

## ORIGINAL

Daybreak painted a burnt-orange hue on the tops of pines and aspens clustered in the shapes of upended bowls. Fog swirled at the bottom of those bowls fog, blanketing bare spots Earl detected by how his horse's hooves dug into unpadded, soggy ground. Here the forest was thinner, snow sparser, the mud slippery; a good thing, then, the sorrel he rode was wise to the terrain.

He leisured in the saddle for much of the journey and let the reins rest easy on the saddle-horn, putting his hands on his hips that lolled in rhythm with the sorrel's gate. A few times Earl breathed deep of the cool morning air and dreamt of the gold he would steal in Deadwood. From there, he planned to disappear a rich and happy man; maybe to California, all the way to the ocean where he would build himself a home ignorant of snow and cold. He stretched his stiffening back; in doing so, he winced and wrinkled his nose. His armpits' stank of spoiled fruit. The stench of rotten eggs emitted on those occasions his ass bounced in the saddle. Earl closed one eye peering at the tree-line. Nigh on a month had passed since a bath and change of clothes. He hadn't been thinking when leaving the cabin in such an all-fire hurry; he should have salvaged some threads off the posse. Picturing the dead left behind, he licked his lips. Yep, leaving quick had been dunderheaded. Five bodies, blood and meat wasted and him, he had last eaten—

"Two days past," interrupted Claude. "Steak at the saloon in Hill City."

"Unfinished," Earl said and recalled that within an hour of his arrival at Hill City a deputy had spotted him chowing on charcoal masquerading as beef. The deputy hollered, drew his pistol. The deputy died. Quicker than a whip cracked, Earl had skedaddled out the saloon and hopped on his no-good hoss, hell-bent for the woods. He found himself missing the wind in his face. He circled a hand in the air, whooping. "Haw!"

## IMPROVED FLOW

Daybreak cast a burnt-orange hue over the forest of pine and aspen while fog swirled around the bottoms of tree-trunks and blanketed the mud. Each time Earl's charger lifted a hoof, there came a sucky pop that held a hypnotizing quality and had him riding leisure-style in the saddle. He let the reins rest on the saddle-horn and put both hands to his hips that lolled in rhythm with the charger's gait. Dreamt of the gold waiting to be stolen in Deadwood. Afterwards he planned hightailing it to California, figured the ocean far enough for evading warrants and—

The hoss stepping in a hole sent a jolt of pain to Earl's lower-back. He stretched out the discomfort, wincing and wrinkling his nose over the stink of his armpits. Awful, yet not as terrible as the rotten-egg odor that wafted on those occasions his ass bounced off the saddle.

What he wouldn't do for a hot-spring.

Nigh on a month since a bath and change of dress. Dunderheaded, him leaving the cabin in such an all-fire hurry. He should have salvaged threads off the posse. Now the clothes went to waste covering bodies that rotted—Earl licked saliva from his lips, unable to recollect when—

"Two days past," muttered Claude floating next to him. "Saloon in Hill City."

"Meal left unfinished." Within minutes of sitting at the eating-table a deputy had spotted him chowing on charcoal masquerading as beef. The deputy hollered, drew his pistol. Earl did likewise. With the lawmen dead, he skedaddled out the saloon and hopped on the no-good mare he later ran off a cliff, hell-bent for the woods. Fun, that ride. Wind in his face, crisp air chilling his snoz. Better than this lollygagging. "Haw!"