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Paradise Sky

Written by Joe R. Lansdale

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PARADISE SKYY

JOE
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Now, in the living of my life, I've killed deadly men and dangerous animals and made love to four Chinese women, all of them on the same night and in the same wagon bed, and one of them with a wooden leg, which made things a mite difficult from time to time. I even ate some of a dead fellow once when I was crossing the plains, though I want to rush right in here and make it clear I didn't know him all that well, and we damn sure wasn't kinfolks, and it all come about by a misunderstanding.

Another thing I did was won me a shooting contest up Deadwood way against some pretty damn fine shooters, all of them white boys, and me as shiny black as obsidian rock. There was some dime novels written about me as well, though there are some that argue with that and say I've merely latched onto the name Deadwood Dick, the Dark Rider of the Plains, as a way of giving myself a higher standing in life, and that those stories wasn't based on me at all. That isn't true, though the stories those writers wrote about me in those books was mostly damn lies, and I plan to set that record straight from one end to the other, and in due time. But I'm not starting where the story starts. I'm jumping ahead and wetting down the fire before it's been lit.

I think this is where it begins. I heard if you went out west and joined up with the colored soldiers they'd pay you in real Yankee dollars, thir-

teen of them a month, feed and clothe you, and give you a horse to ride. This was in the back of my mind when my adventure started. It was something that had been lying there like a hound in the sun that didn't want to get up. But on this day I'm talking about, suddenly some fire got in that dog's bones. It was due to what I heard a man once call the vagaries of life that it come to sound like a right smart idea and a good career choice. You see, I got invited to a lynching.

It wasn't that I had been asked to hold the rope or sing a little spiritual. I was the guest of honor on this one. They was planning to stretch my neck like a goozle-wrung chicken at Sunday dinner.

At the time of these goings-on, I wasn't but twenty years old. Thing I'd done was nothing on purpose. I had gone to town for Pa, to get some flour and such, and it was about a five-mile walk. I wasn't looking forward to carrying a tow sack of flour and corn and other goods back that five miles, but that was how things was. We only had one horse, and Pa was using it to plow the cornfield. That meant I had to walk.

The trip there was all right, as the sack was empty and without real weight, and the day was nice, the sun heating things up, birds singing in the trees, happy as if they had good sense. I whistled most of the way there. It was a good thing wasn't anyone with me, because I'm not much of a whistler. But there I was, on a nice morning, feeling pretty good about things, even if I was going to have to deal with white people—Civil War veterans, mostly. Folks who wanted to talk about the war all the time and to anyone come along. Wanted to tell how if good ole Robert E. Lee had just done a little of this instead of a little of that, we niggers would still know our place down on the farm, and when we didn't know it, whippings was needed now and then just to keep us straight cause our minds was like a child's mind. According to them, if left to ourselves, we would have been wandering around aimless, not knowing how to feed and clothe ourselves and humping the livestock.

On this day I wasn't thinking much on that kind of thing, though. I was just enjoying myself, walking along, going to Wilkes Mercantile and General Store and Emporium to buy some things with what little money

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Pa had on hand from selling taters and maters last year. He had clung to that money tight as a crow to something shiny, but finally some of the staples had run low, and I was going to have to buy enough of those to last us until he brought in the next crop, all of it growed on land we owned free and clear, which for colored was as rare as a ride down Main Street in a buggy with fringe on top and white people standing on either side of the street waving and cheering.

It was a white woman that led to the trouble. I was traveling along, my empty sack hung over my shoulder, thinking how I hated to have to go to the back of the Wilkes store and stand there with my sack in hand till Old Man Wilkes or his son, Royce, decided they would ask what it was I wanted, then try and sell me the worst of the meal and flour for more than it was worth. I was supposed to sort of shuck and yuk with them until I got as good a deal as I could get without appearing uppity or pushy. It was a thing that wore a man out, young or old. But it was part of survival training.

I never got to the store. I decided on a shortcut, took a back alley, and come to a split between the handful of buildings that made up the town and walked past a backyard where a white woman was hanging out wash. That house five years ago had set on the edge of town, but now the town had grown out that way, and the house was tucked in among a livery and a barbershop. It wasn't much of a house, by the way. What real property there had once been was sold off after the war, and to hear the owner of that place, Mr. Sam Ruggert, talk, you would have thought before the war it had been vast farmland and bountiful orchards, but it hadn't. It had been covered in brush and thistle, and if Ruggert had spent less time in the barn with a jug of moonshine he might could have grown something besides all them thistles and weeds. His take, however, was different. He decided loss of the war had thrown him and his family into decline—and to hear him tell it, which he did on a regular basis at the store toward which I was walking, ever' hole in his long johns had to do with Yankees and niggers. According to Ruggert's way of thinking, I was a member of both groups: one by birth and the other by wishful think-

ing. He also had a reputation as a strange and angry man, right deadly if crossed. His hovel was always patched over with animal skins he was curing against the outside wall, and the roof sagged on one side and had a tarp stretched over it where some shingles should have been laid.

As I come along with my empty sack, I turned my head to see this young red-haired woman of generous but well-contained construction at the wash, hanging clothes on the line, clamping it there with clothespins. I knew this woman by sight, if no other way. She was Ruggert's third wife, one having died from working herself to death, a second having run off, and this one being the daughter of the woman who had run off. She was an attractive young lady from behind, but from the fore, with the way her face was narrow and her nose was long, she gave the appearance of the business end of a hatchet.

That wasn't the end I was watching, however, and I will admit to a bit of true curiosity as to how that backside of hers was far more attractive than the front, but I wasn't about no mischief of any kind. I just turned my head and seen she was reaching into her basket, pressing some serious butt up against her thin gingham dress.

It was in that brief and fateful moment that her husband, the aforementioned Sam Ruggert, come out of the back door and seen me looking. My having sight of what anyone that might have walked by could have seen just crawled up his ass like a wounded animal and died, and he couldn't stand the stink.

There he stood, eyeing me hard with his piggy eyes, wearing only a pair of pants and his boots, his big white belly hanging over his belt like a bag of potatoes, his mouth twisting around in his beard like a couple of red worms trying to get out of a tangle of grass.

Next thing I know the fly was in the buttermilk. He's bellowing at me, accusing me of being bold with a white woman, like maybe I had broke into their yard and jammed my arm up her ass. But I hadn't done nothing except what was natural, which was to admire a nice butt when it was available to me.

By this time his wife had turned around and seen me, ruining any joy

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I might have had in her backside with the sight of her face. She started calling me this and that, and you can bet the word *nigger* come up two or three times. *Coon* was tossed in there for good measure, and the kindest thing I was called by the both of them was a goddamn darky. Of course they made mention of my ears, which stood out like the open front and back doors on a shack.

So there they was, yelling at me and carrying on, and Ruggert started looking around, hoping for an ax or a hoe, maybe even a rock to throw. None of that was on hand, so he rushed into the house. I knew he'd be coming out with a gun. Most likely a big one.

If he didn't shoot me dead, I could already in my mind's eye see a bunch of white folks loping up with a rope and a snarl on their lips, ready to string me to a tree or a porch overhang without so much as a questioning or a trial. I had seen it happen once. An old man, who the white folks called Uncle Bob, said something that went sour with some white person, and it was a thing so minor no one remembers what it was anymore. In the next instant Uncle Bob was dangling by a rope from a tree and had been set on fire by lighting his pants legs with a kitchen match. That was done after a nice churchgoing lady had opened his fly, sawed off his manhood with a pocketknife, and tossed it to a dog.

I was ten years old when I seen it happen. My mama was alive then and home, as it was after the war and her having been sold off became unlawful, and she had made her way back to us. By then Pa was free himself. I had only been a little slave boy for a few years and was fortunate enough not to remember it too good. We had been owned by a pretty nice fellow, if you want to consider it that way. I mean, he didn't beat us or anything, but we was certainly his property. Had we run off we would have been hunted down with dogs and men with rifles. And he had sold Mama, hadn't he? So to say he wasn't bad as some is a relief, but not a smooth satisfaction.

Mama got to come home, and things was better, but it didn't last. Didn't seem it was no time at all until she got the sickness and died. But this time concerning Uncle Bob was before her dying. Me and Mama had

come to town to buy something or another with our small bit of trade goods, and next thing we knew here come old Uncle Bob running like a dog that had stole a ham.

A mob was right behind him, and then they was on him. It was like watching a mass of big ole horseflies settling down on a dog turd. Mama tried to put her hand over my eyes so I wouldn't see it happen, but a white man seen us standing there, said to Ma, "Get your fingers off his face. You people take a good look and know your place around here." It happened so fast and so furious that by the time you could have picked your nose only slightly, and without much in the way of a comfortable reward, it was over. Uncle Bob was cut and hanged, and a dead bird found beside the road was stuck in his mouth. I don't think there was any reason to that, other than it was something mean.

That day got branded firm in my mind, and that's why I run away from that place after seeing Mrs. Ruggert's ass. I ended up at the livery and stole a horse right in front of the colored livery boy, who said, "Oh, shit, you gonna be in some hot water now."

In a moment I had gone from being in trouble over a misunderstanding to being in trouble over an actual theft.

I didn't have time to saddle the horse, and I didn't pick too wise. That mare was old and near lame. Therefore I don't know I can say I rode out of town so much as my horse limped away with me on its back.

It wasn't clear to me what I should do, so I decided to ride out to our place to see Pa and explain to him what had happened. When I was about a half mile out, for some reason I abandoned the horse, thinking I might be forgiven for taking it. This was, of course, unclear thinking, as I was going to be killed for something that was a matter of accident and of no consequence. Had that horse gone back to the livery, and had it had the ability to talk, and had it explained the situation, given them a solid and true bill of events, about how I was in a frightened whirl and had only borrowed her, it wouldn't have mattered. Had the horse spoke up in my defense, she would have been hanged first and then me alongside her, the both of us with dead birds in our mouths.

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I ran like a deer the rest of the way to our place and hadn't no more got there when I realized pretty soon there would be a rabble on my tail. By this time the story of what I had done would have been built on so a foot would become a yard. It would be determined that I had not only molested that hatchet-faced wife of Ruggert's and stole a horse but also assaulted every woman in town in some fashion or another, and of course that would be an insult to white manhood, which was a thing that couldn't be tolerated.

It also occurred to me that I might be bringing the whole bad business down on Pa. But by the time I had thought this through, I was at our place and had caught Pa out in the field plowing.

He stopped to listen to my story, and I explained the whole bad business to him. Unhitching the old horse from the plow, we both rode it back to the house. When we got there, he tied the horse up, and we went inside. He peeled back some floorboards. Underneath them was a tow sack, and inside it, wrapped in oil paper, was a pistol. It was a .44, Pa explained, and it was converted from cap and ball to a cartridge shooter. When he gave it to me, I damn near went through the floor it was so heavy.

"You had better run," he said. "I ain't gonna say I seen you. You ought not take the plow horse, cause it would be dead in an afternoon if you had to really ride it, and they'd know for a fact you come here and took it, which would put them directly on your path. You'd make out best if you run across the field and down into the draw, where them trees along it can hide you. Do that and keep moving down it until you get to the pine break. Go into them pines, head west, and keep traveling on in that direction. And son, it might be best you never come back, cause if you do, they'll be waiting. A white man has a long memory for unimportant things involving colored folks. And that Ruggert fella, he's one of the worst."

I nodded at him, feeling so weak I could hardly stand, not quite wrapping my thoughts around the fact I was leaving forever.

"You take that gun. It's loaded, and try not to use it, but they come

down on you, you take it in both hands and aim at the biggest part of them you can see, and if they are going to swarm you, you ought to save a bullet for yourself, put it to your head, and let go, cause things is going to get a lot worse if you're alive when they lay hands on you."

Considering I was already scared, that bit of advice really lit a shuck under me. Next thing I knew Pa was taking out his old cheap pocket watch and giving me that, as if telling time under the circumstances was important, and then he hugged me. I shoved that watch deep in my pocket, dropped the Colt into a feed sack, and within minutes I was running out of the house, across the field toward that deep draw that was at the back of our place.

As I ran I heard Pa yell at me, "Run, Willie, run."

I made right smart of my run, and it wasn't long before I come to that draw, which was bordered by trees. I slipped down the side of it, stumbling, near losing that big cannon of a gun as I went. I got my feet under me, then took to running through the shallow water that crawled along the draw like a thin, wet snake. I figured if I was in the water I might put off any dogs they brought, and my tracks could get lost if there were enough rocks at the bottom of the stream. That plan went to hell quick when I realized I was just bogging in mud and leaving a path that a blind man with no more than a walking stick to feel around with could have followed. It also come to me that a dog didn't need to smell my feet, just me. Anyway, I continued on, and it didn't seem any time at all that I come to the spot I was hunting for: the big gathering of pines.

Scrambling up the side of the draw, I made it into the trees, and at the same time I heard horses splashing through the water. They had come on me quicker than I could have imagined. I paused a moment for a peek, and coming over the lip of the draw I saw a horse, and on it was Ruggert, shirted now and wearing an old black flat hat. There was a holstered revolver on his hip.

Ruggert had no more made the top of the draw than another man on horseback followed up. I didn't wait to see how many there was, cause I knew for certain there was more of them than me.

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They broke apart, fanning out through the pines, and I started hoofing it. I decided it might be smart to go wide and backtrack on them and get behind them and into the creek. They didn't have dogs with them, but they had reckoned correctly that I would head to Pa's place, and it occurred to me then that was why they was on me so fast, having found my footprints out in the plowed field and then followed them down into the draw.

I went wide and cut back through the pines, back to the water, but well up ahead of where I had been. When I got to the draw it wasn't just a little run of water no more. It was wide in the spot I come to, and was in fact no longer a draw at all but a marsh. There was reeds and old dried wood and some trees growing up in it. I couldn't figure no other thing to do than to wade in and try and heel it to dry land, which was a considerable distance away.

Me and my feed sack full of pistol got into the water, and it wasn't deep, but it was mucky. I headed to where the trees was thickest in the beyond, and hadn't gone no distance at all when I heard a horse splashing along in the water. I turned to see that it wasn't none other than Ruggert riding down on me, though his horse was having considerable problems in the mud.

He yelled out to the others he had me cornered, and that's when the water got deep and I was suddenly up to my neck, still clinging to my bag of pistol but knowing I had most likely wetted it up to the point of not firing.

It was then that I took a step and found the water got really deep. I was under it before I could say, "Oh, shit."

I don't know how far I went down, but it seemed some distance. All I know for sure was it was wet and I come up out of it snorting. At that same time a shot was fired, and I felt the side of my head, high up over my ear, burn like a lightning strike, and then everything was black.

I couldn't have been out long, cause when I come to Ruggert and his horse was right over me. Still in his saddle, Ruggert swung out and down, trying to grab me by the collar, pull me up, trap me against the

side of his horse, and ride me out of the water, where he could lay solid hands on me.

I was pretty light and thin compared to him. He was strong and was trying to back his horse out of the water, dragging me with it. It was then that I swung out with the bag of pistol, which I had clung to even during my time of unconsciousness. I swung it high, and damned if I didn't catch Ruggert a good lick—nailed him about the same place he grazed me with his shot.

He let out a sound like a cow that was dropping her calf, and next thing he was in the water, facedown and cold out. I ain't sure why I done it, but I rolled him over so he wouldn't drown. I looked down into his face, which seemed to be older than I knew he was, and took a quick study of it. There was creases on his forehead, along with a red knot swelling up where I had whacked him. His whiskers was wet and clearly shot through with gray. It was then, too, that I realized that though he was stout, he wasn't no big man, really, but was short and muscled with a big belly. I don't know why I noticed all this, but I did, and then I let him go a'floating and got to hustling out of there, thinking any minute the rest of them fellas would come up on me. An alligator couldn't have hastened through that marsh any faster than I did, though I was concerned I might come upon a real one in my progress, it being bottomland and close to where the Sabine run its course.

I didn't have no idea how far I went or how long it was before they found Ruggert, who at that point in time I thought was dead. I just kept going.

The swamp got thicker with trees, and the land got firmer, and after a long time I was on solid ground, moving along nicely through a stand of hardwoods and scattered pines. The day began to creep away, and I stopped a few times to rest, listening for horses, but didn't hear nothing. Being in such thick woods, I couldn't really see the sun and tell which way it was sinking, so I was firmly confused on directions.

When the trees broke there was a clearing. I looked out and seen I had made a loop all the way back to our property, only now where

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our house used to be standing, there was a pile of blackened ash and charred wood.

My first impulse was to charge out of there over to the house and see if I could find Pa, but I didn't. It was a tough decision, but I had been dragging and staggering through the swamp and the woods all day, and the sun was setting like a busted apple off to my right, finally showing me which way was west. I sat down among the trees and put the bag of Colt in my lap and waited until it was solid dark.

There was just a piece of moon that night, but it was good enough I could make my way across the field and over to our burned house. I looked around as best I could in the moonlight, fearing I'd find Pa's body, and that's exactly what I did. He was blacker than his natural black and was smoking like a heap of burning tobacco, his ribs and skull revealed, the fire having charred the flesh off of them.

They had throwed our hog up in there with him, probably shot it or beaned it in the head. It had burned up too, except I could see its legs poking up, its hog hooves puffing off strips of smoke like rips of cotton. The air smelled like frying pork, or at least I liked to think it was pork, cause it made my stomach hungry and sick at the same time.

I felt so weak I almost couldn't walk. It was too hot to go right in there and drag Pa out, and by that point it didn't matter. He wasn't going to cure up and be well between now and things cooling off. He was dead as dead could be, and they had either killed him there or done it and put him and the hog in the cabin and set fire to it just because they could. I wasn't sure what their problem with the hog was. Probably just wanted to kill something else, and without me being around the porker had taken my place.

I decided I couldn't leave Pa there until he'd cooled down, so I went out to the barn, which they hadn't burned, got a rope, and lassoed Pa's body and dragged it out of the ruins of our shack. I hauled him to a place beneath an old oak, got a shovel out of the barn, and buried him, his body still smoking. I didn't make a cross or heap up stones, cause I didn't want to let on where he was buried, in case the vengeful bastards might

take it out on his remains. I scraped the ground good and dragged some leaves over it with the shovel, so unless someone was looking for the grave it wouldn't be easy to find.

Finishing up, I was considering if I could get away with sleeping in the barn when I seen outlined in the moonlight four men on horseback coming out of the pines along the draw at the back of the property. They was heading in the direction of the cabin.

Carrying the shovel and my bag with the pistol in it, the rope coiled and looped over my shoulder, I eased into the woods, hunkered down, and watched. I seen right off from the way he sat in the saddle that one of them was Ruggert. He wasn't dead. It was then that I wished the pistol hadn't gotten wet, because I didn't want to chance shooting it and it misfiring. I pulled it out of the bag anyway, poured water out of the barrel, checked the chambers, and discovered three loads. I couldn't have put up much of a fight with that if it was working, especially if I was saving one of the shells for myself. Still, I clung to it in case I had to give it a try.

So there I sat, back in the shadow of the woods, squatted down on my haunches, watching that string of horses ride toward the shack, starting to be able to hear them talking. The night air carried every sound as clean and sharp as if they was standing right beside me. I listened to them until they rode up to the burned-down house. They looked around for a while but never bothered to get off horseback.

"Looks like he's all burned up, Sam," said one of the men mounted next to Ruggert. "I don't even see no bones." He was a man I had seen around town but didn't know well, other than he was kind of a drunk and his name was Hubert something or another. The others I didn't know at all.

"It's that damn uppity shine I want," Ruggert said. "Want to cut him and rope him and burn him and whatever I can think of."

That uppity shine would be me, of course.

"We ought to burn down the goddamn barn while we're here," Ruggert said. "I think they got chickens we can kill."

"Ah, the hell with it," said the man mounted next to him. "Let's head

on back in. I've had enough. We got us one tonight, and I'm satisfied enough."

"Wasn't your wife's butt he was looking at," Ruggert said.

"Hell, I think your wife's butt is about all she's got going for her," said another of the men. "I've taken a look now and then."

"But it was a darky took the look," Ruggert said. "I can understand a white man, but a darky? That's wrong, and you know it."

"We've done what we can, and I'm through with it," Hubert said. "I ain't gonna spend the rest of my night chasing some nigger through the swamp."

"I wasn't planning on starting out until tomorrow again," said Ruggert.

"You'll start without me," said a man.

"I got to get home to dinner," said another.

"I ain't never gonna give up till I get him," Ruggert said. "I have to get me a tracker to run him down, that's what I'll do."

That's when I heard a sound behind me, like something creeping up. I turned with the big pistol, hoping it would fire, and seen our old plow horse, who we called Jesse. He was wandering out of the woods, walking right at me. I stood up behind the tree, and the horse come over and looked down at me, probably wanting the grain it hadn't had. It made a nickering sound.

I heard Ruggert say, "There's that old nigger's horse." A shot was fired, and Jesse reared up slightly and turned and bolted away in pain.

Another shot was fired off into the pines where Jesse had departed, then there was silence. I laid down on the ground behind the tree and wormed my head around the side of it and took a gander. They was riding off then, having burned down our house, killed my pa and a hog, threatened the chickens, and shot at Jesse. Not to mention they had tried to kill me. They had had a busy day.

It was my thoughts to follow them into town and kill the four man jack of them. But even in the state I was in, I knew that wasn't a good plan. There I was, a kid compared to them, and them with guns that

was fully loaded, and there I was with an old pistol that might work and might not, and if it did, I had three shots and there was four of them.

Much as it galled me to do it, I lay there and let them ride out of sight. When I was sure they was good and gone, I put the pistol in the bag and went into the woods searching for Jesse. I found him easy enough. He wasn't much of a runner, old as he was. I petted him up, saw that the bullet had grazed him under the belly. Ruggert seemed to have a knack for coming close but not quite getting there.

I walked out of the pines, and, as I expected, Jesse followed me to the barn. Opening the double doors, I let him in and fed him grain, went out to the well pump and got a bucket of water, and sloshed it into his trough. I looked around for something for me to eat, but there wasn't nothing. We had a few chickens in coops behind the barn, so I went out there and let the chickens out, since there wouldn't be no one to feed them anymore. I gathered about a half dozen eggs that hadn't been collected that day, put them in a feed bucket, and went back inside the barn. I took all the eggs out of the bucket and laid them out on a pile of hay.

There was some matches in the barn, and I used hay for a fire starter, brought in some sticks from outside, and made me a little blaze. I sat the bucket on some logs I dragged in. I cracked all those eggs and fried them in the bottom of the bucket. They stuck a little, but I scooped them out with my hands when the bucket and the eggs was cool enough for me to stand it. I licked the eggs off my fingers.

When I finished eating, I decided to lay down for a couple hours' sleep. When I woke up I was crying. I was crying for Mama being dead, Pa murdered. I was mad I had been chased and near killed for looking at a white woman's butt. On top of that I was angry about them taking a shot at poor old Jesse, who was about as dangerous to them as a wind-blown leaf.

Getting off the horse blanket I had laid out, I got the saddle and the bridle and such that was needed and dressed Jesse up. I led him outside. It was a still night, and the air was sharp. The moon was laying gold light over everything, smooth as butter being spread with a knife. It was odd

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the world could look so pretty and the air taste so clean and my pa was lying buried under a tree.

I walked Jesse out to the oak, where I said my good-byes to Pa. Mama was buried in a colored cemetery. I thought about visiting her grave but come to the thought that she and Pa was dead and that didn't matter none. Mama told me once she wanted a better life for me and thought being free would give me a shot. She said, "You get the chance, you got to take it."

I also remembered her lying sick, dying, touching her hand to my cheek, saying, "Willie, you're our hope. You got to go on and make something of yourself. You got greatness in you."

Well, I didn't know if that was true, but I know Mama believed it, and I wanted to. It was better to follow the dream she wished for me than to try and visit her grave. One had a future, the other just might not.

I started thinking on those stories I had heard about the colored army and made up my mind their outposts would be my destination, which was no short hop and a jump but way out in West Texas. I led Jesse to the draw, then guided him down into it. Once we was there I mounted, and Jesse splashed through the water, on to where that marshland was. We eventually come out on the draw and took the road alongside the marsh for a stretch. We passed where me and Ruggert had our tangle. Even with Jesse plodding like he was dragging a plow, we made a good many miles. The marsh was covered with a mist thick enough it looked like a cloud had fallen out of the sky. We rode through that cloud, the dampness of the mist clamping to us like a wet cloth.

Eventually the sun burned off the mist, and we left the road and wandered between the trees. The ground was mighty clean under them trees until we got close to the river, and then the brambles started to grow.

I had bagged some grain for Jesse, and when it was good and light I stopped and let him eat some of it right out of the bag. Not so much that when he took a drink of water he'd founder. What drinking water we had was what I had put in an old whiskey jug in the barn and tied over the saddle with a cord. And there was the Sabine River, which we was

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about to cross. That was all-right water for a horse, but I drank from it once when I was out fishing and got the runs so bad I thought I'd be in the outhouse the rest of my life.

The Sabine wasn't wide, but it was deep there, and Jesse had to swim it. The water was sluggish, but a couple of turtles was showing out and making good time. I watched their snaky heads as they drifted down the river and under the shadows of the overhanging trees along the bank. A fat perch swam by, and he was colorful enough and the light was bright enough so I could see him good, and just the sight of him made me hungry again.

There was a few times when I thought Jesse might tucker out, but he stayed with it, and we got to the other side. I slid down off Jesse, grabbed a handful of the rich, stinking mud from the riverbank, and slapped it on my head wound, which had opened up and was bleeding heavily. I packed some of the muck on Jesse's bullet graze, and then I walked him until I thought he had blown well enough for me to ride. We continued then, steady as the ticking of a clock, heading out west.