

Needle and Thread

A Story of Stitches in Time by Rett Ulebo

The pale, white moonlight cast an eerie, gorgeous glow across the mesa as the cool canyon breeze whistled against the thick, yellowed pane glass of a small shack somewhere in New Mexico. Within, an old fox gazed over his shoulder, a soft smile across his vulpine muzzle, at the portly bear of similar age putting more wood into the pot-bellied stove and stoking the hot orange embers. With a crackle they licked the end of the heavy cast iron poker in his silvered bear paw. Quietly, the fox put away the last of the worn steel dishes and pans from supper and crept up behind the bear as he rose to his feet. He encircled his arms around his midriff and rested his tapered muzzle on the thick patch of fur on the bear's neck. He whispered, "Tyler, I'll love you until the end of time. You know that, right?"

Tyler gazed back at the fox and smiled, closed his eyes, and cooed in a deep, rumbling reply, "I know, Ferguson... I love you too. Thanks for dinner; amazing as always." Ferguson rolled his eyes and stuck out his tongue. Stepping in front of the bear, he rested his black-gloved paws over Tyler's heart and smiled up at the taller ursine, "Canned beans are canned beans, hon. Doesn't change much day to day. But thanks." Quietly, the two older men kissed, as Ferguson glanced from the corner of his eye at the old wooden clock resting on the mantle of the fireplace, savoring the moment.

A soft, but distinctive rifle shot rang out from outside somewhere in the distance. The reverberation rattled the rickety windows as Tyler's brown eyes widened in alarm. He searched Ferguson's yellow irises, which didn't seem to react to the threatening sound. In a flash, Tyler grabbed his rifle from the wall and headed for the door, blowing out the oil lantern at the adjoining window. Out from the now dark abode, the bear surveyed the cold, moonlight landscape for a sign of who might be near and at whatever they may be shooting.

For a long, silent moment the bear stood in a steady, frozen grip looking for any movement in the long blue shadows outside. He opened the door to go outside, and as he did the fox quietly sat down in a chair next to the fireplace. Despondent he asked, "Tyler, you don't have to go outside this time. Let's just stay here together. Please?" The bear quickly looked back at the fox, frowning incredulously, "This time? What are you talking about, Ferguson? If someone's out prowling around on our land, I'm going to find out who it is! No one and nothing is messing with you and me." With that, the bear launched himself running into the night, leaving the door ajar and a chilling wind rustling through the kindling stacked next to the fox. Ferguson looked away from the window, more forlorn than upset, not watching for his lover barreling out into the threatening night. He reached into his tattered vest pocket and pulled out a tarnished brass device, nearly like a pocket watch, but with only dials instead of a watch face. With a heavy sigh he slowly closed his eyes and clicked a small lever on the side.

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The red-orange sun streamed through the windows of the small bedroom, big enough only for the sturdy bed within it. Ferguson smiled up at Tyler, the two shirtless, fur-covered men curled around one another in the cold room. The fox buried his nose against the bear's scruffy neck and grinned as they awoke together. The bear begrudgingly opened one eye and looked piercingly down at his coaxing lover and smiled, grunting groggily. The warm silence of the bedroom and occasional hawk calling out in the distance was suddenly broken by a gentle repeating rapping. The two looked at each other quickly in surprise: Someone was at the door.

Quickly, Tyler threw on overalls and swiped up his gun as Ferguson grabbed a towel. The bear barreled for the door and the fox quickly pulled out a six shooter and tucked it into his waist. The two were quite unaccustomed to visitors in the desolate desert. As the bear swung the heavy door open and blinked in the blindingly bright sunlight, both beheld a gaunt coyote, wearing a sleeveless leather vest, two silver revolvers holstered at his waist, with his hand resting on his clean, black hat. He smiled softly to Tyler, then at seeing the fox's form from within the shack, he met Ferguson's eyes and continued to stare at him as he spoke deeply, "Hey there fellas. Sorry for any alarm, I was just passing through and saw your shack. I've been hunting rabbits early this morning and wondered if I might trade you lunch for dinner tonight? As hot as it is with my old horse, I'm riding through the night."

Tyler's shoulders relaxed as he saw a pale horse out to the side of his periphery with nearly a dozen rabbit carcasses hanging off the saddle bags, corroborating his request. He nodded, "Well, um, sure, stranger." He sat his rifle down just inside the door, and looked back to Ferguson, whom had shared the same stare with the coyote for the entire exchange. "What do you think bab... 'Bought it? Rabbit for lunch for your fancy beans for dinner?" the bear stammered after catching himself. Ferguson nodded reluctantly, pointing back to the bedroom as he whispered, "Um, sure. I'm going to get dressed."

When the fox stepped out of the bedroom, the coyote was asleep in one of the two chairs in the shack. His dark hat tipped over his face, and his clean black boots crossed and propped up on the table. Ferguson quietly stepped by the cross-armed, softly snoring stranger, and fished out the brass contraption from the pocket of his coat. Draping back over the adjoining chair, he stepped outside and walked down to the stream, where the burly bear had already started sifting the silt in their daily gold hunt.

"So who is that guy, Burr?" Ferguson queried as he began shoveling the heavy riverbed into his own sieve. Tyler just shrugged as he tossed out rocks from his screen and gathered up his next pile of dirt, "I dunno. Some guy with rabbits who let me take his revolvers while he slept in our living room? I'm game for something different for lunch. Why not?"

"I thought you said my beans were amazing", the fox teased as he stepped away from his sifting and coughed hard into his handkerchief. As the fit subsided, he caught his breath and hugged at the bear's side. Tyler raised an eyebrow and replied, "I didn't ever say that, but you know I love you and your cooking." The fox blinked and nodded, "Right. You didn't say that. Hey, tell you what. Just today, for one day, let's take a rest and go down to the lake over by the far butte and go swimming. You know how much fun we have doing that, and it's been a while."

Tyler shook his head, “No. Can’t. We haven’t found much this month, and we need the canned goods, Foxie. There won’t be a guy showing up with rabbits every day.” Ferguson looked back at their shack on the hill and distantly agreed, whispering, “No, he doesn’t come by every day.”

Tyler’s resolve seemed to melt as he interpreted Ferguson’s quiet confusion for disappointment, and he quietly hugged around the smaller fox, sighing, “Okay, okay, just for a bit.” The fox tightened his embrace and looked back to the bear, up at him as he softly smiled, “Let the ‘yote skin and cook, and we’ll go down to the butte and skinny dip. You can make love to me again, and we can come back after the hot part of the day. Just this once, until our big break, huh?”

Tyler smiled, “I love you.” Ferguson closed his eyes and held tightly, “I’ll love you forever, Tyler.”

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Their morning romp in the vast, empty wilderness became a long day. They rode down to the oasis, disrobed, swam, joshed around as best as old men can do, and dove into the water from a rocky overhang high above the deep part of the lake. The pair, having been together many years, laughed, kissed, and held each other like it was the first time, with the same passion, enthusiasm, and tenderness. The sun traced a long path across the cloudless blue sky as they lost track of time. By the time the two dressed and rode back up, the shadows across the dusty land had grown long, and the sun glowed orange low on the horizon.

As they rode back up to their old, shanty shack, their home time nearly forgot, they smelled the savory aroma of freshly roasted rabbit and smiled to each other. Dismounting their steeds, they came through the doorway where the ‘yote nodded to them, having cooked a veritable feast of many of their rations, with beans, bacon from the icehouse, and cornbread to compliment his catch. Tyler gritted his teeth, knowing how thin their pockets were lined with the lackluster amounts of gold they had collected to date. Ferguson sensed the bear’s tensing, and softly grabbed his hand, looking over and shaking his head, “It’s okay, it’s okay.” Both looked quickly over to the ‘yote, who smiled almost knowingly, sensing the mutual affection. The nameless stranger held out his hand to the two chairs, perching himself on a barrel he had brought in at the other end of the small table, “Gentlemen, dinner is served.”

The group talked for a long time over an unusually filling dinner, and the ‘yote seemed quite witty and had amazing stories to tell. Most were gruesome or morose tales from his experiences as a newspaper photographer, traversing the state to cover important stories, mishaps, and deaths worthy of retelling in print. After the ‘yote surmised as much, Ferguson and Tyler affirmed their relationship and had a rare heartfelt opportunity to share with another, even if only a stranger, how happy they were and the foibles of daily life in the barren West.

Afterwards, with a clean precision and placement, the ‘yote helped clean and put away all the dishes. As the clock approached ten, Ferguson appeared to get antsy and a bit clingier, resting against Tyler’s side, quietly hugging against him. His unease became noticeable to both the ‘yote and Tyler, but seemed to pass after the hour mark passed. Eventually, the oil began to run dry, though the conversation flowed endlessly with their visitor. After returning from the outhouse, Tyler motioned

towards the bedroom and bid the 'yote a farewell and safe journey as he retired. Ferguson followed him to the doorway, and then paused, "I'm going to talk to the 'yote just a bit more, burr. Not often I get the chance. I'll be into bed in a few." Tyler nodded, and from the 'yote's vantage, he only saw the bear's muzzle peek out from the doorway and kiss the fox on the cheek before the door shut. Ferguson stood outside it, staring at the 'yote.

The fox padded over to the barrel and sat on it as the 'yote stood there, quietly staring back. What was once a natural exchange suddenly became awkwardly silent, and the fox pursed his lips to ask, "What's your name, 'yote? You never told us."

"You know my name, Ferguson. You know who I am" replied the stranger.

Ferguson's fur-covered skin went cold and his neck bristled as he heard those vague words, deeply spoken. He absently looked out the window in the bright moonlit night, "Things were different today. We're not supposed to have any visitors today. In fact, there wasn't any gunshot tonight..." he tested.

"No, there wasn't."

The fox looked up, his suspicions now confirmed. He patted his breast pocket, sliding out the brass contraption and holding it in his paw. It was still there. He closed his eyes and asked with a raspier, shakier voice, "Why are you here?"

The 'yote sat quietly in the adjoining chair, and it creaked softly as he rested his weight. Kicking his clean black boots up on the table and resting his arms behind his head, he leaned back on the two rear legs. "Well, many moons ago, I came through here on my way to do my business down in Tucumcari. I stopped around these parts to shoot a rabbit at night. When I did, I heard a scream come from this shack some minutes later, and I rode over to see what the commotion was. I found you kneeling at your bear's side in the cool, moonlit desert night. Seems he heard my shot and came running out. The big guy had a heart attack and died right here in the night. You remember that right?"

Ferguson clutched the brass contraption to his chest and nodded, his eyes tearing up a bit as he clinched them shut.

The mysterious stranger continued, "I didn't mean to cause you two any trouble. Wasn't his time. It was the game rabbit's time, and I was on my way to do other business. And you don't remember it... I made sure of it... but it was I who bestowed you with that brass contraption you hold so dear. So that, like a needle through a hole, you might stitch together your time with Tyler a bit longer. Wear it for a while longer, as it were."

The fox coughed a few times and then drew in a breath, "That next morning, I awoke with it in my coat pocket, and Tyler in bed at my side. I remembered him passing in my arms, but he didn't remember anything. Later that day, we saw the same heard of mustangs below the mesa, exactly as it did the day before. The day passed for only me, but for no one else. Winter never came. It was always the same morning, always yesterday."

The 'yote nodded, his grey eyes cold and glimmering white under his black cap as he spoke, "That's right, Ferguson. I messed up, and I took what wasn't mine to take yet. I fixed it up the best I could, and I went on to do my business. I only came back every night at the same hour mark to make the same mistake, to shoot off a round in the distance where I could barely see your shack, so that you might be able to use my token to keep undoing my mistake for another day."

Ferguson interrupted, "...and now, your business is here, isn't it?"

The dark stranger smiled softly and remained silent for a long moment, "This is the last time I'm stopping by, yes. See, I kept coming back because Tyler would have passed later the same night from the same weak heart. Now it's your time, Ferguson. It's time to close the loop; cut the thread. I've come for my token, and to finish my business here, with both him... and you."

Ferguson breathed in deeply, and then let out a long, tired sigh. He sat motionless for a long few minutes. "Thank you. Thank you for one more day, for many, many more days. But I'm ready to go with him tonight. I can't repeat this wonderful day any more. For as horrific as the alternative is, I can't keep reliving the same wonderful last day under the hellish fate hanging over it every night." As he said that, he stood and set the brass token on the table, relinquishing it.

The 'yote pulled out a cigarette and light a match against his boot, the orange burning flame not even lighting up his eyes as he lit it in his maw. He remained sitting in the same spot and nodded, looking forward as though through the standing fox. "If it's any consolation, in this line of work, there's no apologies, no regrets. But, I am sorry."

Ferguson nodded, and walked quietly to the door of the bedroom. With a new heaviness, he felt his old bones creak with the floor as he felt a sudden mortality coupled with a great freedom, as the weight of all the calculated certainty as well as all the fresh uncertainty melted away with each step closer to the handle. He looked back to Death, and nodded, "Goodnight.", and stepped through the door, closing it behind him. The coyote didn't stir from his chair, he only whispered to the empty room, "Rest easy."

In the dark, cramped bedroom, he slipped off his vest and suspenders and slipped bare into bed. Tyler awoke groggily, only for a moment, and hugged around Ferguson as he faded back towards sleep. The fox smiled and closed his eyes, curling his thin, old arm around the bear's neck. He quietly whispered, "Tyler, I'll love you until the end of time. You know that, right?"

Tyler softly nodded, his eyes still closed peacefully and smiled, kissing his forehead, "I know."