

(Short story written for Carmen Maria Machado's "Flash Fiction" course at the University of Pennsylvania in Spring 2018)

The Ballad of Skull Larry

By Nicholas Escobar

The day the messenger arrived at our doorstep is a day I will not soon forget. He brought a dead man's finger in a glass cup, the smooth sides dripping with the ghost's blood.

I breathed in sharply looking at the ragged piece of skin and bone.

"Whose finger?" I asked quietly.

The messenger's face was emotionless.

"Loretta Willis."

I flinched.

"Who sent you?"

"Mayor Shelby. He is asking for your help. Nowhere is in danger."

"I'm retired."

"He's killing people left and right Willy. You can't let this continue."

I pause. I don't answer. I know he is right.

"So are you going to go find him Willy?"

"I guess I have to. If I don't find and kill Skull Larry, no one will."

The messenger's face broke into a smile.

"Best of luck Willy."

He rode away on his horse. Into the sunset.

I had met Skull Larry once before, when I was a young sheriff in Lucid Valley, Utah. He came in on his black horse, his eyes wild, his muscles groaning. He shot up the town, killing men, women and children. He shot me in the chest, with a smile etched across his hallowed face. I carry the scar to this day. It still stings. Skull Larry liked killing people in cold blood, watching their final moments as one does to a theatrical performance.

Mayor Shelby was a coward. A large man with eyes that cried. A wimp in every sense of the word. But he was genuine, and I admired him for that. When I received his cry for help, I answered it.

The following morning I bid farewell for my wife and daughter. Their silhouettes faded into the Wyoming sunrise. I tracked Skull Larry, putting my nose to the Wyoming soil and sniffing for man's sweat and a violent heart. I rode through nameless towns. People would stare at me with a mixture of pity and awe. They would pray for me. It was as if I was walking to the gallows. Maybe I was.

People say Skull Larry was the devil incarnate, opting for a cowboy hat instead of horns, and a whisky belt instead of a sharpened tail. I believed the stories, for no Man would commit such heinous debauchery on our beautiful Earth. It was the drive to kill this man once and for all that led me across the entirety of Wyoming. I slept under the stars, looking up into the heavens and missing my wife and daughter. I would see them in my dreams, watching me as I'm slowly lowered into my grave.

I found Skull Larry in a makeshift graveyard near South Pass City. His potbellied figure stood stark against the dying Wyoming sun. A lone dead tree sat like a hangman's noose above

old Skull Larry's balding head. He turned to me, smiling. He was old, wrinkled, dying, but still filled with hate.

"Killing me will not kill him you know," he snarled.

His rotten teeth began to fall out of his mouth one by one, turning to dust before they hit the hot Earth.

"You can keep searching but you will never find him."

Skull Larry's skin peeled away from his bones, leaving a bare skeleton staring at me, its cavernous eyes smiling death.

I knew he was right. I will never find him.

I carried Skull Larry's fibula to Mayor Shelby, throwing it onto his dirtied desk with disdain. The bone blackened my hand, leaving deep, dark gashes along my palm.

I died two weeks later. My wife and daughter dropped tears on my eyes as I shut them for the last time.

I met Skull Larry in Hell a day later, under the same tree, under the same Wyoming sun. He had taken a different form, but he was the same dark soul.

"You found me."

He smiled.

I shot him twice through the chest. Much to his alarm. The wounds disappeared immediately.

"Why will you never suffer for your sins?" I asked.

"A true villain never truly suffers."

"Then this is it? We are stuck here for eternity, and you will never pay for the crimes you

committed.”

“You are here as well Willy. Perhaps we aren’t so different.”

I paused.

I remembered.

I accepted.

I atoned.

I disappeared.