

The West

“One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.” The man softly chants as he takes each step. His face is sandy, his clothes are tattered and his body is slender. His shoulder blades protrude through his shirt and one can see them move as he paces through this land. It is morning. The mornings are hard because the nights are restless. The view is incredible. Sandstone rock formations so grand they would catch anyone's eye, but not his. He keeps his head down and continues. He looks down at his boots — his father gave them to him, but little remains of what they once were. The man carries a gun; a Winchester thirty aut six with one in the chamber and four in the magazine, no extras. The only other possessions to his name are a pocket knife, a lighter, a canteen and two cigarettes. His hair is matted and he cannot remember the last time it was washed. “One, two, three, four,” he continues to whisper, as it makes the walking easier, but no one will hear him. He stops to take a seat on a rock. It is pale and covered with a complex network of black and green lichen. He reaches into his pocket to grab a cigarette. He brings it to his face and clamps it with his lips. Bringing the small flame from the lighter up to his dry skin in the desert heat makes him pucker as he establishes an ember. He finishes the cigarette, puts the butt in his pocket, takes a sip of water and keeps on walking. “One, two, three, four.” He is wandering, searching for the man who took his soul.

As the man slowly walks, he glances down and to his right to see a two foot tall, dark figure flowing across the sand beside him. It follows his every move and is the closest thing he has to a mirror. This is also how he checks the time. It spends less energy than looking up at the sun. He notices how skeletal his frame is and knows that he must eat today. He runs his tongue

along his lips to feel small, sharp, stubbles of hardened skin and deep cracks that sting when his saliva enters them. He needs water within the hour.

He gets to a vantage point and spots some greenery down in a ravine. "Water," he mumbles. He makes his way down the steep cliffside to a sandy spot in the dry creek bed, sets his gun and canteen down, drops to his knees and begins to dig. He presses his hands into the sand and pulls them towards him again and again, bringing sand out of the shallow hole. As it gets deeper, the sand gets damp, until finally he hits water. He takes out a couple more handfuls so that he can fit his canteen, fills it up and finishes the whole thing. He drinks two more full canteens, fills it a third time and sets it in the sand. He cups his hands in the shallow pool bringing water up to his face and splashes himself. The gleaming beads of water collect sand as they race down his skin and fall off his chin and back into the hole. He stands up, grabs the gun, puts the strap on his shoulder, grabs his canteen and continues walking. "One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four."

The man walks up the other side of the ravine through soft sand and notices some small tracks. He slows his pace and follows them. Keeping his head down, he winds along the paw prints then hears a delicate rustle. He raises his glare to see a Black-tailed jackrabbit perched on a rock eating pine nuts. A supple little animal that will provide the perfect dinner. He quietly takes the gun off his shoulder and silently brings it around to face the rabbit. The man secures the butt of the gun, presses his cheek to the hot steel and levels the sights on the animal's chest. It has not spotted him yet. He takes the gun off safety and squeezes the trigger, letting loose of the large lead cartridge. The rabbit is hit and falls off the small rock. He sighs with relief. The man then pulls back the bolt action to load another projectile and walks over to the rabbit. He grabs his

pocket knife and makes a small incision in the rabbit's back. He then slides his dry, dirty, fingers into the hole and pulls outwards, ripping the hide apart. He effortlessly continues to work his way around and pull the skin off the head and all the legs, except for one. He cuts it off and places it in his pocket. Now that all of the fur is gone, he slides his knife tenderly through the thin layer of skin so as to not puncture the innards and pulls the blade from head to tail. He then pulls out the entrails. The man fastens the dressed rabbit onto the cord that holds his canteen and puts his knife back in his pocket. He spoons some silky sand into his hands and rubs them together to clean off the blood. Brushing the dust off on the sides of his jeans, he sets off again. "One, two, three, four."

He knows he needs to get the high ground so that he can get his bearings straight and make camp. The man continues up the side of the ravine until he reaches the top. A grand ridge where he will make camp. He looks south. "Two days walk from what used to be Santa Fe," he softly speaks. The man carefully places all of his belongings into the sand, takes a small drink from his canteen and starts rummaging around in search of sticks. He collects small, dried juniper branches and makes a pile. The sun is setting, producing a flurry of vibrant oranges, reds and yellows that spew violently across the sky, but the man is more focused on dinner. He grabs a fistfull of dry grass and places it under his pile of sticks. Then with his lighter, quickly sets it ablaze. The man takes the hare off his canteen cord and puts a sturdy stick through it. He lets it hover above the flames, as the meat darkens and drips fatty fluids that create sharp sizzles upon landing. He sits and waits with his head between his knees and his arm extended. Finally it is finished. He makes quick, calculated work of the carcass, getting every little piece of the meat off the bones. He ponders smoking his last cigarette but decides to save it for a reward later. The

man then spreads the coals with the stick he used for the rabbit and scoops about three inches of even sand over them. He lies down over the coals and tries to fall asleep. The moon is full and so is his stomach. His eyes slowly nod closed and he drifts to sleep.

The man abruptly awakens and his pupils quickly constrict due to the brightness of the full moon as he sits up in confusion. His nostrils flare. "Smoke," he mumbles. His eyes scan down across the plain and see the dim light of a campfire. "Him," the man says, more loudly now. He stands, brushes himself off and grabs his belongings. He keeps his eyes locked on the dim light and sets off. He pulls back the bolt action of his rifle just to take a peek and assures himself there is one in the chamber. The desolate desert landscape is lit by the moon, so he moves swiftly while keeping his eyes persistently locked on the distant fire. He only looks away for a brief moment to check his shadow, and he knows he has about two hours until the sun rises. "One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four," the words continue to spill out of his mouth, but something has changed. His pace has quickened, and the words come faster than they have in years. His heart is beating rapidly. He has no thoughts, just a blank, fixated stare at the campfire as he walks.

Just as the very first hue of morning starts to expose itself in the east, the man approaches the camp. He slows and scours the area. A small dwindling fire, an empty bean can, a revolver half buried in the sand and a man sleeping on the ground with a hat on his face. The man slowly approaches the sleeping man and turns the gun around to his face. He is still asleep. The man takes his rifle off safety and kicks the hat off his face. "Tommy Hitchcock," the man growls as he maintains his aim. Hitchcock, abruptly awoken, grasps the situation and makes a fleeing attempt to save his life. "Please, don't, forgive others not because they deserve forgiveness, but because

you deserve peace,” Hitchcock pleads. “Men who kill other men have no room for forgiveness,” the man says bluntly as he fires upon Hitchcock, killing him. He sets his gun down and falls to his knees. He sighs, licks his thumb and rubs a spatter of blood from the leather on his boots. He reaches into his pocket and takes out his last cigarette. He then pulls Hitchcock’s pocket open and grabs a Zippo, his old man’s. He lights it, puts the Zippo into his own pocket and smokes the cigarette, savoring it, knowing it’s his last. He flicks the butt onto Hitchcock’s dead body, stands up and starts walking.

He walks thoughtlessly in the direction of Santa Fe. He comes upon on an old VW Beetle that is half buried in sand, probably where a road used to be. He slowly walks along the left side of the tarnished metal. No paint remains. He looks at himself in the rear view mirror to see a skeleton. The frame of a human. A gun and a canteen strung around a framework of cracked white bones looking back at him. “Men who kill other men are already dead.”