

Albert Stark was a coward. Not a quivering, jittery, weak-kneed sort of a coward, but the kind who viewed his cowardice as an act of sensibility: a coward in the name of pragmatism. To Albert, his cowardice functioned as a shield that existed to service the very sensible goal of self-preservation. In the West, brave men got killed. Cowards stayed alive.

Death was everywhere on the frontier.

“Everything that’s not you wants you dead,” Albert would often say. “Outlaws, Indians, angry gamblers, disgruntled prostitutes, wild animals, the weather, disease—hell, even a trip to the dentist means taking your fucking life in your hands.”

One needed only to glance at the front page of any local newspaper to see the truth in such a point of view:

INFANT TRAMPLED BY SICKLY MARE

HUNDREDS PERISH IN LATE SPRING DAMP

SCHOOLMARM FELLED BY TUMBLEWEED ABRASION

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MASS HANGING GOES WELL

MUD DEATHS REACH 30-YEAR HIGH

DUTCH FAMILY CRUSHED BY FALLING CHINAMEN

**WOMAN FOUND GUILTY OF ADULTERY; TONGUE,
BREASTS REMOVED**

50-ACRE BUFFALO HERD DESTROYS TOWN

WATER TOWER CONTAMINATED BY BATHING NEGRESS

BLACK BEARS FEAST ON KINDERGARTEN CLASS

⊕

**HAIL STORM DRIVES SNAKES INTO LOCAL CHURCH—NO
SURVIVORS**

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Yes, it seemed to Albert that fear was a very useful thing for a man living in the southern Arizona territory.

So on this blistering hot day he was quite content to once again allow cowardice to insulate him from an early demise.

He stood at the center of the thoroughfare, gun belt at the ready—or so it appeared. The townsfolk of Old Stump lined the street, eager as ever to witness that most electrifying of all frontier spectacles:

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the showdown. But at the moment, Albert stood alone. His opponent was nowhere to be seen, and high noon had officially come and gone. No one spoke, save for the occasional fluttering murmurs of slightly confused anticipation from the onlookers. Dirt farmers watched patiently. Women fanned themselves, desperately attempting to force a few little bursts of air between their numerous layers of clothing. Well-to-do gentlemen checked their pocket watches and smoked the sort of fine cigars one can only truly enjoy outdoors in 112-degree weather. Children fidgeted and played idly with their favorite toys, such as apple cores, bits of string, and deceased mice. Dogs lay panting on the ground, no doubt wondering how the fuck any human being could live a non-suicidal existence in such an awful, depressing place.

Albert tried to avoid eye contact with the surrounding spectators, aside from the occasional shared glance with a strikingly beautiful blond-haired woman who stood on the steps in front of the general store. She offered him a wan smile, perhaps meant to be reassuring but with a seemingly dubious degree of conviction.

And then, at last, they heard the sound of approaching hoofbeats. Very faint and distant at first, then more distinct, until finally a man rode into view at the opposite end of the thoroughfare. He

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slowed his horse with a sharp yank on the reins that appeared to startle the animal, though it came to an obedient halt. The man dismounted and moved with a decided lack of urgency into position at the end of the street.

Albert stiffened and regarded his opponent. Charlie Blanche and Albert Stark could not have been more contrasting in their deportment: Blanche was a grizzled, weathered-looking mass of aggression, who looked as though he hadn't smiled since the days of Lewis and Clark. He glared at Albert with an expression that seemed to say, *I want to shoot you in the dick with a bullet made of cancer.*

Albert cleared his throat. "So . . . I guess high noon to you means 12:15?"

Charlie stared blankly for a beat. "What?"

"Well," said Albert, genuinely annoyed in spite of his fear, "I mean, you said high noon, and I was here, and . . . I've sort of just been waiting."

Blanche narrowed his eyes darkly. "I'm here now."

"Yeah, I know, but it's just—it's like sort of inconsiderate, because it's like you're saying that your time is more valuable than everyone else's, and . . . well, I know everybody here has like a full day, and they all took time off to be here, and—I mean, right, everyone?"

No one answered. Albert looked around furtively

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in search of a supportive face but found none. His gaze landed on a toothless old man who did not look like he had a full day at all. The man stared emptily, his tongue sliding along the perimeter of his solitary tooth, like a sentry dutifully patrolling the last remaining outpost of an all-but-defeated army.

“Draw,” said Charlie Blanche.

A wave of renewed alertness swept over the on-lookers as they shared a collective inhalation. Now the show would begin!

Albert took a deep breath of his own. “Um . . . no.”

A perplexed buzzing from the townsfolk. The pretty blond woman regarded Albert with a look of confused dismay.

“What do you mean, no?” Blanche narrowed his eyes further, nearly squinting them out of existence.

Albert took another deep breath. “I . . . I don’t wanna do this. You’re a way better shot than me, and so before this gets outta hand and we both get all crazy and dead here, I . . . I don’t wanna have a shoot-out.”

“You yellow, Stark?” The corner of Blanche’s mouth twisted into a perversion of a half smile—no doubt the warmest expression his long-rotted disposition would accommodate.

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“Well, look, *yellow* is kind of a”—Albert paused uneasily—“I mean, that’s kind of racist to our hard-working friends from the Far East, right, guys?”

He turned to a small cluster of Chinese railroad workers watching from off to the side. Surely now he’d get a small boost of support. The shortest Chinaman gave him the finger.

“O-okay,” Albert stuttered. “Welcome.”

Blanche barked out a gravelly laugh. “Even the damn *Chinese* know you’re yellow!”

Albert turned back to face his adversary. “Look, I—I just wanna resolve things more reasonably, okay? I mean, we’re both intelligent adults, right? So . . . I’m just gonna pay you for the damages.”

Blanche’s expression did not change. “Suits me fine. That’s fifty dollars.”

“Right, okay,” said Albert, fidgeting slightly. “Now, here’s the thing . . . I don’t have fifty dollars in cash—”

Charlie’s hand moved toward the butt of his gun.

“—*but* . . . I will give you twenty-five sheep.”

Charlie’s index finger was almost touching the trigger. “I don’t want sheep, Stark.”

Heat sweat was suddenly interfused with panic sweat as Albert realized he was in trouble. “Well, this—this is a lotta sheep. This is like twenty-five sheep. Like a whole . . . gaggle. A pack? Is it a pack?” He laughed anxiously as his floundering brain let

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loose a diarrhetic stream of nonsense. “Oh, my God, can you believe this?! I’m a sheep farmer, and I’m totally blanking on the plural—is it a *school* of sheep? I don’t know! Ha! Hey, you know what a group of ferrets is called? A *business*. A business of ferrets. English is fun, ’cause there’s all kinds of secret treasures—”

The *crack* of a bullet split the air as Charlie Blanche fired a shot at Albert’s feet. Albert jumped back with a distinctly feminine shriek.

“Your goddamn sheep grazed up half my ranch, Stark! That grass ain’t never gonna grow back.”

There was a deep-rooted hatred for sheepmen among the cattle ranchers of the West, largely because the sheep themselves grazed in such a deep-rooted fashion. They would devour the grass so close to the ground that, if left unchecked, they could effectively strip a pasture bare to the point that the grass had to be resown. *No cow can graze where a sheep has been*, the cattlemen would declare. As a result, range wars often broke out between cattle and sheep farmers, with terribly bloody consequences. It also didn’t help that sheepmen were generally considered huge pussies.

Albert swallowed what little saliva he had left as Charlie raised his gun and took aim.

“Okay, okay!” Albert threw up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “I’ll sell off the sheep myself, all

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right? I'll get you the money! O-okay? You'll have it tomorrow."

There was a terrifying moment during which Albert was certain that, even though he had truckled to his opponent's demands, Blanche would pull the trigger. But, instead, the other man slowly lowered the pistol. "If I don't have that cash, I'm comin' after you. And I'll shoot you three times: forehead, nose, and chin, so your head splits clean in half like a fairground watermelon."

"Oh, and I would deserve it," Albert blurted obsequiously. "In that scenario? Oh, my God, what a jerk I would be. But I—that's not the kind of guy I am, so I—I'll get you your money."

Charlie Blanche carefully holstered his weapon. Albert let loose a quivering exhale as Blanche moved back toward his horse. *I'm so glad I didn't pee*, thought Albert, feeling an aftershock of panic over how truly close he'd come to death. He turned and walked back up the street, his legs feeling like they were made of jam—

CRACK!!

The townsfolk gasped. Albert collapsed to the ground as an unimaginably cutting pain blasted through his ankle. "FUCK!" he screamed as he turned in shock.

Charlie had shot him.

"Just a little taste," said Blanche in a soft, deadly

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tone. He reholstered his pistol, mounted his horse, and loped off without another word.

And almost immediately the townsfolk began to disperse as if nothing had happened. The entertainment was over. Everyone casually returned to their day as if they'd just finished watching a sideshow in a traveling carnival—never mind the fact that a man had barely avoided losing his life mere moments before.

A pudgy, slightly balding man in his mid-thirties hurried to where Albert lay clutching his foot in pain.

“Aw, man, Albert! You okay?”

Albert had never been shot before, but he'd witnessed men who had. And those little metal pellets could do some horrifically gruesome damage. He sucked in a sharp breath of air as he steeled himself and pulled back his trouser leg. Though the pain was intolerable, a look of surprise came over his face as he registered the superficiality of the wound. It had pierced the skin, but not by much. *Jesus, how the hell bad must the pain be from a dead-on shot?*

“It's—it's fine, it's just grazed,” Albert said, pulling his trouser leg back down.

“Oh, thank God.” Edward breathed a sigh of relief.

Edward Phelps was a kind-eyed, mild-mannered

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cobbler and Albert's closest friend. Out on the frontier, however, that didn't necessarily mean an inseparable bond. In a town of fewer than seventy-five people, your choices were limited when it came to picking a best pal. Albert liked Edward well enough, but it had more to do with the fact that Edward was one of the few people in the West who wouldn't shoot you for looking at him the wrong way. Albert wasn't sure, but he didn't think Edward even owned a gun. And if he did, it would have looked completely out of place. If there were such a term as *aggressively affable*, that was Edward.

A much more imposing man approached the center of the thoroughfare.

"You all right, Stark?" Sheriff Arness inquired without expression.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Albert responded. "Oh, hey, listen, Sheriff, I wanna thank you for your help. Appreciate you stepping in and halting this deadly altercation going on right in front of your office. Really terrific, thanks for the support."

The sheriff looked at Albert with coldness. "It's not my place to intervene, Stark. I believe a man should fight his own battles."

Albert stared for a beat. This guy was everything that was fucked up about the frontier, all wrapped up in one tough-eyed, sunburned package sealed with a tin star. "You're the sheriff," Albert said, try-

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ing not to sound too much like he was talking to a five-year-old.

“That’s right.”

“So . . . the one thing we’re all paying you to do—like, the one function you have in town—you’re saying everyone else should do it.”

“I’m not your goddamn bodyguard, Stark.”

Once again, Albert resisted the urge to sound as if he were teaching a class of retarded children. “Well, actually, yes. See, as the sheriff, it’s technically kind of your job to protect my body from harm.”

“Yeah, it is kinda your job,” Edward chimed in, always the faithful, supportive pal who didn’t know when to keep his mouth closed.

“Shut up,” the sheriff snapped, and Edward quickly lowered his head and shuffled aside timidly. The sheriff turned back to Albert. “I guess you and I see things differently.”

“So, like, if you opened a restaurant, would you wait for people to come in and then say, ‘A man should cook his own food?’”

“You’d best watch your tongue, or you’re gonna find yourself in a jail cell.”

“Oh, *there* we go!” Albert threw up his arms, the stress and pain of the day exploding in an outburst of aggravation. “The long arm of the law finally lashes out to protect *itself* against pissy people!”

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The sheriff just glared. “You should see Doctor Harper about that ankle,” he said at last, turning away stiffly.

Albert expelled a pained sigh of defeat, struggled to pull himself up from the dirt, and limped off toward the doctor’s office.

Frontier medicine was essentially an oxymoron.

The big city hospitals in 1882 were bad enough, but they exemplified the cutting edge of science compared to what sort of treatment you got out West.

The medical office of Doctor Matthew Harper, the only licensed practicing physician in the town of Old Stump, was a glorified shack. His hand-painted shingle swayed and creaked in the hot, dusty wind—a fine indication of the kind of care you could expect if you fell ill in this little community. Inside, the wooden shelves were lined with various bottles of medicines, elixirs, tonics—but who the hell was anybody kidding? It was all just liquor. On the frontier, medicine was merely booze with a fancy label.

Doctor Harper stood over the body of his patient. She was a woman in her forties, hard-lined and graying. She lay unconscious from the doctor’s

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ether, which was a good thing, since her abdomen was sliced wide open. Doctor Harper's hands were covered in blood as he meticulously worked away at her insides, using all the skills his dental training had provided him. A mangy-looking housecat leapt up onto the operating table, sniffing at the body.

"Oh, come on, now, you know you're not supposed to be up here," Doctor Harper chuckled, scooping up the cat and placing him gently on the floor. "You run along now, Jesus, you hear?" The doctor's hands left smears of blood on the cat's fur, at which it eagerly lapped. Harper returned to his work, brushing the errant feline hairs off the table.

"Hello?" came a voice from the outer room. "Doctor Harper?"

Harper wiped his hands on a rag, tossed it on his patient's leg, and strolled into the outer room. Albert had already seated himself in a chair, eager to take the weight off his injured limb.

"Hi, Doc," he said. "I was wondering if—*holy shit*." He stopped mid-sentence as he registered Doctor Harper's hands, which were still shiny with fresh crimson blood.

"Oh, don't mind this," Doctor Harper reassured him. "I'm just in the middle of surgery."

"I can come back," Albert said, moving toward the door.

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“No, no, she’ll be out for a while. It’s Mrs. Callaghan, poor woman. Her stomach devil was about to explode, so I had to take it out.”

It took Albert a beat to decipher that one. “Her appendix?”

“Yep, that’s the fella,” the doctor answered.

Albert wondered why he had even come here. A trip to the doctor’s office was likely to turn a hangnail into a desperate struggle for survival.

“Now, what’s the trouble?” Doctor Harper asked, allowing himself a swallow from one of the bottles on the shelf. No doubt such frequent behavior contributed to the heavily seamed face and unhealthy pallor that brought to mind Luke 4:23: *Physician, heal thyself.*

“Uh, it’s a bullet graze. Just need it checked out.”

“Oh, yeah.” The doctor smiled with a gossip-hungry glint in his eye. “I heard you turned yellow on Charlie Blanche.”

“Well, Doc, I know you’d rather be patching up a gaping chest wound than a minor graze, but unfortunately I value my life. Now, you wanna take a look at this, or should I limp out into the desert and let the fucking coyotes have at it?”

“All right, let’s have a look.” Doctor Harper laughed good-naturedly. The doctor rolled up Albert’s trouser leg, his hands leaving light bloody smears on the fabric, courtesy of Mrs. Callaghan.

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“I notice you’re not big on the hand-washing,” Albert remarked listlessly. The doctor either ignored the comment or was too busy focusing on the injury.

“Ooh, that’s a nasty one,” he observed, examining the wound. “We may have to take that off, otherwise you could wind up with a case of toe-foot.”

Albert sighed. “Okay, first of all, I don’t think that’s a real thing, and second of all, it’s a graze, Doc. I’m not gonna let you cut my foot off.”

“Suit yourself. But I’ve seen toe-foot turn into knee-leg in less than a week.”

“Just a dressing, thanks,” Albert responded curtly, now even more anxious to get this over with as quickly as possible.

Doctor Harper pulled open a drawer and retrieved a roll of bandages as Albert surveyed the small office. The remains of a roast chicken were scattered on a plate next to an open jar of laudanum, and a recently lit cigar sat precariously on the edge of a side table, its pointy tip still darkened with saliva. As for any sign of official physician’s credentials, the sole candidate hung in a wooden frame on the far wall.

“*Texas Territory Medical College*,” Albert read the handwritten diploma aloud as the doctor went to work on his leg. “So, is that a pretty prestigious place?”

“Yessir, third in my class,” Harper answered with genuine pride.

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“Ah. And was this an indoor medical school?” Albert asked without a trace of sarcasm or irony.

“All right, there we go,” said the doctor, straightening up and smiling down at the new dressing. “Try to stay off it for a bit.”

Albert looked at the results. “Just a dry cloth bandage? That’s it?”

“Well, what else would you like me to do?”

“Clean it, maybe?” Albert answered, feigning patience. “So I don’t get an infection and die?”

“Well, now, that’s up to the Lord God.”

Albert stared for a beat. “I guess I’m looking for someone more reliable.”

They wished each other good day as Jesus the cat helped himself to Mrs. Callaghan’s large intestine.

On any given evening, the Old Stump Saloon was packed to the gills with gamblers, boozers, and unshaven purveyors of various foul smells. At times, in fact, there seemed to be virtually hundreds of different odors, all fiercely competing for dominance in the confined and poorly ventilated space.

But at two o’clock in the afternoon, the place was mostly deserted. A couple of frail-looking old cowhands sat at the bar staring into their glasses, but otherwise the lower level was empty.

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Except for Edward Phelps.

Edward sat patiently on a wooden chair at the base of the stairwell that led up to the brothel rooms. He probably should have brought a book or something, he thought, but the wait wouldn't be too long. In his hand he held a lovely late-spring bouquet of daisies, lilacs, and daffodils. From upstairs, the raucous sounds of sexual intercourse could be heard as Edward's girlfriend, Ruth, was fucked wildly by a dirty cowboy.

"Oh, yes! *YES!!*" she screamed, her voice reverberating throughout the saloon.

"Yeah, you like me fuckin' you, don't you?" belted the dirty cowboy.

"Yes! Yes, it's really terrific!" she shouted back between moans of ecstasy.

"I got dirt on my dick from workin' outside all day!"

"I know! I love the scratchy feeling inside me!"

"Yeah, you *like* the dirt on my dick, don't you?!"

"I do! I really do! It's such a treat!"

Ruth's sex talk had always been a bit clumsy, but her heart was in the right place, and as a prostitute she was exemplary: always on time for her shift, freshly bathed after every fifth customer, and willing to accommodate all types of fetishes. Edward admired her work ethic. The seriousness with which

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a person took professional obligations said a lot about their character. He was lucky to be with such a woman.

“Stick your finger in my asshole!” shouted the dirty cowboy.

“I’m excited to!” Ruth answered.

At that moment, Millie, the house madam, descended the stairs. She was plump, in her early forties, with the saucy, painted look of a career saloon whore. Her thick mound of done-up hair, no doubt once dark as onyx, now showed numerous streaks of gray. As she approached, she waved a beringed hand in the cobbler’s direction.

“Hi, Edward,” she said with a smile. Her cherry-red lips and heavily rouged cheeks, while undignified-looking in and of themselves, at least added some welcome color to the brown-on-brown room.

“Oh, hey, Millie.” Edward grinned, standing respectfully.

“You waiting for Ruth?”

“Yeah, I got off work a little early, so I thought I’d take her out for a picnic.”

“Oh. You’re a good boyfriend.”

“I try to be.”

Millie glanced toward the upper level. “Well, it sounds like she’s almost done,” she said, as the moans of orgasmic passion reached a dissonant crescendo.

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“OH, GOD, I’M GONNA COME!” Ruth screamed.

“Those are pretty flowers,” Millie remarked.

Edward looked down at his bouquet with a proud grin. “I know, aren’t they beautiful? There are even a couple of tulips in here. They’re hard to come by this time of year, but Ruth is very particular.”

“OH, YES! SHOOT THAT DIRTY COWBOY CUM ALL OVER MY FACE!”

Edward adjusted his tie, hearing that Ruth was almost finished. “Do I look all right?” he asked, presenting himself to Millie for inspection.

“Yes, you’re . . . you’re fine,” she answered, unable to contain her curiosity any longer. “Say, Edward . . . can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Are you . . . okay with the fact that your girlfriend gets screwed by about fifteen guys every day and gets paid to do it?”

“Oh. Well, I mean, my job sucks too.”

“Yeah, but you repair shoes.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me!” Edward laughed. “The shoe business has been so slow since the Civil War ended.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, there’s just a lot less legs.”

Millie was about to press the original issue a bit

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further, when Ruth came bounding down the stairs, still in the process of pulling her clothes back on.

“Eddie, is that you?” she squealed happily.

He whirled around to meet her eyes and flung his arms wide open. “Hey, sweetheart!”

“What are you doing here?” she exclaimed, smothering him in a joyous embrace and kissing him flush on the lips.

He flinched. “Ooh, your breath is a little . . .”

“Sorry—I had to give a blow job.” She covered her mouth, her already red cheeks coloring just a bit more.

Edward smiled with genuine understanding. “That’s okay. Hey, I got done a little early, and I thought we could go for a walk out by the stream.”

Ruth hugged him all over again for his thoughtfulness. “Ohhh, you are the *best!* Yeah, c’mon, let’s go!” She gave him a peck on the cheek, then looked at Millie. “Don’t I have the best boyfriend in the world?”

Millie opened her mouth to respond, but nothing seemed fitting.

“Bye!” Ruth giggled, pulling a beaming Edward by the hand toward the saloon doors. “What time should I be back?” she asked, turning briefly back to Millie.

“Well, Clyde Hodgkins wanted to know if he could come by later on.”

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“Oh—what’s he want?” Ruth asked.

“I think he wants anal.”

Ruth whirled around and grabbed Edward’s hands.
“Oh, honey! We could afford to get you a new belt for church!”

Edward’s eyes widened as he registered his good fortune. “Wow, that’d be great!”

“I know!” Ruth erupted with delight, squeezing his hands and swinging them back and forth in a dancier fashion.

“So, what time will you need her? 5:30 or so?” Edward asked Millie.

“Well, this isn’t really like a dentist’s office, Edward. He’ll probably stop in when he’s ready to put his penis inside an asshole.”

“Okay, we’ll say 5:00 just to be safe,” Edward said. And, with that, the couple hurried out into the afternoon sunlight, their love for each other outshining the brightness of the day.

Deadcow Bridge had earned its name back around the time that Old Stump’s first settlers rode west with dreams of making a new life for themselves. In addition to its human complement, the wagon train had brought with it two hundred head of beef cattle. But when the settlers reached the southwestern Arizona territory, the herd had suc-