Long Lost Trail

Death, it surrounds us all, eats us away from the inside out. Slowly turns our heart from gold to a worthless clump of mud. Death has a harsh way of attacking us. How can we hear and see others die, and not be affected. Though many deaths tend to eat us away faster and more aggressively than usual. I don’t know why this is, but it hurts. Watching him die hurts me more than I expected. Why is this? Why is death so gruesome to us internally?

“Stella, go tell ‘em cowboys to get saddled up and meet me at the house, including you,” says Papa with a stern voice.

“Ok Papa, will do.”

Suddenly, it was a race to get to the cowboys. We needed to leave fast because winter was raging behind us. If we wanted any shot of making it to Fort Worth on time, we would need to leave right now. The cowboys were herding the cows and getting them into the barn.

“Hurry on up now, fellas, we need to get goin’ if we want a shot of making it down there. Papa wants us all up at the house before we get on our way.”

Garret tipped his hat. “Yes Ma’am, can ya tell him we will be on our way once we get these cattle in the barn?”

I still don’t know what to think, it’s definitely going to feel different going back to the town that I once was born in. Mama says we left because of the war. Though even when we leave from war, it still surrounds us. There is no escaping it, even the animals are at war. It is a never ending cycle.

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Mama says that after the war, things haven’t been the same with Papa. Every night he wakes up, scared that someone is standing over him about to kill him. She says ever since the civil war, Papa has been different. Our daily lives changed due to this. When out in the field he was scared someone would attack him, I remember him pulling out his pistol on me because he thought I was an enemy. Thankfully Papa didn’t shoot, though due to that I either go out in the field with him, or I stay inside. Mama says it is too risky for me to sneak up on him. She told me a story about a year after the war, when they started to live together. She said he would actually not even sleep at all. He would stay up night and day scared that someone is there. War has destroyed our family. Though even with this we somehow kept moving on. I gave it to Mama, she is a strong woman. I wish to be like her when I'm older.

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“Alright, cowboys and cowgirl, we have a long journey ahead of us. I hope y'all ready for the challenge. On this journey we will face Indian tribes, mother nature, and bandits. I hope y’all are ready for ‘er because she ain’t gonna be pretty!” Papa explained.

I believe the cowboys were ready for the challenge, but I sure know I wasn’t ready. I gotta leave mama, my sisters, and my brother. It’s going to be tough not just on me, but for them. I know mama wasn’t planning for me to be a cowgirl. Typically we are supposed to be housewives. We aren’t supposed to be out getting dirty all the time. I know my sisters don’t wanna get dirty. Thankfully I was able to get them to shoot with us but that is the furthest to dirty they got. I just hope mama and them are ready for the hardship that will hit them faster than running into a brick wall.

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“Papa?!?! What is that smoke?”

“Stella, that is leading to that Indian tribal camp,” Papa said, very concerned. “If that looks like what I think it is then we are going to be in big trouble.”

As we got closer we were able to see the bodies of women and children. Someone came through and slaughtered the wives and children of an Indian tribe and caught it on fire. Papa, Garret, and I know exactly what to do. We have to find the people who have done this. We could tell by the stage of the fire that it had just recently happened.

“Alright, boys and girl, we are going to have to split up for this one. Garret, Jared, and Stella, you come with me, the other six of you stay here. We won't take any risk of them trying to kill us. If you leave they will follow you and kill you. We are the last track visible in the mud. If they come, make sure they know we will find the people who did this!” exclaimed Papa.

As we arrived upon a hill about 30 miles east of the camp, we saw a group of six guys sitting around on their horses, ready with their guns drawn. They were waiting for the group of Indians to come by. Two of their guys approached us on the hill. Papa asked them if they knew anything about that camp that was burning. Almost instantly, they knew why we were there.

“They refused to send their kids to school, which is the law. So we did what we had to do, we killed them all. Their father’s and husband’s will have the same punishment.”

Papa extended his arm out, and punched him in the face knocking him off the horse, “no, you will face the punishment instead.”

I shot the guy who papa had punched off the horse. We thought it was an easy fight, but they had three other guys hiding out in the trees. It was an all out ambush. We all were fighting for our lives. Papa split up to the left side, Garret went out to the right, Jarred and I had to go straight ahead. This was our tactic to have them panic. Though Jared and I are at even more risk of being shot than anyone else. Though this tactic somehow works every time. So I thought, one of the guys who came out the tree all dressed in green and brown, had shot as us. The first three shots missed Jared and I. Though the fourth shot, we weren’t too lucky. Jared got shot off his horse. All he could do was lay there on the ground, and hope no one shoots him again, nor step on him. Papa was able to take down four of their guys. Garret got two of them, and I had that one that papa punched off. So that would leave this one guy. The one who had shot Jared. Garret charged directly at him, fearless. Then suddenly, I wasn’t able to see Garret on the horse anymore. Maybe he jumped off? Maybe he got shot? I asked myself. Either way Garret was not visible. Papa was able to sneak his way behind him, Garret was the perfect distraction for him. Papa quickly got the guy in an arm lock, knocking the guy out of the guys hand. Papa grabbed his knife. I knew what he was going to do. He was going to stab the guy right then and there.

“Papa! No, let's save him and bring him to the Indians.”

“Stella. Garret and Jared are shot! What else am I supposed to do?”

For the first time, I had seen Papa go war crazy. He was ready to kill anyone he saw at that point. Mama warned me about this. She knew that once he was around conflict, this would happen. I couldn’t bring myself to the fact that Papa is crazy. A faint voice was heard in the distance.

The voice said “Thank you for your actions, but leave the last guy for us. We will give your guys medical assistance.”

I couldn’t figure out where the voice was coming from. Until papa pointed behind me. It was the leader to the Indian tribe that had gotten attacked. He had everyone behind him. Including our cowboys, they must’ve been able to tell them exactly what had happened. Papa brought the guy to them.

By June, we had made it down to Fort Worth and were ready to make our way back to South Dakota. Though the trip up wasn't going to be so friendly in the winter.

Death and war, the two things that a man can not escape from. It follows you everywhere you go, there is death in the woods, valleys, canyons, mountains, and even the plains. There is no escaping death. All species die. Though the way they die is due to war. We are all at war with each other. It will always be around us. There is no escaping death and war.