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Out on a Limb

by Richard Lewis

Long hours in the saddle from Calgary to Pincher's Creek had taken its toll on Joseph but the ache in his back was nothing compared to the twisting pain he held inside.

It was the autumn of nineteen hundred and eleven. Maples were shedding their leaves of red and gold, as wind hurried across the plains in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, unhindered by the sparse trees and infrequent farm buildings.

The old nag Joseph had bought for ten dollars had almost given up the ghost but in the distance, he could see his destination the Rio Alto Ranch, reluctantly revealing itself. He thought, 'at least aunt Bessie will be waiting to welcome me.'

The world Joseph had left behind seemed distant, like the stranger he'd become to himself. An outsider, unsure of who he was or where his life was heading. He'd resented having to leave the family home at the age of nineteen, dispatched to the wilds of Canada on some fool's errand, though it was better than the alternative. A life in the ministry promised by his father.

It was a relief to escape the stifling environment of his parent's house, under the withering scrutiny of the old man. The daily ritual of morning prayer, readings from the bible and unwanted reminders that god is watching, had become unbearable.

While leaving it all behind, Joseph was acutely aware that it had become a part of him and that there was no escaping himself. Renouncing religion on the one hand, praying for something good to come out of the mad adventure on the other. As if taken back to those tender moments as a child, kneeling with his mother at the foot of the bed, saying his prayers. *Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.*

Yet this was some *kingdom come* he found himself in, hardly *god's will* to wander the prairie like a forgotten outlaw.

Joseph felt hopelessly divided, both attracted to and repelled by, people and places. He thought, 'I like a view but I like to sit with my back turned toward it.'

Arriving at the gates of the Rio Alto, something caught his eye at the side of the track, leading to the ranch house. A simple cross, planted in the broken earth. Trickle of dread ran through him. 'A bad omen,' he thought.

Turning his head, he could hear the faint sound of bellowing cattle and barking dogs, echoing in the distance. He felt sadness at the loss of summer and the thought of winter's icy blast just around the corner but there was something else, a sense he couldn't quite grasp.

Arriving at the ranch house, there was no sign of life. The place run down and deserted, windows all boarded up. Then he saw the stark notice attached to the door.

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Bewildered by the hopelessness of his fate and miles from the next settlement, what else was there but to pray.