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THIRD PLACE: SHORT STORY

The Last, Best Hope

by J. Daniel Byford

The sun was as brilliant as a brass knob. Heat moved about the wreckage like some brooding arid thing, licking at scorched rocks, crawling about over the splintered remains of an Overland coach. Finally settling against a wilting, twisted stump which protruded from the dry earth, the coach lay tilted towards that hot, unblinking eye - blistered offering to a grim god. Scattered about upon the broken, sandrock slope, a mass of shattered wood and smashed discards remained motionless, untouched by any faint trace of breeze.

When he finally woke up, the black man believed himself to be burning. His eyes fumed with an impervious, gray smoke. And then he thought that it was the sky, and not his eyes, which was filled with smoke. The sun had burnt the wooden coach to a dry, crispy wafer and seared down and down until at last it had spit a solitary spark instantly flaming the coach and broiling the air around it to a thick veil of wet fog.

The air began to slowly clear. Blinking brought a creamy film to mix with the dust upon his cheeks. Clouds lifted, smoke thinned. His eyelids slapped lazily against increasing brightness. The coach loomed from the haze not more than twenty feet away. He knew at once, lying there upon his stomach, that the horses were gone and the renegades had left him for dead. His tongue squirmed against the grit in his mouth.

He became aware of a small voice wafting through this oppressive, steaming world. He could almost see the sound of it floating its way to him upon a drifting, radiant wave. Absurd as it seemed, he heard the doleful voice inquire, "Oh how do I get out?"

Years later, as he stood swaying before the coach, a crude lever in hand, he remembered the small white child. . . .

She had wide, green eyes. Her long, white hair was tangled and dirty. Her teeth chewed absently upon a strand of it as she stared into his face. Sunlight poured from behind him and played with shadows inside.

"Have you come to take me?" she asked quietly.

He had seen those green eyes before somewhere. Or maybe it was grass he had seen. Or new leaves. Or green eggs in a spring nest.

"The door's open," he replied and extended his stronger arm.

When she was to the ground the white child's eyes filled with tears. A twitch snagged at the corners of her thin mouth. She would have to rub her face, he thought, for there was no water to wash the dried blood from the side of it.

They discovered the driver not far from the coach with a broken leg and an arrow in his gut. His eyelids fluttered as they drew near.

"Shirt?" he moaned. That would be the shotgun rider. They had lost him many miles back at the first shot of the ambush. He had toppled off and faced down in a bed of prickly pear.

"Shirt," he repeated, "get me some water, Shirt." The barely audible words trickled out across his lips like the last drops from a spilled canteen.

"I'm not Shirt, mister," apologized the black man.

"Water," the driver pleaded.

"No water neither, fella. Water barrel's smashed. Fraid your buddy Shirt got lost somewhere in the storm."

The driver convulsed powerfully and groaned beneath clenched teeth. He remained in this manner for some time. The black man stared at the heavy coat of dust blanching the color from the too pale face. The white child pulled at his elbow.

"What is he going to do?" she asked.

He did not answer. The driver relaxed and lay groaning on the dusty floor. Not far from the driver's rolling head lay a dirty revolver. When he had picked it up, he found that it held only two shells. He wiped it clean and bent to the writhing form.

"Shirt?" whispered the driver. "I got to get some water, Shirt."

The black man placed the dull colored pistol into a twitching hand.

"I'm going to go get water, okay?"

He moved to go but a bloody hand stopped him.

"Thanks...thanks Shirt," the driver gasped, then fell back panting upon the red-stained bed of weeds.

They stood staring for a moment. He put a hand on the white child and they turned and began walking towards the west where the sun had begun its long descent to darkness.

When they had lost sight of the coach and were a good way from it, a single shot boomed out forlornly against the afternoon sky. It hopped about the rolling terrain like some angry crow upon the smooth limbs of a dark tree.

He hesitated only a moment.

"Stay here," he said. "I'll be back."

He made a slow, unsteady retreat back towards the now completely silent slope.

It was near dark that first day when they saw the eagle. From nowhere it descended with a frightening swoop, then
glided easily over them as they hugged the earth. It was immense. The great wings spread across the sky as it passed, as wide as the distant mountain range. The black man strained his misty eyes against the darkness as it vanished upward from view.

“What... what was it, a... a bird?” stammered out the child beside him.

His gnawing stomach suddenly occurred to him for the first time lying there face down. Sights of cool, clear water had been gleaming on his parched brain for some time now, but not food. His insides gave an awful tug as he gaped at a large rock next to his nose that to all the world looked like a steaming, sauteed chicken breast. He rolled weakly to his back. Night had not quite settled into the lap of the swelling hills. He could still distinguish the snow tipped mountain peaks in the distance. Early stars had already taken position in the blunt lavender sky. He rose to his feet.

The thing fell not more than three feet in front of him and for a moment he believed that one of those yet unsteady stars had lost its hold and plummeted downward to smash upon his fevered head. The child had not flinched. She lay quietly upon her back and stared into the dusking west. She appeared frozen in an attitude at once both determined and reticent.

He pulled matches from a pocket and said in a knowing voice, “A rabbit has fell from the sky.”

The band of riders waited for the verdict. One bent silently over a set of tracks, his fingers brushing gently inside one of the many hoof marks.

“Many riders,” said the tall man. He stood up at last and went to his horse. A grimy hand swept at the dark, graying strands bound by a tight, green band.

“We have been wandering here for days, Aguila,” said one of the mounted men. “There is nothing here but Commancheiros.”

The man on foot did not reply. He mounted and sat staring towards the horizon.

“Aguila, the morning sun grows more hot each day. We should ride from this... wilderness into the south, or... .”

“You still call me that name, Montenegro.”

The Mexican grew quiet, his lips tight.

“I do not speak your language,” the other continued, nor do you speak mine. You will call me Grey Eagle.”

“Aguila is Eagle in Spanish,” came back the taut words.

“Grey Eagle!” demanded the Comanche and turned in his saddle. The others watched intently, but made no sign of interference.

Montenegro’s face was an expressionless mask. Only a faint curl of the upper lip disturbed it.

“Si, Senior Grey Eagle,” he said coolly. “It will be as you wish.” A cruel smile thinned itself across his wrinkled face.

A moment of tension remained. Then Montenegro eased back in his ornamented saddle and gave a snorting laugh.

“Ah, compadres, we may yet find something in this... unpromising land. Maybe we make friends with more banditos... or maybe we kill off a little competition.” He grinned widely.

Grey Eagle said nothing. He only returned his gaze to the expanse of hills which rolled into the west.

Neither was surprised when the eagle dropped the second rabbit the following dusk. It raised no questions in their minds. They accepted it completely. Neither did the black man question the child’s determination to trace the path of the eagle’s flight into the glowing sunset.

Staggering along they felt a vague lifting in their over-exposed bodies. An unusual lightness inside their heavy limbs seemed to waft them quietly along. The black man fiddled with a lucky piece in a pocket. At times, without thinking, he would whistle in a low, flat tone, then catch himself and laugh.

The child trailed behind him.

They topped a hill.

He realized that the child had stopped walking. He gazed back into the dazed face.

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing ahead, an urgency prickling her voice.

He turned very slowly knowing that there would be a gigantic tarantula looming high above him, its frothing expectant jaws preparing to swallow him in two awful gulps. But no, there was no spider there. No spider at all.

In the distance, in the folds of a featureless hill, nestled a small, deserted looking shack. It lay like some discarded dream. A huff of dust occasioned it in a tireless wave.

The child moved past him.

They made their feeble way as best they could through rock and brush. No matter if they had reached it instantaneously, it would have been eternity. Moments are dust, he thought.

The wind seemed to raise a bit as they neared. A fine sand searched for his eyes, but he felt he might have found the shack by sense of smell alone. He was aware of a warm, mellow, delicious scent. He had been a cook once, and had gotten drunk and passed out in his kitchen after hours, smelling good smells. An endless, wonderful odor, pleasant and safe.

They stood outside the shack. Wind rubbed the dust briskly about its sides.

“Bells,” breathed the child. Her eyes stared vacantly.

He became aware of the bells. They were hanging loosely on a scrub of mesquite not far from the nearest corner of the shack. Wind played upon them occasionally and brought forth an eerie, hollow sound.

He staggered to the door. A shaking hand pushed it lightly.
In it swam. Inward. ...slowly. At once he became afraid of something and couldn't for the world think of what it was until he realized a figure stood just inside the threshold holding loosely in shadowed fingers a crystal bell.

Then blackness rushed from behind the looming figure and engulfed him.

Three vultures perched eagerly upon the coach. Still more flew in tightening circles above it.

Grey Eagle's shot put them all to wing. Angrily they flew high into the hot evening air to breeze about, resembling curious winged ants. The men dismounted to inspect the wreckage. Montenegro kicked at a broken, empty box. Across the coach's scarred side a rough wind vamped, covering it with a fine, powdery dust. "There is nothing here, amigos, not even for the big birds...."

A shout broke off his words. Someone had found something. "Comanche arrow," mused Montenegro as he stood above the discovered driver. The air was painted with the foulest of odors. Montenegro leaned closer. "And... a bullet in his head..."

"Grey Eagle, shall we mount and ride to the south?" queried one of the men.

Grey Eagle's breath slid slowly between his lips. He turned to leave. It was then that he saw the prints trailing away towards the sinking sun.

The black man revived to find something warm, wet and pleasant pressing on his forehead. He licked his lips and found that they really weren't strips of leather. His thoughts were old and tired and blind, as if for centuries they had been chased by a raging heat down odd, impenetrable alleyways.

He raised upon his elbows. He lay upon a narrow cot in a big room partially lit by two candles and a small lantern. Asleep upon a low bed tucked into a corner, the child breathed deeply. His eyes roved about picking at the shadowy interior. Wood stove. Pots and pans on a high shelf. A trunk beneath a window. Rags. Odds and ends piled into a corner. A tin water basin resting on a red, wooden table, beside it an arrangement of weeds in a chipped vase. On a wall above a cracking mirror a tattered piece of cloth was pinned, an odd, circular design painted in a fading, greenish hue.

He swung his feet to the floor and sat up slowly, his back sagging to a tired hump. The pistol lay on the floor beside the cot. The room was quiet, uniquely strange. A newness surrounded in oldness. Shadowed. He noticed a thin, faint coat of dust which covered everything.

The door opened. She walked in softly and stood facing him. Her hair trailed down to her hips and was satin black. She was small and thin, but a deepness in the way she stood refuted her appearance of fragility. She crossed her slender arms, the color of sand at early dawn.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

"For water," came his answer. He noticed that it did not sound at all like his own voice. He felt giddy and as though he might be standing behind himself watching all this. He pointed at a bucket resting beside the water basin.

The young woman laughed. "I did not mean now," she said. "Before, where were you going?" She moved to the water and poured a tin cup full.

"Oh," he breathed weakly. She turned towards him with the cup. The light displayed her face and deep, sea green eyes. She could not be more than half his age. Maybe twenty. And yet... somehow she was...

She watched him intently.

"Do you feel better? You look much better. Here, drink." She handed the water to him. She took something from a red pouch dangling from the cloth belt tightened about the middle of her long, faded gray dress. It was a small, brownish root. "Eat this," she said.

He swallowed it quickly and gulped the water down. The child stirred, but did not wake. He soon grew too sleepy to even sit.

Time passed through his thoughts like dust sift ing through ancient cracks. He stared emptily at flickers of light dancing off the rafters.

"How long," he heard his voice ask from somewhere far away. He almost thought he heard an answer as he slipped from the cot and down a long, thin bell rope swaying into nothingness.

"Always," the bell seemed to say.

"Her mother is dead?" she asked standing above the sleeping child.

The black man nodded. "Her father too. Told me they died in a fire in '49."

She looked down at the child solemnly.

"She's got folks though, in California. That's where she was going."

"And you?" She looked into his eyes.

"I was headed there too... I was headed there too."

"Mam? How did you come to be here?"

A slant of evening sunlight splashed across her dun face from the narrow window. He thought he saw her dark eyebrows and her lower lids tighten.

"Were you born here?"

"I am here," she said, and moved away towards the small stove. "We have rabbit stew tonight."

He rose from the cot unsteadily and made his third successful trip to the water stand. He had to do something to keep from talking too much. But the diversion did not last.
"Mam? Have you always been alone here? I mean...it's no business of mine, I know, but..."

She was staring absently over her shoulder at the sleeping child. Slim fingers turned a wooden spoon inside a steaming pot.

"No," she answered softly. "I have not always been alone. This was once the...home...of my mother. It was she who brought me here before I could know her words...her reasons."

Something kindled in her face. As if looking back into the past, her eyes narrowed, being windows through which she might pull old scenes and forgotten voices.

"She came here when my grandfather died. She was without husband, no man to watch for her after her father had gone to the Eagle Mountain to leave the earth. Her younger brother grew too wild and left to rob settlers on the border. My mother...was big with child. The People did not want her then. She was the last of the women of the Medicine Ring. They feared her, for she hated their pettiness and did not kiss the sleeves of their wise men. Her pride made her an outcast. She spit on the People and walked the paths of the Lonely Ones. She came here."

The black man stared at the thick steam rising from the stew.

"Here, I came into this world," she added. Her eyes were vacant, lost in the images of her mind. "Here I am, here I will be. I have but one path."

"Mam?"

She moved the spoon once more through the bubbling sauce.

"Yes?"

"Did you know that you were a dreamer?"

"A dreamer?"

"Well...yes, mam," he returned unsteadily.

She stopped her stirring and removed the container from the heat.

"Are we not all dreamers? Do we all not dream the world up in front of our eyes? Doesn't the world look like a dream to you?" Her voice filled with power. "Go look out the window."

He did not move. An old, forgotten feeling began in the pit of his stomach, a light, gnawing, numbing feeling. She motioned to him and pointed out the window. He remained frozen to his spot. A hand steadied him against the wash stand. She walked to him and grasped his hand and led him to the window.

"Look!" she demanded and drew away the dusty curtain. "Out there is only a dream."

In the darkness they came upon the old hut. A faint, orange glow crept from the one window facing north. Blackness washed back against the weak light like waves covering a shivering, moonlit beach. Candle light.

Mute horses stood ranged in front of the hut reflecting the somberness of their riders. Not one dismounted. They waited.

The door creaked inward. A dark figure stepped through, lantern in hand, held low. Grey Eagle strained to make out the features in the bad light. A young woman walked fearlessly up to them and stopped only a few feet from his mount. Her face was shadowed, but the voice displayed her feelings well enough.

"What do you want?" she asked harshly.

They remained silent. She held the lantern forward. 'What are you here for?"

The Mexican dismounted. He took a step towards her and was fully illuminated by the soft yellow light. He grinned widely and took off his hat.

"Buenos noches," he slurred. "La senorita es muy hermosa." He bowed. Straightening, he noticed that she held something tightly clutched in a small fist. "What have you there, little woman?" He looked as if he would take the final few steps to her.

"Montenegro! Get back on your horse!" said Grey Eagle sharply, edging his mount forward. A tense hand lightly touched a revolver tucked in his waistband.

Montenegro half turned, his face becoming a grim, but silent
answer. His left hand moved slowly towards one of the two holstered pistols shielded from view by the large sombrero.

"She is alone, amigo," he said, spitting out the words. "No man is here, or she would still be inside."

"Mount!" gritted the Comanche.

For a moment the air cracked between the two. Suddenly the Mexican laughed and, turning back to the young woman, bowed again.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, bonita senorita." His eyes narrowed as they met hers. His smile faded. A nervous twitch pulled once at his upper lip. "I . . . have seen you before, no?" He shook his head and replaced his hat. "Beauty tricks the eyes at night, es verdad?"

Her face was an impassive as the sand she stood upon. Montenegro mounted briskly and trotted away. All but Grey Eagle rode after him.

"We followed a trail to your door. Two on foot. They are safe?"

She hesitated, looking up at him her face hidden in darkness, then turned and walked quickly back to the cabin door. Opening it she yelled back in a tone he was unable to decipher.

"Go away!"

He jerked his reins and followed after his retreating men. The sun was now well hidden beneath a veil of faceless hills.

The black man heard the door close and rapid steps across the wooden floor. Secret boards above him seeped quiet light as the rug was drawn aside. The child beside him sat, quietly waiting.

"Come out quickly, you must go into the hills and hide!" A face peered down at them in the dark cellar full of anxiousness. She helped them up into the room and put the floorboards and rug back in place.

She handed the black man the lantern and ushered them towards the door. Opening it she gave the child a gentle push into the darkness. The black man was on the threshold when a small but firm hand clasped his arm and dark green eyes caught him with a glint of light.

"Stay in the hills until sunrise," she said.

His mind was lost in snapping, black images. His racing heart beat against the prison of his throat.

"What is happening?" he asked.

"Leave!" she shouted. "Go to the hills!"

He turned and ran after the child into the darkness. A snatch of words from behind sought and overtook him, stabbing

at his whirling, jointless thoughts.

"The last, best hope has come. . . ."

The black man found him face down behind a low wall of sheeting rock. The man was near death. A thickening stream of blood still trickled from the knife wound low in the left side of his back. For a moment he did not really know what to do. The child stood behind him, her thin hand holding tightly to the upper arm of his sleeve. She peered over his shoulder at the prone Comanche.

He had no doubt that here was one of the same men they had hidden from. Possibly he had been one of the renegades who had stranded him in the desert. Should he now save this life? Would he die anyway? Was this a trick . . . a trap? The black man shook his head in the darkness.

"Is he dead?" she asked.

"No," he replied shaking his head again, "not yet."

His mind was made up. It was no more than half a mile to the shack. He grabbed the man army style, gingerly draping the huge form across his shoulders, stomach down, armpit-to-armpit.

"You'll have to hold up his feet to keep them from dragging," he told the child.

They moved down the slope in a slow jog. Halfway down, the black man stopped abruptly, but not to regain his flagging breath. Something loomed up at them from a round spot of earth, marked with a wide, wooden plank. It was a grave. At the center of the mound sat a small vase arranged with dried weeds. Across the plank hung a strand of thin rope strung with seven motionless bells.

His plan had worked well, he thought. Straying from the campfire had brought the Indian to find him. It had been no difficult task to lead him into an unexpectant ambush and then take him from behind with his blade. But had he not rapped him on the head with a pistol butt, he would have had to shoot him. The Indian had had ideas about that little waistgun. A gunshot would have alerted his compadres to his bit of nightwork and that might not be so good in the longest run. As it was, they were no wiser.

He gazed over their sleeping forms. The Indian would probably never regain his senses. If he did, it would only be long enough to realize that he was bleeding to death.

He warmed himself up to the fire. One must stay quick, he thought, in these hot days and in the cool nights. The cabin was not far away. Three minutes on a quiet horse.
The little woman had looked so...so...smoldering. Inviting.

"Like a fire in the cool night," he breathed, moving from the flames in a solid direction. Maybe that is what he saw familiar in the little bitch. She heated his blood like so many fires before...

The bleeding man came to consciousness abruptly, but not coherently and for not very long.

He looked about the cabin, his eyes wide. A thin trickle of blood streamed from his open mouth, no matter how much the child dabbed at it. The black man had built a good fire and compressed the wound, but the bleeding would not stop.

"Is he going to die?" asked the child.

He shrugged. Punctured lung, he thought.

The man groaned. He lifted his head and peered into the meek, green eyes of the child.

"Sister...I meant you no evil!" His words came out anguish and slow. "Glass Ring, do not bare my soul to the wind!" He fell back upon the bed with a shriek of pain. "Oh forgive me...for I was but a child! Do not keep me...from the journey...to the Mountain Nest..." His voice broke into a sob.

Suddenly he jerked upright, his eyes pierced across the dimly lit room to the painted cloth above the mirror. 

"Medicine Rings...take back your lost son..." He fell again upon the low bed, his breathing short and hard. A gurgling noise turned in his throat.

The black man walked to the wash stand and picked up the revolver. One bullet, he thought, and so many people needing one. He smiled at the child and closed the door quietly behind him as he left.

She came from the cool night. Montenegro started, then froze. A wide grin curled across his dusky face.

"Senorita," he whispered, leering, "it is so nice to see you again." He flashed the blade from its hidden sheath inside his shirt.

"You have come to see Montenegro, no?" he asked.

Grabbing her roughly by the shoulder, he shoved her back towards the fire. The other men did not stir. He stopped some yards short and with a powerful shove, sprawled her on her back upon the hard earth. He wondered if he should wake the others, or pluck the little thing by himself.

"I am glad you have had a change of heart, little one." He stood grinning at her.

"One little peep," he whispered putting a finger to his lips, "and I will stick this in your pretty ear," he brandished the knife, "and do what I want anyway." His empty hand reached for the big buckle at his waist.

The girl extended a hand.

"Here," she murmured softly.

"Eh..."

"I give you a gift."

Her arm remained outstretched.

Montenegro took the object from her hand and held it towards the fire. It caught at light like a brilliant gem. Sparkles shard from its smooth, pristine sides arching up into his eyes. He staggered back.

"The trinket...the little bell..." His knife hand dropped limply. His eyes were locked upon the thing he held, his face a tormented rag of years. "Where...did you find this?"

She came to her feet.

"I did not find it, it was a gift. 'It is a gift'," she snarled, "Your very words to her after you had raped her and left her lying in a thicket."

He stepped backward.

"Gift," hissed the word from between her bared teeth. She crouched. "The very word my mother bade me say to you, Black Mountain!"

She leaped.

His arm whipped up in reflex and the knife buried itself deeply between her breasts. The force of her claw like hands smashing against his throat and the power of her lunging body drove him back upon the fire, her body smashing him hard against the coals. Her dress burst instantly into flames. He screamed and shoved her from him, rolling and leaping to his feet. His vest flamed. His pants. He screamed and ran.

A single shot burst into the night, splitting the scream and soon the cool, night air calmed to smoke and glowing embers.

The black man dropped the revolver into the dust. A great weariness filled his body. He fell to his knees.

The renegades were on their feet, but did not move toward him. Small flickers began to lick about the scattered coals and render through the darkness a breath of light. They peered past him towards the shack.

The child came slowly into the kindling light. Suddenly she ran and threw her arms around him. She cried for a moment and he allowed the cool tears to wash their way across his neck and down his back. Soon she stopped.

"He is dead too. They are all dead," she said.

The black man rose to his feet and touched the child’s pale cheek. He pressed something firmly into the small hand.

Dreamers neither sleep nor wake, he thought.

A western breeze blew at his back, fresh but dry with the knowledge of a red glow dawning in the east. Somewhere an eagle launched from a high mountain into the waking currents of a new day.

"A gift," he said softly.