

Canyon In The Clouds

by Zack Keller

It was two days to town. His horse could only go one.

He knew his way all right. Had they water and provisions the ride would have been simple. Even in the slender shade of a cactus, standing tall against the withering August heat, the desert made a man sweat then boiled it straight off his back.

Beautiful country, they called it, though they sure as hell had never seen it. Not like he had. Clay, the man atop the dried-out horse, spit hot into the hissing dirt.

Shit, he thought, shoulda swallowed that one. Waste of water.

His painted horse, Juniper, whinnied as she swung her tail, batting at the black flies buzzing about. Clay dug his heels gently into her side and she started to amble.

"Well," Clay said, "lead the way."

They were supposed to leave him for the buzzards, but scavengers won't feed on a thing that's still kicking. The kid Clay hired to tie the noose claimed he was a sailor and had a better knot to hang a man he'd learned from years in the rigging off the white peaked waves of the Atlantic. Turns out he wasn't a sailor at all, just a blackjack dealer on a Louisiana riverboat. Never trust a card-dealer; they live to screw you over just enough that you want to come back for more. That's sticking in the knife and slowly twisting. Likely taking your money at the same time. And they get paid to do it.

"He supposed to be breathing like that?" the boy's voice cracked as he scratched his chin. "Isn't he supposed to be all blue and purple in the face?"

"You know, they call it a noose knot for a reason. Makin' nooses," the Judge hollered. It had been his daughter this swinging, kicking, breathing man had murdered so you better believe he wanted to see him good and dead. Didn't even need a jury for this one. "Cut that

sum' bitch down and do a proper knot or you'll be the one swingin' next."

"Kill a guy for tryin' somethin' new," the boy threw up his hands in disgust then reached for his holster. Now, truth is, this fella had been staring at cards a foot in front of his face for years, maybe double that distance if his clientele was the buxom type, so a target fifty feet away was liable to be a bit squint-inducing.

The pistol cracked, then the branch cracked, then crack went the prisoner's foot breaking beneath him as he tumbled down. He let out a yell, something definitely not possible if that knot had been doing its job.

"Well shit," muttered the Judge.

As they were neck-deep in God-forsaken nowhere, that was the only tree for miles and now that it had torn nearly in half, there wasn't a single stick to set a rope. No more than boot-high shrubs for miles.

"Refresh my memory, boy," the Judge bared his teeth as the kid took a step back. "What was this man's sentence?"

"Death by hanging," he replied after a hesitant moment.

"Hanging, huh? Now how the hell are we gonna give him a death by hanging if there ain't no place to hang him from?"

The boy flipped a rock with his big toe, then looked out over the desert floor, sweating more from the Judge than from the noon sun.

"We could, uh, we could tie him to the back of a horse and send it off running quick for a strangle," the boy stumbled, "or I think I saw some real good cactuses a few miles back."

Denny, the boy was called, beamed a smile at his ability to recall recent memories of geography.

"I think I've had enough of your big ideas for today so you can just shut it, Denny."

"A cactus is the desert's tree. Learned that from a teacher."

"I said shut it, Denny! We ain't hanging him from no cactus!" the Judge snapped. "Besides, ain't you ever read the Bible? Killing is bad, so if you gotta do it like we gotta do it to this here soul we gotta

do it quick and clean and with decency. Ask any of the Twelve Apostles and they'll tell you the same."

Clay peered off into the shimmering distance, waves of heat baking the horizon into an unending mirage. The land itself shifted and tore.

"There's a place I know," Clay whispered. "Not too far from here."

"Well all right," the Judge slapped the dust off his hat before plunking it on his bald head. "The hanged man is on your horse, Denny. Let's try to keep him alive long enough so we can kill him ourselves."

They rode hard, ready to be done with their Devil's deed and out of the harsh light of day. In heat like that, it might've been colder in hell. The kinda warmth that doesn't go away when the sun does. Keeps right on cooking the ground through the night only to rise vengeful again the next morning with a head-start on making everyone miserable.

The black horse bringing up the rear dug in suddenly and bucked the hanged man off. Denny cried out, tightening the reins as the horse's tongue dangled out the side of his mouth. Even its eyes were dry.

"Easy, boy, easy! Hey Judge! My horse is quite nearly done for. Gotta get him to a watering hole pronto before I lose his feet completely."

"Ain't no water round here for fifty miles, 'cept maybe fifty feet underground if you think you can dig that deep. All we've got is what we're carryin' and what's inside us," the Judge stated plainly.

Clay unbuckled his water pouch and poured some into his horse's mouth. Juniper leaned her long haired neck back against Clay in thanks.

"You give your horse a swig before you take one?" Denny laughed like a coyote. "Didn't realize you got that lonely out here."

Clay said nothing as he took a long draw of water, feeling the bag as he did. Nearly half empty, and they weren't half back yet. Denny, always trying too hard to think with his brain, dug a bowl in the

sand and filled it with water, but within moments the ground soaked it up leaving his horse only a few laps before there was nothing left.

"You're shittin' me... I nearly poured it all out!" he shouted in frustration.

"You want a swig?" asked Clay with a dead-set expression as he coaxed the pouch towards the fuming boy.

"Funny. So funny you can hear me not laughing."

As Denny put his foot in the stirrup, the black horse began twitching, all its muscles seizing as if electrocuted by a stray bolt of lightning from the heavens before collapsing to the ground.

"What the hell, horse!"

The hanged man croaked out a word from the dust.

"Water."

The Judge rode up between Denny and the hanged man, "Don't give him a drop. You already wasted half on a dead horse and we don't need to waste the other half on a soon to be dead man. Let's saddle up and finish this by sundown or we'll all end up like this poor beast."

Clay tied the hanged man to the back of the Judge's horse and Denny rode with him. Not a single man was happy with the arrangement, but being on foot meant slow, uncomfortable death.

On they rode, without seeing another living thing. Animals are smarter than humans, they knew not to be out of their holes on a day like this.

"It's just past this gully," Clay called out as the other horse and rider left the flat chaparral behind and entered hard, rocky country where dry winds brushed the faces of stone paper smooth.

"This is it."

Denny looked around confused. There was nothing except big boulders and a broken crack in the Earth.

"There something I'm missing here?" Denny chuckled. "Ain't no trees I can see."

"The only thing you're missing is a coupla screws in that head of yours for certain," the Judge chimed in as he dismounted his horse.

"Har de flippin' har."

Clay jumped off and unspooled his rope into the sand.

"We'll tie round his neck a good strong noose knot, thank you very much, tie the other end to one of these sturdy rocks and make him walk the plank," Clay nodded past them. The plank, or so it was called, was a strip of land jutting out over a chasm that dropped hundreds of feet into a black abyss. The three walked cautiously to the crumbling edge and peered down into the maw. Denny kicked a rock that echoed off the sheer walls as it tumbled and never hit bottom, if there even was one.

Denny whistled through the gap in his teeth, "Hang him high all right."

"Let's get to it," said the Judge shoving past Denny. "Still got a helluva ride into town if we wanna get there before they cork up the whiskey for the night. If I miss that Denny, I'm kicking you into this hole myself."

The hanged man was nearly dead to the world as they unpacked him from the horse. His eyes crusted with sand. Every muscle hung loose under tattered clothing. Denny tied a standard noose knot as the others watched. The Judge had worked too hard to lose the satisfaction of seeing this bastard die if the knot failed and he was swallowed by the infinite unknown below. He blindfolded the hanged man, slapped him awake, and pointed him towards the plank.

"We've already passed judgement on you in this life," the Judge said gruffly, "walk forward and meet your judgement in the next."

A hot wind blew. The hanged man just stood there, unwilling or unable to take a single step.

"Give him a little motivation."

"Why's it gotta be me?" Denny cried.

"Cause you're the one who tied that pretty little bow round his neck that got us into this shit-hole mess," the Judge snapped.

Denny grumbled as he drew his pistol, moving behind the man and sticking it in the small of his back.

"Just a few more steps and all your suffering will be over, pal."

After too long a pause, the hanged man's will bent and he took a step forward, painfully, onto his broken foot.

"That's it. Just a few more like that one."

Two steps, three, four. He was only inches from the edge when he stopped again. Denny gritted his teeth.

"You gonna make me shove you off?"

In anger, Denny pushed all his weight into the gun, but it didn't push back as the hanged man stepped to the side causing Denny to lose his balance and fumble over the edge. Flailing, he fell, headfirst into open air. All the luck in his life was used up in that last desperate second as he caught a hold in the cliff face and managed to keep his grip. The two men sprinted over, shouting.

"Denny, you hold on!"

"Gimme yer hand!" Clay barked.

Clay reached down, straining to get any kind of purchase on the boy's hand. He was just out of reach, and every swing back and forth felt like the boy's last. Denny's hollering cut short as an unmistakable rattle echoed into the canyon. Clay and the Judge jumped back, looking around for the source of the sound. Denny's eyes shot wide as he peered deep into the hole where his hand held.

"Sweet Jesus."

A rattlesnake den. All that luck blown away. The first snake struck like a whip into his neck. Then the second to his cheek, deep, drawing a quick trail of blood down his face. Then the little ones joined in hissing, rattling, drowning out his screams until the world before his eyes became as black as the pit into which he fell.

Emotion welled up in the many creases of the Judge's face as he directed his wrath towards the hanged man who was on his hands and knees feeling his way back to the safety of solid ground. Without a thought, the Judge pulled out his revolver and shot him straight through the back before putting his boot on the man's shoulder and shoving him over the edge to bleed, to hang, and hopefully to swing within reach of the rattlesnake's den. The Judge watched him for a time until he didn't swing at all.

Didn't move.

"At least we got to hang him twice," the Judge whispered.

Neither took another look into the pit as they set out straight for town, the Judge simply making the sign of the cross for Denny as the last rays of light slipped beneath the hillside. The twilight had no shadows, so there was nowhere to hide from the heat when the last of their water ran out.

There was no use sleeping. Even stopping to rest made the world seem hot and dead and endless. At least when they were moving it felt like there was a breeze. Felt like. The men feared opening their mouths to talk would dry them out to the point of dead kindling and they'd spontaneously combust into flames. The blue moon, bright enough to illuminate the long valley before them, betrayed the red-hot heat of it all.

"I don't remember seeing this on the way in," the Judge wiped dusty sweat off his brow.

"That's cause we didn't," Clay said through dry lips as he peered out over the desert night, not even a lone coyote to be seen. "This way is quicker, takes straight to the old bridge we crossed a few miles outside of town."

"Then we should make a run for it before dawn. I fear another day in this heat is liable to turn my bones to sand," the Judge felt around the inside of his mouth with his tongue and flinched with pain.

"The horses need rest."

"I need rest. And I sure as shit ain't getting any out here. The horses will be fine, it's us I'm worried about," the Judge gingerly put a tired foot into the stirrup and hoisted himself on top of his horse. Clay brushed Juniper's side gently with his hand and climbed into the saddle.

"Let's get home."

The two rode silently through the night with hooves clamping on packed sand the only noise that hung in the air. Ahead, a dark, jagged streak cut across the terrain.

The river.

Both horses quickened their pace. The end of their long road was at hand in the form of the nearest trough of cool, clear liquid they could find. Clay didn't mind, he'd jump into the river Styx right now if it was full of water. The Judge slowed his horse to a stop as his eyes focused in the darkness.

"That our bridge?"

"Yep."

"You remember it being broken in two pieces?"

"Nope."

Once, the bridge had crossed a shallow ravine forming the Western passage into town they took not but a day ago. Now, splinters of wood and rope hung lamely on either side of the banks above a stone dry riverbed. A shattered cart and the fly ridden corpses of several oxen and one unlucky driver told the story of the bridge's demise.

"How far is town from here?" the Judge sighed.

"Across this bridge, maybe, two hours at a stiff pace."

"How far is town from here not across this bridge?" his eyes caught a sidelong glance at Clay.

"Three days."

Wildlife had tried to make the crossing without the bridge and all had gotten trapped between the steep banks and laid down to die where time bleached their bones pure white.

"I told them time and again those ropes wouldn't hold. Now we ain't got a bridge to cross or a tree to swing those idiots from," the Judge threw his empty water pouch onto the ground. "All this for that dead soul hanging from the plank laughing up from the fire and brimstone below."

"You feel any better for it?"

The Judge paused and sat back in his saddle.

"Not a bit. Just cause the fire is out doesn't mean the embers don't burn just as much."

The Judge gripped the reins and dug his spurs. A loud whinny snarled out from the horse which set off running straight for the bridge. Sick from dehydration and nearly blind with exertion, the

horse barreled for the banks and with its last strength leaped down into the riverbed and careened for the opposite side. Clay rushed over and watched as the Judge picked up speed in an attempt to run his way out of the bowl on sheer will alone. Up and up he and his horse climbed, grinding, churning, fighting for every step, until its very fibers of existence tore apart.

The horse died beneath him at full gallop and sent the Judge sailing head first into a broken heap on the ground.

"Judge!"

After a weary eternity, the Judge lifted onto an elbow, then a knee, and looked up at the bank above him: only ten feet from salvation that in his eyes could have been a thousand. Clay reached into the saddlebag but his only rope had been used for the second hanging and his reins weren't half as long as they needed to be.

The Judge was stuck in his own purgatory and he knew it.

"It's been nice making your acquaintance, Clay," he called up out of the riverbed as he tipped his hat. "Looks like I'll make my own way from here."

And with that the Judge set out walking.

Alone.

Clay no longer knew the world around him. He just kept working on instinct. The land crossing where the river flowed shallow was North. He would go North. If something got in his way, he would go around it and then continue North. Clay slid back and forth in the saddle, unable to sit or see straight anymore.

Why he had accepted the job to escort the Judge, witness, and convicted out to be hanged dissolved from his thoughts as all he could think to do was go onward.

He was lost. Everything blurred together. The map of his mind drawing blanks. Had he been here before? Was he even heading North anymore? It was only the sudden stop of his horse that jarred him back to reality. Juniper burned beneath him, shaking, hotter than the midday sun above. Her legs were unable to take them any further. Clay reached down and patted her on the side.

"It's all right, girl. It's all right."

Clay looked around for something, anything that would tell him where he was. A lone rock, split down the middle, made a connection. He knew where he was and suddenly wished he didn't.

His father taught him to hunt these hills. Their quarry was mostly small game like hare and any deer that ventured down to drink back when the river still ran high. After a long day, they camped beside the split rock under a full blanket of stars sewn into the quilt of night. It was a wonderful memory, his father and him together, which Clay wished he could live in forever. The nagging truth finally worked its way into his consciousness as he remembered how far they had to travel to get to this exact spot.

It was two days to town. His horse could only go one.

At least with Clay on her back.

So he got off.

