

## THE VACATION

By

Monette Bebow-Reinhard

Joe was grumpy and nearly missed Hoss's cup when he poured the coffee, hitting the red and white gingham tablecloth HopSing had just washed.

"Come on, Joe, watch what you're doing!" Hoss sopped up the spilled coffee with his biscuit and took a bite.

"Sorry, Hoss. Can't stop thinking of Adam out there in San Francisco on vacation. Probably got all the girls lined up by now."

"Ha! I do remember him bragging about that a lot. You know old Adam."

"Yeah. It's been a month of Sundays since we've seen any new gals in the territory."

"Well, don't you worry. You'll get your vacation and I'll get mine," Hoss said as he munched.

"You know Pa has to let us take turns because of all the work there is to do, and there are only so many months of the year when there ain't snow. It's just ole Adam's turn right now."

"Yeah, but I'd sure like to follow him around sometime. He's so darned serious. I'll bet he doesn't know how to have fun, anyhow."

Ben came in from the barn in time to hear that last remark and chuckled as he brushed off. "I'll take you up on that bet, Joe. Adam told me this was going to be his vacation to remember. He plans to write home about it every other day or so, and we're to save the letters of his adventures, as kind of like ... well, his journal."

"Ha!" Joe laughed. And then finished chewing. "Haha! It'll be filled with the books he read and the sunsets he saw. You know, I've never even seen him drunk."

Ben poured some coffee. "That's because he's busy setting a good example for you."

"Yeah, well, my good examples of dating sure haven't rubbed off on him."

Ben walked over to his desk. "You each have fun in your own way."

"Yeah, Joe," said Hoss. "Just because he doesn't view girls as frivolously as you doesn't mean he doesn't show interest."

"I can't wait to hear about his fun way," Joe said to his pa. He turned with a scoffing face at Hoss. "Hey, where did you learn a fancy word like that, anyway?"

"Like what?"

“Frivolously.”

“I don’t know. Adam probably. Comes from how often I have to get between you two.”

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Ben ran into the house, his face red from exertion. He couldn’t remember when he’d pushed his horse so hard to get back to the ranch. Or got back to the ranch so late, but he couldn’t leave until the stage dropped off the mail. “Joe! Hoss! Got a letter here! You up?” He slapped his hat on his trousers. “Well, tarnation, I’ll read it without you.”

Joe and Hoss came bounding down the stairs, bedclothes on. “Doggone, it’s about time.”

“Well, Hoss it does take time for the mail to get here.” Ben opened it. “Let’s see what he has to say. It’s pretty long. Let’s have a seat.”

Hello, Family! Hope the days aren’t too long over there without me. They go pretty fast here on the Barbary Coast, but I assure you I am not about to get shanghaied. You’ll remember that Pa told me to give his letter of recommendation to Mr. Evenstein, running for mayor. Well, they were so impressed with the letter that they asked me to read it to a gathering of voters. So I did. And then I added a few choice thoughts of my own. You know, Joe, how you always call me a blowhard? Well, my way of speaking made them even more impressed, and, well, now I’m being courted to be governor of the state.

I could hardly say no.

Okay, I was tempted to say no at first. But then I thought of all I had to offer the state. Well, you know all the ideas I’ve had for the Ponderosa. Of course, now that I’ll have to become a resident of California, I’m off to find a plot of land once this is in the mail.

Needless to say, I might be a little late returning home. I’m sorry, Pa. I have to do it. I have so many great plans for California. It tends to be pretty arid in places, so I was thinking a whole countryside filled with windmills, so they could grow grapes. You know how you complain about the price of wine, Pa.

And of course they’ll need more railroads, one through the Donner Pass, of course, so no one ever gets stranded there again. Well worth the expense. And then I was thinking that we could breed a lot of these horses here, let them loose, and then charge people to ride around and rope one, if they can. You know, like a tax-raising scheme. You should have seen the people whooping and hollering when I presented *that* idea.

They wanted to take me criss-crossing the whole state on stagecoach, but when I heard how long that would take ... well, I just don’t think I have a year to spend for such lolly-gagging. I got them to agree to let me do this kind of touring every other month or so. I’m sure you’d enjoy that part of it, Joe. And Hoss, you would love all the fine eateries, all paid for by the state of California, as much as I can eat. I swear, if I keep this up, I’ll be glad I’m taking the stagecoach back so I don’t founder my horse. Stuffed sweet goose pie, homemade cherry apple pie – tell Hop Sing you want him to try two fruits together in one pie. He’ll pop a cork, no doubt. Oh yes,

lots of champagne, and pastries, and the best darned egg and vegetable pie. Why, I've never had anything like it. Hoss, you should run for governor just to be treated this good.

Oh, but of course, they only treat you that good because of how hard the work is to be governor. And first you have to get elected. You have to sweet talk to every woman in town, because they tell their men who to vote for. It's hard work, I'll tell you, just plain hard work.

Why just the other day I had three women hanging on my every word. And I later learned only one was married. So I found a way to spend a little devoted time to each of the other two. So much work to do! You don't need to be jealous of me at all.

And I have to settle disputes, too, just to show I can compromise. Why, there were these two fellows fighting in a saloon over which was the better beer, that from England or that made right here in San Francisco. I got between them and told them they were both good. It all depended on the palette. Well, that shut them up. They didn't know what a palette is! So you gotta be smart to be governor. You got to be convincing, and show the ability to make both sides happy. Not an easy task, mind you.

Well, that's all for now. I'll get another letter out to you as soon as I can. I have a feeling they're going to keep me real busy here. Best, Adam

Ben folded the letter back up. The room was so quiet they could hear the clock ticking.

Finally Joe burst out. "A year!"

"Did you hear that, Joe? Our brother's gonna be governor!"

"Now hold up, boys. There's got to be more to a residency than just buying a piece of land."

"Well, what would that take, Pa? Being a resident?"

"I suspect living there for a full year. Maybe more."

"Ha! Hot dog, he plum said he was gonna be going around the state for a year, giving them speeches, and eating that stuffed goose pie."

"No, Hoss. He said every other month. Hey, that's still too much. Pa, you can't let him. We got a ranch to run! Look at all the chores he's shirking."

"Maybe he'll just settle there for the winter months. You know we don't have that much to do up here in heavy snows." Ben put a hand on Joe's shoulder. "Now, Joe, we both know Adam is a grown man. If he wants to leave the ranch, well, I guess we don't have any way to stop him." He turned to face the fire. "Go on back up. We got an early day tomorrow, being short-handed and all. I gotta think if there's a way I should answer this letter."

Grumbling and arguing to each other, they climbed the stairs. "He ain't gotta nohow."

"Hoss, it's just plum loco, I'm telling you."

Ben turned to the fire, so they couldn't see him chuckle. He'd answer the letter, all right, and knew just what to say.

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Joe never felt so tired. Riding home from the logging camp he nearly fell out of the saddle once or twice before catching up to Hoss, riding back from herd count. "Hoss, you look nearly as tuckered out as I feel." He breathed heavy in the damp air. "On top of that, it feels like rain."

They both stared up at the clouds a moment. "We gotta get rain. We don't need our other troubles."

"You got that right. Yours couldn't be worse than mine."

"Oh, dadburnit, we had three men walk off the job today, and then there was this stampede and if it didn't take the rest of the day to find half of them and the other half are still out there but there ain't enough daylight to find them."

"What started the stampede?"

"I suspect that was when one of those fellows got mad and threw what he thought was an empty bottle of liquor into the fire."

"And it wasn't empty."

"Nope."

"What they get mad about?"

"Oh, I suspect that was my fault it was when I told them to stop drinking on the job. How was your day?"

"Well, Hoss, you know how, when the log gets cut and loaded on a wagon and then the wagon pulls the logs to the flume and then the log goes sailing down the flume all nice and pretty and hits the water to go downstream to the mill?"

"Yeah."

"Well, someone forgot to bring the horses for the wagons."

"Don't tell me."

"Yeah, I ended up dragging logs to the flume. Doggone Adam."

"Now, come on, Joe, we can't blame him for everything."

"We can if he's not here."

"And you know we got vacation coming, too."

"I ain't gonna live that long, Hoss. He's gonna be gone every other month for a year. How am I gonna sneak a vacation in there?"

“Good point, little brother. Maybe he’ll just go when it snows, like Pay says.” Hoss tried to straighten in the saddle but failed. “Well, come on, if we’re lucky, Adam’s sent another letter saying he’s coming in on tomorrow’s stage.”

“And give up being governor? Ha.”

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When they got home they didn’t at first notice how upset Ben looked but dived into the leftover beef stew Hop Sing kept warm for them. Hoss was cleaning his plate with the last of the bread when he noticed Ben studying the letter.

“Hey, Pa, what you got there? Bad news?”

Joe didn’t even look up from his plate. He appeared asleep.

“I’m afraid so, boys. It’s from Adam.” Ben walked to the table and gave Joe’s chair leg a kick, startling Joe into sitting up again.

“Sorry, Pa. I guess I should go to bed.”

“Let me read this letter from Adam first.”

Joe yawned. “Not sure I want to hear Adam bragging about the great time he’s having.”

“Well, then you’re going to want to hear this one. There’s been trouble.”

“Dear Pa. I’d rather you don’t share this one with Hoss or Joe. I’d never live it down.”

“Hey, Pa, see that? He doesn’t even want us to know. I’m going to bed.”

“Sit, Joe. He starts out that way but doesn’t end that way, so just listen.”

I’m now out of the running for governorship. I don’t quite know how it happened. Everything was going along really well, but at this one gathering the champagne was flowing. Well, Pa, you know I can handle champagne, under usual circumstances. But here there was a lot of dancing, lots of girls, everyone kept toasting me as the next governor, refilling my glass. I don’t know how many I had, I lost track.

Well, these two girls I mentioned before, ladies actually, helped me across the street to a card game, and I’m told I was just laughing with them and having a grand time. I was told but I don’t remember it.

Joe laughed. “He was drunk.”

“Doggonit, I never seen Adam drunk.”

Ben shook his head and kept reading.

They took me to this card game and really, they made the stakes much too tempting. Well, you know it costs money to run a campaign, Pa, and I didn’t want you to have to put up the land for collateral or anything like that. So with the girls coaxing me, I took an empty seat. I’ve always

prided myself on knowing when to hold them and when to fold them. And at first, it seemed Lady Luck was with me. I started sobering up, but then the whiskey began to flow. And well, I was in such a good mood, I guess my normally stoic nature just took wing. And then my luck took a foul turn.

“Oh, Pa, he must have got set up. That doesn’t sound like him.”

Ben nodded. “I suspect so, too. Let me keep reading.”

One of the card players turned out to be someone who wanted the governorship. Sam Morgan. When he accused me of cheating, I just sort of laughed at him. At first. But then someone started calling us both names, and well, one thing lead to another, and before I knew it, we were fist fighting in the street. Now some might say that to be governor you have to hold your own in a fistfight, but we were out there brawling like two-bit thugs, and neither of us were very sober. I kept trying to find a compromise with the man but it’s hard with a fist in your jaw at every turn.

Finally the sheriff came running out, shooting his guns. He broke us up and hauled us off to jail. Well, that was the last straw. Now neither of us could be governor. You can’t run a campaign from a jail cell, I found that out.

And now I gotta find a buyer for the land I bought. Pa, know anyone with a keen eye on living in the desert?

I also found out what the punishment for drunkenness, cheating at cards, and brawling in the street as a would-be politician is in this town. I’m going to be stuck in jail for a year. So I guess I won’t be seeing the ranch for a while. I’ll return as a lowlife ex-convict, not as a governor-in-training. What a turn of events. I never thought it could happen to me.

Now I know why I avoid the drink and the ladies in Virginia City. The pleasure of a night is not worth the trappings of the rest of the year.

On the bright side, the two ladies are keeping me company in here, so maybe the year will go fast. At least, on my end. Tell Hoss and Joe to just buckle down and work hard, for once. And tell them to stay out of politics.

Ben folded up the letter. “Well, governor or convict, I guess we won’t see him again for a while.”

“Hey, Pa, let’s go break him out.”

“No, Joe, that wouldn’t be right, not in this kind of situation. No, he get himself into this mess.”

“Ho-boy. I guess ole Adam thinks because he screws up a chance of a lifetime that the same would happen to us. Uh-uh.”

“Now, Joe, we all know Adam only means good for all of us. It’s what he’s learning on vacation that we can all learn from. Politics is a tough business.”

“Especially when you’re drunk!”

“Pa knows, Little Joe. He almost was territorial governor once.”

“Well, I still can’t believe it. From top of the world to jail. Just doesn’t sound like Adam.”

“You think he’s making it up, Pa?”

“Well, no. I mean, you boys tell tall tales, but I’ve never known Adam to do the same.” Ben folded up the letter, but Hoss took it from him and read it to himself. “You think I didn’t read it right, son?”

“No, it’s all right there, Pa, just like you says.”

“Oh, I can’t wait until Adam gets home and give him a hard time. And I’ll take a whole year doingn it, too, as long as he’s making us wait.”

Hoss grabbed Joe’s arm and pulled him to the stairs. “Let’s leave Pa alone, Joe. He’s hurting bad enough now as it is.” Hoss looked back over his shoulder and winked at Ben.

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There was a barn social at the Harrisons’ ranch a few nights later, and the three Cartwrights had themselves a good time dancing and getting to know some new neighbors. One of them happened to be named Sam Morgan, so Little Joe just naturally took to asking him if he just moved here from San Francisco.

“Well, I sure enough did. How’d you guess?”

“How come you’re out of jail?”

“Excuse me?”

“You start a fight with my brother there, and you get out but he doesn’t?”

“Son, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Sam tried to walk away but Joe grabbed him again.

“I’m talking about Adam Cartwright, is what I’m talking about.”

Hoss brought his girl over after replenishing their punch. “Joe, you better keep your voice down a mite.”

“Oh, Adam Cartwright, sure, I knew him. Last I saw he was having a grand old time there with a lady, not at all anxious to get out of jail.”

“How come he’s stuck in jail for a year and you’re not?”

“A year? You must have read his telegram wrong or something. Come to think, maybe his lady friend got him sprung right after he sent the letter. If you’ll excuse me, I was just on my way out. Need to make it an early evening.”

Joe and Hoss watched him walk away. “What the heck is going on, Hoss?”

“I suspect ole Adam’s having himself a great vacation. Not coming home like he said he would. Well, the jig is up, that’s for sure. No way Adam coulda known we’d run in to that feller.”

“Let’s go tell Pa. Adam must be on his way home already.”

“Dadgumit. He sure better be, or—.”

“I know, Hoss, the jig is up.”

Ben seemed less than concerned. “Well, you know how things change as soon as you send a letter. It does seem odd that Morgan just happened to show up here. But let’s give Adam the benefit, and see what his next letter says.”

That didn’t make Joe feel any better, and he spent the rest of the night stewing, and not meeting the new neighbors at all.

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“Jumping Jehoshaphat!” Ben stood with fists on hips facing his two sons after they rode in. “I have been waiting for two days for the two of you to get back here so we can tally the herd. You weren’t supposed to cut the trees yourself!”

“But Pa, we thought Adam would be back by now to help with the tallying.”

“You what?”

“Yeah, Pa,” Hoss said, after swallowing hard. “You said it yourself, how things change so fast sometimes, after we met that feller at the dance who said Adam was out of jail and ... on his way home. Ain’t that what he said, Joe?”

“Well, that was the idea we got, anyway.”

“Is it? Well, it so happens he’s not here. I got another letter from him today. But I’m not reading it until after we do the herd tally.” He mounted. “Let’s go.”

Joe and Hoss exchanged soundless groans and followed.

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Ben waited until the next morning to read the letter, since his sons were barely awake enough to eat supper last night. He knew he shouldn’t be working them so hard when one was on vacation, but only hoped they’d get the point about a ranch this size needing all of them. There was never a lack of anything to do, except in the deep snow winters. But if he didn’t let his sons have a vacation once a year, well, they might mutiny. Knowing how much harder life was without one of them made them appreciate each other all the more.

Adam might be taking this vacation a little farther than expected, but Ben knew he deserved his fun, too.

The breakfast chatter was lively as it could be with the food Hop Sing kept bringing out -- enough for four of them. Flapjacks, hogback, fresh strawberries and cream, and more biscuits than even Hoss could eat.

“All right, Pa, I think I’m done stuffed enough for work this morning.”

“Speak for yourself, Hoss. I had to wait for Hop Sing to make seconds.”

“Well, you can both listen. Hoss, have some more coffee, we don’t have anything pressing this morning.” He opened the letter.

Dear Pa. I am glad to be able to write this. I was nearly lost forever.

Hoss laughed. Ben looked up with a frown. “I doubt he’s joshing.”

Hoss shut up with a meek smile.

My lady friend, her name is Kate, she got me out of jail. But the other gal, well, she didn’t take too kindly to me choosing Kate over her. But that wasn’t the worst of it. Turns out Kate was married, and Linda, the other gal, was, too, and she told her husband, well, a pack of lies, really. I mean, these two ladies were just lying to everyone. Maybe there’s something in the air around here. I never experienced anything like this.

I honestly don’t know what happened but will have to tell the rest of the story as it was told to me. Because for the life of me I can’t remember any of it. And this time, not because I was drinking.

Pa, I was getting ready to come home. I know my 10 days of vacation are past being used up, but after I got out of jail I was jumped by a couple of men. I must have taken a bad blow to the head because I’m told I didn’t know who I was for three days. When I finally remembered who I was, I was sitting in a horse trough. Naked. Yeah, I know how that sounds. But I swear, for three days, I have no memory of anything. Well, here’s what I was told.

First, yeah, they found the guys who jumped me. They claimed it was self-defense because I was getting ready to draw down on Kate’s husband for her hand. I swear, Pa, if I had known she was married, I never would have and I wouldn’t have challenged somebody’s husband for his wife’s hand. You know I wouldn’t. I thought he was just another troublemaker like I’ve seen too many of lately. Next vacation I’m going to New England. Anyway, this fellow had friends watching and he says that when it seemed like I had the drop on him, one of them hit me from behind.

When I woke, I was in a jail cell, and they told me I was going to have to be tried for having committed a crime of disturbing the peace, and drunkenness and a whole slew of other offenses I couldn’t remember doing. Because at that point, I had to ask them who I was. I didn’t even know my own name, Pa.

Well, that just gave everyone a big chuckle at my expense. They had the doctor look at me, and he said that where I was hit would account for this amnesia, and it could be temporary but maybe not. Well, as you see it was temporary. But I have to explain so you know why I’m late to

heading back. You make sure those brothers keep up with the chores, too. Tell them I'll owe them one or two.

Hoss laughed. "Ha! Or ten. I'm gonna be collecting on that, too."

"You and me both."

"This is quite distressing, boys. He's not finished yet. Let me keep reading."

Pa, I was in jail for the better part of two days, not knowing who I was, when Kate came to see me. She said the sheriff wasn't around and that I had to help her. She called me a hired gun and she wanted me to draw her husband out in the street, like she said she hired me to do in the first place, which is when I was hit from behind, making me forget what I was doing in the street in the first place. I hope I'm explaining this right.

Well, what could I say? She seemed natural and honest and I didn't have any other memory to draw down on. I had to believe someone who was being nice to me. She said her husband was mean and a bully and wanted for murder and she just wanted to be shut of him. I didn't feel like I was a hired gun, but if she could vouch for me, that was enough for me, at the time.

She unlocked my jail cell door. Well, if I was a hired gun, what did I care about breaking out? So we walked right on past the sheriff snoozing in his chair.

"Hoo-hoo, Adam a hired gun. From a governor candidate, to a drunk, to a gunslinger. Adam sure knows how to do vacation, eh, Hoss."

"Yeah, we should be so lucky. At least he's getting the ladies, Joe."

"Don't think I want them, that way."

She dragged me into the street, but my head was pounding and I said all I want is a good bath and night's sleep, and I'll take care of him in the morning.

"Oh no, please, Sam. You've already been paid. You have to do the job. He'll kill me, don't you understand? If he stays alive one more day, I'm dead."

I swear, I felt so grimy and I wasn't really sure why. "Can I at least have a bath? Maybe a clean set of clothes? Something befitting me?"

I must have been playing the role. I don't think I ever said befitting before. Now remember, most of this is from what others told me. I couldn't remember much of these three days, except brief moments where they told me things that just didn't feel right. But she took me to the hotel and paid for a bath for me. I swear, sinking into that warm water, I started feeling like myself again. Except that the myself they told me was a gun slinger, and I was already paid to kill a man. It didn't feel right to me but I had no idea. I just knew that, if I wasn't, I could well end up dead myself.

Then I heard him calling for me out in the street.

"You stole my woman, now get out here so I can kill you."

I'd soaked long enough so I reached over for my clothes. But they were gone. All that was there was a towel. I heard someone, I thought it was Kate, screaming. I grabbed the towel, wrapped it around me and ran out. There were my clothes, and my gun, out there in the street. And there was Kate's husband, ready to face me down.

Now I ask you, what gunslinger ever found himself in such a predicament? That's when I started figuring that everyone's been lying to me. They all expected me to pick my holster up off the ground and strap it to my naked body. Maybe it would fit over the towel, was my first thought. Has anyone ever won a gunfight naked? Well, it's not like clothes stop bullets anyway. But my hands still felt a little slick from the tub.

But I walked into the middle of the street, without the gun. And I faced him down, without the gun. A man doesn't shoot an unarmed man, was what I figured. Then I started reciting, but I honestly didn't know at that point where the words came from. Let's see if I can remember ... ah ...

Thou! why,  
thou wilt quarrel with a man that hath a hair more,  
or a hair less, in his beard, than thou hast: thou  
wilt quarrel with a man for cracking nuts, having no  
other reason but because thou hast hazel eyes: what  
eye but such an eye would spy out such a quarrel?  
Thy head is as full of quarrels as an egg is full of  
meat, and yet thy head hath been beaten as addle as  
an egg for quarrelling: thou hast quarrelled with a  
man for coughing in the street, because he hath  
wakened thy dog that hath lain asleep in the sun:  
and yet thou wilt tutor me from quarrelling!

By the time I finished, I realized who I was. I remembered my name. But I was careful not to let my newfound memory give me away. I could see that my reputation as a gunslinger was starting to slide by now, if quoting Shakespear while naked in the street without a gun could give a man away. As I finished Mercutio's lines I was standing by the horse trough, and that seemed the perfect place to finish the lines, since I was naked anyway, so I got in.

Tell Joe I often quote parts of it when he starts getting a little crazy, so he'll remember how I've used quotes in the past to quiet him down. I guess before I got done quoting, I was feeling a little crazy myself. Well, you know, the predicament and all. I don't even know if I got all the words right.

The next thing I know, I'm remembering who I am, and asking if someone could get me the towel so I could take myself peacefully to jail, with my clothes, where I could get dressed again. So they did. I apologized to Kate, too, said I wasn't a gunslinger and to have the sheriff arrest the man. Which he did. So all's well that ends well. At least, for Kate.

They kept me there for another whole day, just to be sure I wasn't going to turn gunslinger again and go after the man who stole my clothes. Have you ever heard of a gunslinger who could sling Shakespeare instead of bullets? They just didn't want to believe that I knew I wasn't one.

Funny thing is ... the next day I saw several other men, naked, waiting to take turns bathing in the horse trough. So I guess I started something. They sure had the ladies gathered around, too.

Well, I better get this in the mail. They'll be letting me out in an hour or so, and I want to be dressed and ready for the noon stage.

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The Cartwrights didn't waste any time heading to Virginia City, hoping to meet the stage Adam for sure must be on by now.

"You'd think Adam being such a serious fellow, he would have had himself a serious vacation," Joe said to Hoss.

"Can you imagine him getting into so much dumb trouble?"

"Guess he was saving it up."

This made Hoss laugh like crazy.

Ben hid his grin with a frown before he turned to them. "You know how upset your brother gets when you tease him. I'd say it's best to pretend he hasn't told us anything about this at all."

"But Pa, he sent those letters. He could have just made something up about the dull time he was having. He didn't have to admit all the dumb stuff."

"Yeah, Pa, he wanted to know," Hoss agreed with an agreeable nod and a smirk.

"Well, he did have to explain why he's late. He didn't want us to worry. Or ride off after him."

"You mean, like we're doing now," Hoss said with a snicker.

"We're going to meet his stage, Hoss, nothing more."

"But Pa, we don't even know if he'll be on it."

Joe was quiet and somber. "Pa, do you really think he's telling us everything?"

"Well, he did want a journal of his adventures, so I would think so. Why, Joe, you think he's in even worse trouble than he says?"

Joe waited until his horse picked up a steady pace again after tripping over a rock. "I mean, knowing Adam, it just doesn't seem like the real huckleberry to me. Going from governor to gunslinger to naked in a horse trough?"

"You mean you think he's made it all up?"

“Well, not all of it, maybe. Maybe he’s embellished, just a little. I mean, it happened, maybe, but not quite that way.”

Hoss glared at Joe. “What part then, short shanks?”

“Look, I told you not to call me that. Is it so hard to believe Adam would ... would ...”

“Would what, Joe?”

Joe found both Ben and Hoss glaring at him. “I guess you’re right. Adam just doesn’t have any imagination at all. If it were me, I’d be making up a wife!”

Hoss and Ben laughed and kicked their horses into a gallop until they reached the next incline up the side of Mount Davidson.

Once in Virginia City they found they’d just missed the stage and Adam wasn’t on it. They settled into a room to wait for tomorrow and set out to walk C Street to see if they knew anyone.

They ran into Roy first thing. “Well doggone if it ain’t the Cartwrights. Ain’t seen ya in a month of Sundays.”

Ben slapped a hand on Roy’s shoulder. “Oh, we have been working so much harder since Adam went off on vacation. We’re expecting to see him here in a day or two, so we’re taking a well needed break.”

“Not a vacation, though,” Joe added. “I got me one coming that’s gonna last a month.”

“Dream on, young ‘un.”

“You’re not going to believe his stories, Roy.”

Ben put up a hand. “We’ll stop by later, Roy. I have some business at the bank. Come on, boys.”

Puzzled, they followed him out. “What business at the bank, Pa?”

“Joe, Hoss, I kindly advise you to remember what Adam’s letters said. He didn’t even want me reading them to you.”

“Pa! Are you saying we can’t tell anyone? Not even Adam? What we know? Dadgumit.”

“Oh, I’m not saying that exactly, Hoss. But let’s keep it between the three of us until we’re sure what parts Adam doesn’t mind us sharing.” Ben walked on.

Joe grabbed Hoss’s arm, stopping him. “Hey, Hoss, remember that time that Sam Clemens published those crazy stories about us in the newspaper?”

“That Mark Twain fellow? Yeah, why?”

“Wouldn’t it be a hoot if Adam comes home to see one of his letters in there?”

“Little Joe, if you want war with Adam, you know jest how to git it, too.”

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The next day's stage brought no Adam, but another letter. Ben tore it open greedily. "Maybe he's just been delayed until tomorrow. We do have to get back, though." He started to read it to himself, then staggered and clutched at the hitching rail behind him, as though ready to fall.

Hoss grabbed the letter.

Ben shook his head. "Go on, read it. I don't want to think it's as bad as it sounds."

Dear Pa. I know I should be home by now. Remember when I said they were going to let me out and I'd grab the first stage. Well, before they let me out, I started to get this strange feeling. Something came over me. I felt like I was burning inside, like I wanted to take all my clothes off and jump back in that horse trough. Only I'd have to wait in line this time. I think maybe something in that water put a curse on me. Or maybe it was Linda. I thought there was something strange about her. Until I shake this feeling, I told them to keep me locked up. I felt like ... I know this will be hard to believe but I felt like running naked in the woods and howling at the moon.

Remember those stories you used to tell me when I was a boy? I'm thinking of those now, and they're scaring me. One was about a fellow in France, in 1573, Gilles Garnier. They called him the Werewolf of Dole. He went around killing people, lapping up their blood. I didn't want to kill anyone, but I started to feel awful thirsty.

"I committed a crime! Keep me in here," I yelled at the sheriff. I figured I better stay locked up until I could figure out what this curse was and find a way to reverse it.

I'm not saying I believe in all those crazy tales, but these legends are as old as time and always are based on something real. That much I knew. There has to be something to them. Even the ancient Greeks borrowed stories of the legend of ly ... ly ...

Hoss showed the letter to Joe because his Pa looked too green just listening.

"Lycanthropy."

"Huh?"

Joe looked at Ben for help. "Oh, that's the word for ah ... a man turning into a wolf."

"Oh." Hoss nodded. "Lycan ... topy ... anyhow." Reading again.

The Greeks got that idea back in 1200 BC ... hey Pa, what does BC mean?"

"Before Christ." Ben grabbed Hoss's arm. "We shouldn't be reading this in the street. Come on, let's go to the bank so they can lock us in the vault."

"We can't do that, Pa, we'd suffocate."

"All right, the International House then. Should be quiet this time of day."

They sat in a quiet corner with coffee. Hoss picked up the letter again.

... 1200 BC from the ... well, from some other people ...

Ben grabbed the letter. "Phoenicians."

"Yeah. Thought so." Hoss grabbed it back.

From them, and spread around the world, like a disease. That's what he says. Pa, he's got a disease."

"Give me that." Ben took the letter back and continued reading aloud.

And then those Russians, father and son. Pa, you really scared me with that story. Sigmund and Sinfjotli found some wolf pelts and when they put them on, they turned into wolves. But this isn't the same as that because I don't want to wear anything at all. But now I figure, when the full moon comes, the urge will be too great, and I'll have to take off the clothes and throw on the wolf pelt. So to speak.

"Pa, what does he mean, so to speak," Joe asked, looking like he might be sick.

"It means ... he'll transform."

"Awww, I'll bet that Linda was just spoofing with him." Hoss swallowed hard. "Wasn't she?"

"Let me finish here."

Those two, Sigmund and Sinfjotli, turned into wolves and began wandering about the forest together. Before they split up, they agreed to howl to each other if either of them encounters seven men to fight at a time. Sinfjotli, the son, breached the agreement and killed 11 men at one time. Angered, Sigmund fatally injures his son. But then a raven, the messenger of Odin, brings a healing leaf to place on Sinfjotli's wound. After Sinfjotli is healed from his wound, he and his father take off the enchanted wolf pelts as the tenth day arrived. They burned the pelts to ashes and freed themselves from the curse of lycanthropy.

Ah! If only it were that easy! Sorry, I'm writing all this to try and figure out what to do.

I'm feeling so hot. And there's a full moon coming. Pa, if I'm not back on the stage the day after you get this letter, you'll have to look for me in the woods around Sacramento. I'll send for Linda .. she has to do something ....

"And that's where it ends."

Hoss shuddered. "All of that because of meeting two gals. It's your fault, Joe."

"My fault?"

"Always teasing him about not being married at his age. He's gone loco now."

Ben tucked the letter away. "Nothing we can do about it now. We'll have some dinner, play some cards, and if he's not on the stage tomorrow, well, we'll just start walking the woods looking for him."

"It's almost a full moon already." As they stood, Joe grabbed Ben's arm. "Pa, I don't think I want to go on vacation this year."

“Just stay away from the girls, Joe, that’s all.”

“Pa, you know Joe can’t do that. He’s weak, Pa.”

“Yeah. I am, Pa.”

\*\*

The stage pulling into Virginia City the next morning was highly anticipated by the three Cartwrights and half of Virginia City, after word leaked out that Adam might not be on it.

And that he might.

And that he might be somewhere in-between, and most of the people in town didn’t know what that meant, Ben judged by the conversations around him. But he kept his serious expression, and worries on his face but unexpressed, and no one dared talked to him in that state.

When the stage rolled to a stop, it seemed no one was going to get off, and there were no suitcases to unstrap. The driver didn’t budge. He appeared frozen.

“Pa. Something wrong with the driver? He looks spooky.” Joe stood ahead of Hoss and Ben, anxious for Adam’s saga to be over, and that once he’s home, where he could be taken care of.

The door of the stagecoach began to open. Joe couldn’t figure out how they got the door to squeak like that. A foot came out, a black boot. “Pa, that’s Adam, right? Looks like he’s got clothes on.”

The door flew open and slammed against the stage, and everyone jumped back a step, with an ‘ooh’. A man, long, dark and lean, stepped out, hat pulled low over his eyes, a strong beard on his face.

“It’s ... Adam?”

Hoss nudged Joe. “Go welcome him back.”

“You go. I’ll wait here.”

Hoss strode up to Adam, shook his hand and gave him a hug. He walked him to Joe. Adam put out a hand.

“Is that ...” Joe gulped. “Hair on your hand?”

“Well, yes,” Adam said. “Seems like I’m growing hair all over. Did you get my letters? I’m not remembering anymore all that I wrote. What did I tell you?” He pulled at his shirt collar. “Sorry, long trip. Fact is I’m feeling kind of hot.” Adam removed his jacket and started unbuttoning his shirt.

“No, that’s okay. Look Adam, it’s not a full moon tonight. I’m gonna go ... I’m gonna get us some beers, and then ...” He fell backward into Ben. “Pa, make sure he’s okay, and can have beer, okay?”

Joe ran inside the Bucket of Blood, came back out, looked at the name, gave them a sick grin, and ran into the Sazerac instead.

The crowd begun to disperse, some welcoming Adam home, others chuckling as if part of a private joke.

The three Cartwrights tried to keep from laughing out loud.

“So Joe really bought it?”

“You saw younger brother, Adam. He was plum scared of you.”

“All right, boys, we had our fun. Let’s go tell him your letters were just joking.”

Hoss grabbed Ben’s arm. “You think we have to right now?”

Ben looked at the mischievous faces of his two sons, shook his head and went into the Sazerac. A few minutes later, Hoss and Adam followed, and sat at their table.

Joe backed his chair up a bit. “Adam, maybe ... you should get a shave.”

Adam rubbed his chin. “Don’t know. Kind of liking it this way now. You shave, and it just ... grows back.”

“Come on, younger brother, I better get you home. Adam done told me that you better keep away from him, until at least after the next full moon. Just in case.”

Hoss followed Joe out, after finishing his beer.

Adam laughed. “Ah, another month of vacation.”

“Yeah, you better enjoy it, too. Joe says he’s going to have the newspaper publish one of your letters.”

“He what?” Adam started to get up.

Ben put a hand on his arm. “Relax, Hoss says he’ll make sure Walker doesn’t print them.” He laughed as Adam relaxed. “But I don’t know how you’re going to pull anything off on the full moon tomorrow night.”

Adam grinned. “I’ll think of something.”

“So tell me, what really happened on your vacation?”

“Oh, Pa, you just wouldn’t believe it. I got married.”

Ben stared at Adam, and then chuckled. “You’re right. I wouldn’t.”