, encompassing the men. Just a handful, at first, but as Potter glanced around, myriad flashes trailed curiously, a cluster sparkling as far as his aging eyes could see. The stellar forest erupted with light, the wind gently dispersing its itinerate constellation.

A twinkling glow from inside the gun's barrel struck Potter as odd. He pulled the gun backward, turning it upon himself, and waited for the flash. The luminous filament of a tiny firefly flickered as it crept out of the tip, hovering in front of his face for a moment before extinguishing its curious effulgence.

The deliberation ended.

Potter gently placed the hammer down. He emptied the six-cylinder chamber onto the cold earth and, by the barrel, tossed the pistol into the wooded void.

4

McCormac opened his eyes. Potter was gone.

"He-heh, Where'd you go!?! Duh-don't you leave me out here you som'bitch! You leave me out here, I'm'a good as dead!" McCormac,

instinctually, tried to pull away knowing it was futile, the twine tearing into his wrists causing them to bleed. “You get back here and finish the job, you no good yella coward! I swear to Christ, if I—”

Shrill howling in the distance shut him right up. He recognized the noise, what he knew to be coyotes calling. A signaling of one to another—the response to spotting a potential food source. He wasn’t terribly concerned with coyotes, but what would follow—bear, cat—passing in the night...

Blood ran down his fingers.

5

In the distance, Potter heard a name being screamed. One he didn’t immediately recognize, but one he once knew, decades ago, to be his. With the fireflies dissipating, he reached the edge of the woods, tied McCormac’s horse to his own, and rode toward home.

The pale-yellow half-moon still made its ascent, illuminating his pathway—the only source of light for what seemed like miles through the woods and prairie. Not that he minded. Had he come across some stranger in passing, someone asking for directions, food, or water, he’d have to explain why he was riding in the dark with an extra horse tied to his saddle. He could stumble into someone looking to rob him and steal his horses, or *worse yet*—and this made Potter’s blood-pressure spike—someone hoping to recognize him. Of course, as Potter knew from his recent outing, there were far worse things caught doing in the middle of the night.

Fortunately, he had planned for such contingencies well in advance, and he knew exactly where he was. Bennett's Silver Mine lay up ahead about a mile or so. And as an employee of that mine—a manager, mind you—he had an obligation to transport work horses that needed to be put down, taking them to the massive stable flanking the mine. There was usually one or two every six months, and McCormac's certainly looked the part.

Potter gave the mare another appraising glance. *This girl is as tired as an old Bughouse whore. Shiiiiit. Probably stolen, too.*

Yet another thing for him to worry about. He shook his head and gave his horse a gentle nudge. Provided he remained on his own trail and stayed on the fringes of town, he would be fine.

Everything was fine.

Or everything *had* been fine until McCormac showed up in Bennett's Silver Mine not three weeks ago. At first, Potter thought he was just another drifter passing through, looking to make a quick buck. Such men were the primary challenge in the mining industry, particularly in Denver. Labor couldn't come cheaper. It also couldn't come more unreliable. Drifters tore through Bennett's like the cyclonic storm that buried Denver in snow not four weeks ago: materializing out of nowhere and capable of causing indiscriminate, cataclysmic destruction. They'd show up ragged, emaciated, and spitting a fake name, usually one Potter had heard so many times that he knew right away they were full of shit.

Not all drifters were a cause for worry, however. Many of these men kept their brows low, worked five to ten days, made some quick green, and went on their way. A few were even incredible finds—the

kind that almost made Potter want to offer a higher wage, just to keep them on-hand. Freddie Montgomery was such a man. Even used his real name, too. Lasted about a month before an Arizona marshal showed up to drag him back to Yuma, where, according to rumor, he had had escaped the “inescapable” new Territorial Prison. But, for the short time Potter had him, Freddie was a real workhorse. A *Sun Dog*, as people called them—a bright spot, like the brilliant halo surrounding the sun on a gorgeous blue-bird day, high above a glistening blanket of unmarred snow. The kind you might be fortunate to catch if you ride over yonder through the Rocky’s on a crisp February afternoon. Incredibly unique. Radiant. Few and far between.

McCormac, though, was neither cyclone nor Sun Dog. The man kept his head down, and the challenge of discerning ‘who’s who’ in a company of over thirty men—mostly drifters—left Potter focused on the more apparent troublemakers. But the day before last, on the transport wagon back to town from the secluded caverns where they worked, he had noticed McCormac in his peripherals, sitting across and four men down. Staring at him.

McCormac was quiet. Vigilant. Disconcerting. The sly fox—a predator in the night, stalking the shadows, its eye on the henhouse. Awaiting the opportunity. Potter knew *it all* too well. He could smell his own, and his keen eye generally spotted such a man a hundred yards out. The fact he didn’t this time disquieted him. Perhaps he was just getting old.

As he neared home, he estimated he had four, maybe five days at the most to *make the decision*. The seasoned math told him it would

take at least two days for the letter to reach Wichita, its most likely destination. After that, the marshal could either send a telegraph straight to Denver, alerting the authorities, or send his own squad, which would take another two to three days. Potter figured for the latter; he knew different territories didn't much like the ubiquitous politics and the greasing of hands involved in using local authorities. *Everyone's got their dirty hand out.* They preferred to do things quietly. Covertly. He could only imagine the price on his head.

The whirlwind is coming...

His spontaneous decision to leave McCormac tied to a tree, without a bullet in his forehead, also had him worried. Was he getting lazy? Or just sloppy? He suspected neither. More than a decade had passed since he'd taken a life, long before the arrival of his firstborn—hell, even before he got hitched. His eyes narrowed, lost in thought as he tightened his red paisley hanky to his throat and popped the worn coat collar. Fifteen years.

Christ. Where does the time go?

Sure, he's had to flash the blue steel many a time, mostly in an intimidation capacity... but since Elizabeth had first entered his life, he had never been *this* close to pulling the trigger.

He was still the fastest motherfucker on the draw, though. If nothing else, of this, he was certain.

He smirked. *Ain't no flies on me.*