



"JOE"

A short Story

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There was rain among the leaves that morning and a sorrow on me; there was as fury on me too. I don't know why they couldn't just leave my family alone. Why did they keep hounding me till something terrible had to happen? And now they left me no choice in the matter but to be a man of extreme violence, although the Lord knows I didn't do much to avoid it. Yeah, I suppose you could make the case that when they came out to start it all that I went out and met 'em at least halfway. Yeah, I know deep down that this is of my own making, I know it, you ain't gotta say it, believe me I know it.

As best I know I'm a man of twenty years, half somethin', half somethin' else, and that somethin' else won't buy ya much of anything out here if your money ain't silver. Out here is the flat land just north of Corpus Christi, Texas, the year is 1874.

I wish I could say otherwise but my life has been one of hard livin' and harsh judgment, one of long bitter lonely years, yep I'm sorry to say, but that has been my plight in this here life up to this point. MY name is Joe and I'm a man with some very long years behind him; a man with little but a gun for a companion.

It would be fair to say that life has made me cruel, and in truth, in me, there's love for only two things in this life, my woman and my child, and I have lived these last for years for nothin' 'cept them. And recently I found out that they was dead, dead by the hands of my own flesh and blood. Yeah, I know that I said that I caused it all, but whether I caused it or not don't much matter now, 'cause my woman and my kid are both gone. Maybe it as a thing unintentional, that doesn't much matter neither, 'cause soon enough my father and probably myself will be dead because of it.

This whole nightmare thing started a few years back when my father and I robbed and killed a family of settlers from somewhere's up north. They was Christian folk of some kind or other and my daddy kilt 'em and robbed 'em for reasons that to this day I cain't tell ya. I was sixteen and I was there and I took part in it, all of it, but I didn't do it on my own, nor did I think it up. I ain't sure anyone actually thought it up, it just happened. One minute we was askin' 'em questions and the next we was blastin' away like we had no God in us, and I suppose by what we done, that maybe we don't.

It was a terrible thing we done, but I can't change none of that now, what's done is done. I cain't fix it with prayers and I cain't fix it with regret, I cain't fix it no matter how hard I might want too. Damn it all!

Believe me, I know that it ain't right what we done, but it wasn't right for me to take all the blame neither. He started it, I just followed his lead, but it was me they hunted. It was me who had to leave his farmhouse, his wife, his baby. It was me who slept on the ground between here and San Antonio. It was me who was forced to live out these last four years as a road bandit; it was me who suffered all that. But it was him what brought the law down on me. It was him who set my cabin afire and it was him what kilt my wife and child. No he didn't shoot 'em like he did that settler woman, but it was him that put 'em out, and him what is responsible for the fever that took 'em. And now it's him what's gonna pay.

After that day we kilt them folks things changed, and all them changes has brought me to this day of reckoning. I guess you could say that one day of killin' four years ago, has finally come 'round for payment. Yep I suppose it's time for a reckoning.

I guess my daddy had his reasons for what he did, hell he's just a dirt farmer tryin' ta feed his family like our kinfolk did before us, but things was a changin' in Texas. Folks with money had power, and folks with power took pretty much whatever it was they wanted, no matter who you was, so he decided to fight back, but none of that matters much now does it. Yep that past didn't mean nothin' then and it don't mean nothin' now, 'cause change is a comin' and I'm headed home to live by it or die by it.

All the way home from San Antonio that fateful night I'd seen a vast array of unusual activity, lots of folks I just couldn't abide by, you know the type, poor folks who would accept bad things happenin' around 'em as long as it only affected someone else and didn't bother them personally. Poor men who'd give up their beliefs as men, to jump on any band wagon willing to play a tune they could accept, without a fight. Weak folks? Without a doubt, but hungry folks for certain.

Everybody was hungry in them days, so hungry in fact that it no longer mattered much about local rights and wrongs, most folks just wanted to be left alone. The fight was gone from most folks, Texas had finally been whupped by Yankee money. The rich settlers from up north had stole or bought up all the good land 'tween here and San Antonio, folks like me, we either lived with it, or died with it; the Rangers saw to that. Yeah I know what them ol' boy's will say, that the Rangers is hero's and all, but it ain't so, the Rangers and them they hired to help 'em was thieves who hunted and hanged any man who resisted them that put money in their pockets. They was the real bandits; but folks don't wanna hear that, even though it's the truth.

Hell, it's always been that'a way ain't it, simple folks got nothin' and ain't meant ta have nothin'.

The campfire was goin' and the last of my coffee smelled mighty good and the sound of the rain was a pleasant peace I had not felt in a long time. Maybe that peace I was feeling was the acceptance of my own guilt, or maybe an acceptance of a forth coming death I knew was probably in my near future. Maybe it was that I just quit carin'. Maybe it was somethin' else all together, heck, I don't know, but like I said, none of that matters much now.

Sitting there, huddled near that small fire, I yearned the hours away wondering how I would show up and present myself to the graves of a woman and a child I had left with nothin' four years back. Yeah, I'd come when I could ta see 'em and all, but it was always dangerous to do so... and I know in my soul that it wasn't often enough; I know it. Then I came ta hear that my Pa was bein' pressured by the Law to give me up. Then I come ta find out that he did, and all that happened after that had to do with the pals of that Ranger fella raping my wife and my Pa turning her out cause of it. And, now this. Now I gotta kill my own Pa and that Ranger fella too. I know what you're thinkin' but don't even go there 'cause if you do, then you yourself ain't a man anymore than them folks what lets other people take their land from 'em without a fight. So don't even go there 'cause I ain't tryin' ta hear it.

Four years and I can still see it plain as if it were happening right this moment. That wagon on the horizon, right over there near those pecan tree's, those Christian folks cookin' supper, not a half mile from where I now sit. Yep, one bad decision, one bad lifetime afterwards, no doubt about it; it was then and there that I became the man I am today, a killin' man, a man of vengeance, a man returned to his most primal instinct. A man come to avenge his family. Yes sir, it was right over there that my whole world changed, and from that point on I been nothin' 'cept a menace to most men, grudge or no grudge and now this, now I'm gonna willingly kill my own daddy.

Yeah, I know that I ain't a righteous man by any stretch of the imagination, but even a bad man has somethin' what caused 'em to be that-a-away. No sir, that ain't an excuse, it's a fact. Some men are just harder than others, and some weaker I suppose, it's just like that, how ever it happened. No I ain't a righteous man, but I wasn't born a rabid dog neither. Truth is, I don't know what I am, 'cept I'm a man and all men have a point beyond which they can't be pushed, and with me, that point is my family. With what happened to my family my blood went dark, dangerously dark in fact, and what I been thinkin' ever since would freeze the balls on ol' Satan himself. Yep, once that happened with my wife and kid, I became what all men are deep down inside; I became cold and dangerous.... haunted and hunted.

That night when it got real dark I went to where I'd sat my Possibles and got my ol' Spencer rifle. I loved that ol' rifle, my granddady gave it to me, anyways, with it

I strolled off into the woods and headed towards my ol' place to do what needed to be done.

My plan was to go first and visit the graves of my wife and child, then ta go to my daddy's place and kill him for what he done. Then I was gonna cause a menace to folks all around these parts till that Ranger fella showed up, then I was gonna shoot him down with my granddady's rifle. Then I was gonna cut out that Ranger's liver and eat it, right after I left his carcass next to the graves of my family. Yep, I had it all planned out and I ain't shamed about it either.

As I neared the place where my ol' house had been I stopped at the clearing and waited to see if I could see any movement, I didn't. I then eased across some rain puddles and made my way up to the shadowed edge of what was left of the south wall; a man had to be cautious in unfamiliar places until he got the feel of it, but even a place you're familiar with, even your own place feels uncomfortable in the dark 'cause everything feels uncomfortable when you're a hunted man like me. And if you was a hunted man, like me, then you had to be extra careful around your own place; most especially your own place.

The smell in the air that night seemed almost normal, almost, standin' there I could smell that smell of burnt wood, but other than that I could find nothin' else out-a-place.

I poked some things with the tip of my boot and once I got more comfortable I walked that spot what used to be mine. I thought about my wife and our times together, lord she was a gooden'.... a tear came to my eye, but I knew it was too late for all that, so I smiled at the memory of the last time I saw her and my only child.

They was sittin' right over there near that stump, and I gave her what I had taken from them government settlers over the last three month's and she kissed me, like only the best of 'em can do. I smelled her long hair and I touched her face and looked into her almond eyes, and right then and there I vowed that one day I'd strike it rich and take her away to someplace on the Mississippi river where we would, the three of us, get us a place and catch fish that were so big it's take a week just to eat one. Yeah, I remember it all so clear. Yeah, I loved my ol' gal and I took it hard when I found out what happened to her.

After I got comfortable I walked south about a hunnert paces or so to the spot that my neighbor Jaime had said was the spot where they had buried her and my child. As I walked towards that big oak where they were supposed to be laid I was looking so intently for the two graves of my family members that I was completely caught off guard when I heard a voice from some nearby hedge tellin' me ta drop my rifle, then in the moonlight I saw that I was surrounded by three men with guns, one of them was Jaime Garza.

Now Jaime and I was close, we had grown up together as kids, we weren't the best of friends but we was friends and I had trusted him to bring me messages and to take money to my wife when the law was around. But it was all clear now, he had set me up.

"Where's my wife's grave?" I asked.

"There ain't no graves you idiot. Your wife ain't dead. I made all that up to get you here. I burned your house, and I, not your pa brought the law down on ya...." Jaime kept talkin' but I didn't hear a word of it 'cept the last word, "hangin'".

I guess you could say that I was happy about my family bein' alive, 'cause I was, but I was also distraught at lettin' myself be fooled and trapped by the likes of a scoundrel like him.

My mind was tryin' to work a way out this here mess, and as he continued to talk I thought it all out but in the end I saw the truth of it and reached down and grabbed my rifle, when I did they blasted me and I flopped back on the ground like somethin' blown over in a wind storm. I just lay there with a half-moon as the last thing I seen in that life.

I, as a man named Joe, died on that spot just north of Corpus Christi, Texas,
in the summer of '74.

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