

Aaron's Last Adventure

Every morning, Aaron rose with the sun, rushed through his chores and clambered up the old cottonwood tree behind the barn, armed with a tin cup of milk and a slice of Ma's bread. This spot was his secret throne where he could survey his kingdom—a sprawling hundred plus acres of corn and wheat, a single room sod house, and a small rickety barn.

He saw some big thunderclouds coming from the west but they'd probably pass to the south of their place. His desire for adventure took over. He was the biggest thundercloud, fat and heavy with rain. He let 'er go and peed all the way for at least fifty miles. This other big cloud to his right was trying to keep up, but Aaron out did him, causing some dry creeks to fill and run muddy.

He laughed.

Grandpa called out, "Hey, Pal, let's go to work, you can tell me about your latest adventure."

Aaron was a tow-headed nine-year-old boy with sparkling blue eyes. He loved having imaginary adventures since it were blank and boring in this dry northwest part of Kansas. He and Grandpa got the big black horse hooked to the plow, then Gramps guided her down the first row. "There ya go, Little Pal, you can take her from here."

He started down the field and imagined going into Denver to join the Army. He spent hours thinking about it while guiding the plow horse in the field, but then Grandpa said the Army was tough on a guy. A fellar was always getting yelled at for nothing and

all that, so ya should only join to fight for a good cause like he and Pa had during the Civil War. Aaron switched to remembering his pa's story about how he came to be.

Pa's father had picked up a wounded Cheyenne squaw after the Sand Creek Massacre where the Army had rode up on a peaceful band of Cheyenne and Arapahos camping by the crick and killed them. They didn't think Nashu was alive or she'd been raped and her throat slashed like the other squaws. White's wanted to eliminate the redskins, thinking they was superior to the godless savages.

Her name meant beautiful and Pa said she was because once she was washed up and the grease rubbed from her hair, it turned out she had yellar hair and blue eyes. She didn't know where she come from, but Pa figured Nashu was from a white family that had been killed when she was a baby. Grandpa McDowell loved her fiercely and she produced Aaron's yellow-haired and sky blue-eyed Pa. She's the one that put the sun in Aaron's eyes. She had a couple of stillborn girls so Pa was an only child. Grandpa McDowell was killed by a bank robber when he run out into the street trying to stop the thief with his six shooter.

Pa looked at his boy and said, "Sometimes being brave ain't smart. It can get ya killed."

Pa was fourteen when a tall feller came by and took a meal and then stayed the night in the small barn. Come morning, the stranger threw his screaming mother over his saddle and hauled her down the dirt trail, heading west, maybe to Colorado where they had water in the mountains. Life was unpredictable and bad on women in them days.

From their place, they could barely see the tips of the Rocky Mountains, but Pa often talked about taking a trip out to them blue hills and finding his pretty mother with sun shining blue eyes and golden hair.

Ma's father, Grandpa Doren, and Pa had fought for the North during the Civil War to end slavery. They had invited a family of blacks to homestead a place adjoining their farm. Washington Williams was Aaron's only friend since for miles around since there weren't no other families. His younger sisters, Martha and Sarah, were friends with the William's sisters. When the kids finished their chores they run a mile to one or the other's house where one of the moms fed them a big meal, then they'd get lessons on reading, writing, and math.

People said blacks had a smell, but Aaron thought they smelled just like him, field grass and dirt. He liked to imagine he was fighting for the North to free the blacks. Didn't seem right that the color O' yer skin made you a slave for life.

On the way home from getting educated, Aaron told his sisters stories. His younger sister, Martha, was five. She looked like Ma with long brown hair. She was the pretty one of the two girls. Sarah was almost seven and she was the shy.

One night, Grandpa Doren woke up before dawn, coughing. His chest hurt and he was tired, but he got up, milked the cow, and went to work on the farm. He had been into town and everyone figured he caught a cold when he was buying supplies. At lunch, Ma made him dandelion tea mixed with thyme, hoping it'd help, but it got worse. Coughed his fool head off and his chest burned like the dickens.

The kids didn't go play with their friends after supper 'cause they worried about Gramps. Everyone sat helplessly watching him suffer as he got worse and worse. Pa

and Ma feared he might die. The girls wept and Aaron clinched his freckled and sunburned jaws to keep from joinin' them.

Grandpa didn't complain. He just coughed and held his sides, his brown eyes showing the pain he was in. Said it was worse than when a rebel soldier hit him in the chest with a musket ball and even worse than when the doc dug it out. He still wore the musket ball on a leather strap around his choking neck.

No one could help him.

He coughed and spit up sputum as a fever took hold of his body and made it shake – sweat run off like he was standing under a waterfall.

Pa motioned to the boy. "Let's ride into town and bring out Doc Brown. Maybe he'll know what to do."

On the way to town, Aaron imagined he was an ambulance driver during the Civil War. It was exciting 'cause they saved six men but one of them died just before they got him to the doctor. It took them all night to make it into Eckerly. Doc Brown's office was closed at seven in the morning so they sat out front with the horse at the water trough. Pa handed the kid a piece of antelope jerky from his front shirt pocket.

"Where's you'rn?"

"You eat it, I ain't hungry."

Aaron knew he was, so he tore off a chunk with his front teeth too big for his mouth. He was nine and tough. Pa said he was gonna be a big man. "You're strong as a mule and a good shot. Glad you got that antelope two weeks back or we wouldn't have any meat, 'less I killed a hog, but it ain't time since they got some growing to do."

The boy gave Pa half and he took it, his mouth watering. Aaron pretended they was in some foreign country like Egypt and a stranger felt sorry for them and give 'em some tough meat because they was skinny. They watched each other tear and chomp on the jerky for a while and then it was gone.

Aaron imagined he was the guy who got off the train and switched the tracks so the train went in a different direction. He decided that was probably a lot of work, so he imagined he was the engineer. It turned into being the captain of a sailing ship, no, make that an American warship and they was going after Caribbean pirates. The ocean was smooth and he fell asleep with his chin on his chest, drooling a little.

People started moving around town and kicked up dust smelling like somebody puked in front of The Lonesome Bar next door. Made him cough and sneeze and Pa thought maybe he had what Gramps caught. Aaron wanted to be back on the farm where no mean-looking men spit chaw on the wooden sidewalk. Out there under big open blue skies, thunder clouds and lightning made the sky bleed water and turned the fields green with corn and wheat. Out there, he had adventures all over the world, but here was too many distractions. He liked being out there.

Aaron smelled a pipe burning tabacci. Wanted to try it but Pa said it weren't good for ya and cost money.

Musta been around eight in the morning and the sun was making things hot. They didn't have hats cause hats cost money so they held their hands above their sky blue eyes to see to the east, thinking the doctor might live out that way.

Doc Brown showed up from the rear, making them jump up scared and ready to swing a fist or two. He asked what was wrong, knowing someone must be sick since they brought the old squeaky farm wagon into town.

"The wife's pa is sick. He's got a cough and he's burning up and sweating from a terrible fever."

Doc's face paled. He ran into his office and grabbed a black leather bag and then crawled into the front seat of the buckboard. Aaron rode as close as possible to the men since the back of the wagon bounced worse. That's why they called it a buckboard. Had his .22 rifle with open sites in case he saw a rabbit or something to knock down for food. He imagined he was hunting lions in Africa like that picture book he saw one time.

Aaron saw movement since he had sharp blue eyes that Mom said had a piece of sunshine in them. He was the family entertainment since he was always singing, dancing, and telling stories about his adventures. He was already taller than Ma, and she walked up one time and said, "Son, some girl sure gonna love you."

Aaron said quietly, "Pa, there's some deer over that rise. I just saw some horns come up." Now, this was his kind of adventure.

Pa pulled back on the horse's reins. She was a black beauty and strong. The mare hardly broke a sweat even when she pulled the big shining plow through the heavy dark sod. Aaron sure loved her. Heck, he loved everybody. Ma said he had the heart of Jesus in his chest. They sang church songs and prayed as they worked. He liked going over to Washington's mud house 'cause they knew a lotta southern gospel songs. Washington had a deep bass and Aaron was a tenor. Harmonized with the good

family. Always a bunch of hugs to send the kids back home. He couldn't figure why people were suspicious and didn't trust the darkies.

Aaron stepped down from the wagon, his eyes on the hill where he'd seen the horns pop up. Like an injun, his feet were quiet despite heavy lace-up farm boots, and he snuck up the low sandy hill softly, his heart pounding too loud. He crawled the last few feet, keeping his head down, glad he didn't own a hat. At last, he laid the rifle in his left hand, the warming earth keepin' her steady. He scanned. Didn't want to knock down a mamma 'cause he'd have to take her sweet fawn. He prayed silently, "Lord, help me choose the right one." They had been eating beans and tators and Ma would shore appreciate some venison.

He looked up at the shadow covering his body. It was a big old bull, eight points on each side. The beast was close enough to smell his rank hormones. Aaron aimed between his powerful front legs as the buck looked right at the boy with brown innocent eyes as if he was a ghost. A .22 bullet usually ain't big enough to take an adult deer down. He had to hit this majestic bull in the heart so it would instantly kill him. A tear approached his eyeball, but he fought it off.

Aaron squeezed the trigger as he exhaled.

The big bull slowly realized he was shot. He stared into the kid's eyes, took two steps, and keeled over dead, its legs and sides shaking.

Aaron stood and waved his sunburned arms. "Go on girls; take yer kids and git out of here. Sorry for killing your big husband, but he was getting too old to father babies."

The boy walked three steps to look at this incredible animal he'd just shot. "I'm sorry I killed you but we gotta eat." He fought the tears trying to come out of his eyes. He was becoming a man and men don't cry no matter what. Grandpa's voice said, "Boy, life will eat you alive if you ain't tough and brave."

Pa and Doc Brown showed up. They cleaned the big buck and left the guts laying for the coyotes. The innards' smell waifed up and nearly made Aaron sick but it didn't affect the men so he clinched his sunburned jaws and helped best he could.

Back on the dirt trail, the deer's big body crowded him to one side as the buckboard bounced along, but he thought about eating venison tonight. His hungry belly made his mouth water. He imagined he was in the Army. They had just beaten the enemy in a skirmish but had lost their provisions. Luckily, he had shot this here buck so the men wouldn't starve.

Ma and the girls run to them when they heard the squeaking wagon wheels go quiet. Gram came out, wringing her wrinkled hands with blue veins marking 'em. Ma said she was pretty back when she was young. Time did that to a person. Aaron wondered if he'd get old too.

Had a bad feeling.

Grandma grabbed the man's arm and with a shaky voice, said, "Doc Brown, I'm so glad you're here. My husband is suffocating."

He grabbed his black bag, slung on a cotton mask he'd dipped in rubbing alcohol, and headed in as the family followed. He turned around with his hand out in a stop sign. "No! This house is quarantined. I think he has tuberculosis and it's highly contagious." He looked stern. "Ya'll need to burn your clothes and wash your whole

body down with alcohol.” He explained there was a family in the village that died of it a couple weeks back. That was when Grandpa had ridden into town for .22 ammo and other supplies.

Aaron felt guilty because he'd kept saying, “I can't shoot any game because I'm out of bullets.”

Doc Brown locked the wooden door because Gram tried to push in behind him, her brown eyes weeping.

Aaron asked, “What's tuberculosis?”

Ma and Gram didn't know, but Pa heard of it during the battle of Gettysburg. “Heard it's some bug that stuffs yer lungs up and kills ya.”

A chill ran around the family. They had been exposed to this horrible way of dying. Aaron looked around. He loved them so much that if one of them died, his heart would frizzle and he'd die too. He prayed, “Dear Jesus, if it's your will that someone else has to die, make it me.”

He caught Ma's big brown eyes. “One of us gotta go in and feed him when Doc Brown comes out.” He said forcefully, “It's gonna be me.”

“No, I'll take care of my pa.” Panic in her eyes.

“Ma! You're pregnant and the whole family depends on you. I'm the only expendable one around here. The girls are too young and Gram's too weak. If'n she goes back in there, she'll be gone.”

After a moment of silence, Pa looked at Aaron. A tear formed in his sky blue eyes that usually had a piece of the sun in them. He reached his big calloused right hand out and took the boy's hand in his. “Son, you're a brave young man.” He wiped the tear

from his eye. "I hope you don't get it." Doc had said that some people did and others didn't and sometimes it lay dormant in your body for months or even years before letting you know you were a gonner. The sunshine had left Pa's eyes.

"Me too, but..." Aaron shrugged. He knew he'd catch it but this was a gift of love to his family. They'd remember him in their hearts and maybe tell the next generation a little about the boy with golden hair and sunshine in his sky blue eyes.

Ma and Gram wept and patted Aaron's shoulders, saying they didn't want him to die, but the decision was made. He'd take responsibility for Grandpa. He shore loved him and couldn't let him die in there by his self. He had to eat and suck down water, and somebody had to get him onto a bucket so he could relieve his self. Gram said he'd already lost his appetite 'cause his nose and throat was all plugged up with yellor snot.

Aaron and Pa went to work on the big buck. Ma was sure happy to have some meat. After they got the deer skinned and hanging, Aaron knocked on the house door. "Doc Brown, you need anything?"

He came to the door, an alcohol-soaked cloth over his mouth and nose. He wiped the door handles off and looked at the boy. "Your grandpa will suffer for around three or four weeks, then he'll suffocate. I gave him a shot of morphine so he's sleeping."

"I'm the one gonna take care of him." Aaron looked back at his parents.

They nodded.

Doc shook his head and tipped his black felt hat to the boy. "You are one brave young man. Such a shame." To hide the moisture in his eyes, he stepped past the kid

and stood on the wobbly wooden step to tell the family that Gramps would die fairly quickly. "Maybe your son won't get so sick he'll die. He might be lucky."

Aaron looked up at the clear blue sky and saw his buddy, Jesus.

The Lord smiled.

He'd be shaking His hand soon. Kinda looked forward to it, but then he saw Ma's hot tears on her pale cheeks. He'd shore miss her.

Doc Brown went over ta the barn, peeled his clothes off, and dropped them into an old bucket. He looked around and shook his head. "Okay, all of you, take your clothes off. We gotta burn 'em."

Soon, the contagious clothes were on fire in the middle of the dirt yard. The smell weren't bad, but the smoke was. Everyone kept shifting to avoid it, fearful of the bugs. Aaron felt weird being naked in front of his sisters so he put his hands over himself like they did. He had never seen a girl without clothes and was embarrassed. He didn't realize Ma had big firm breasts since she was modest and kept 'em covered with long flour sack dresses. He got a little grin and wiped it off with the back of his sunburned freckled hand.

Ma and Pa talked about where the family could stay since the sod house was quarantined.

Doc Brown sat down in the horse dip and then he had everyone jump in and rub the poison water on the places where bugs could hide out and make a fellar sick. He told them how to get the sod house clean after Grandpa went to meet Jesus. Momma found some gunny sacks out in the barn that were probably free of bugs and she cut head holes in them so everyone had something to put on. The gunny sack was real

scratchy and only went to his waist. It was embarrassing. They all knelt and prayed, and then the boy took Doc Brown back to Eckerly.

Aaron was terribly embarrassed about going into town wearing a short gunny sack that didn't hide much.

Doc Brown said, "They'll point and stare but just ignore 'em. They'll understand after I say your Grandpa is dying of tuberculosis."

Aaron was a touch sunburned when he got back, especially in those places that never saw the sun. Couldn't touch it to take a pee and got urine all over his feet and legs. Shook his head. Had to accept this life. It was the Lord's will. He looked up, hoping to see Jesus.

He was busy helping somebody else.

Ma went through her medicinal herbs and made everyone drink a cup or two, hoping it would help them not get sick and cough like Grandpa. She had some nice hot soup ready for Grandpa

Gramps was a good man, a good father, and he had worked hard his whole life so they could eat. They'd miss him, but knew he'd be with the Lord. Aaron told Ma about seeing Jesus up in the sky and how he had rode back with him on the wagon, telling him how it would go during the next few weeks. "It's a bad way to die." He said, "Yer nose runs and the flime pushes gobs down yer throat and gets plugged up in your lung air pockets so you slowly suffocate. Jesus said He was sorry it was so painful." He took a big breath of air and said, "I'll be with Gramps in the afterlife and I'll look out for the family. If I weren't the one, then Ma would take care of him and get sick so Pa would take care of her. He'd get sick, then it'd be me anyway."

Ma took a long breath, knowing her boy was as right as three rabbits.

Aaron said, "I love you all, but I got to go." He joined Grampa in the sick room and gave him a shot of morphine the doc had left. The old man fell hard asleep.

The next morning, Aaron heard sounds on the wood step and waited a moment before pulling it open. Ma gave him a little wave from a distance. She wasn't crying, having accepted her boy was leaving with her pa. She wore a dress from Washington's ma that was way too big for her. Aaron carried the small iron pot of delicious smelling soup into where Grandpa coughed and choked despite the drug soothing his fragile body. He sat it on the rickety table and pulled an old wooden chair next to the bed. It was sad, but it was his time and soon would be Aaron's. He took Grandpa's hand. "I'm here to help ya meet Jesus."

Gramps coughed and after a moment, said, "Thank you, Pal. You're a brave boy."

"You are. You're dying with grace." He got him sitting up against the grey mud wall and moved the soup pot to the floor next to the chair. Okay, next step. Aaron got the ladle full and without spilling any, put it to the old man's lips. He had just coughed hard and should be able to get a few sips in afore the next one hit his scarred lungs. His deep brown eyes were watery but he weren't scared. He'd fought in many battles during the Civil War and come through them to go to the other side in this tough way. Aaron wanted to go like Grandpa – with dignity and honor.

For the next two weeks, every morning near sunrise, Ma put a pot of something smelling good on the wooden step. They was staying with the Kings who made 'em

keep the clothes they give 'em. She wore a bandana over her face and used alcohol on the iron pot when the boy put it back out, hoping no one else would die this way.

One day, everyone followed her over when she brought meaty soup in the black pot, just enough for the two dying fellows. They stood far away and blew kisses. Aaron didn't blow them back because he wanted them to think he wasn't dying. He fought to keep from hacking and spitting till he heard the sounds of their shoes shuffling away. His whole body hurt and his lungs burned. Soon as they was out of sight, he fell down and lay there, trying to catch a breath as he coughed and spit up yellar stuff.

A few dark nights later, Aaron watched Grandpa suffer, choke, and gag for the last time. He finally passed, suffocated. Drowning woulda been quicker and a lot better.

After pulling Gramp's clothes off, Aaron wiped his frighteningly thin body down with the grain alcohol Pa had brewed. They'd put him naked in a wooden coffin unless they found a spare sheet from friends or family. He put Grandpa out on the steps when dawn hit. Soon, three buzzards circled overhead. He fired a .22 shell to scare them off – one of them lost a feather or two.

Aaron stared at the tips of the blue Rocky Mountains with snow on their peaks. His heart yearned. He'd never have an adventure there.

Doc said that Aaron should burn what he could and to wipe the rest down with alcohol. He started burning the clothes and bedding in the cast iron cook stove. The corn shuck mattress was a real headache because he had to pull her apart and push pieces of it into the stove. It was like a funeral pyre – the black and grey smoke churning out the bent steel chimney from the mud house. He hoped the smoke would blow north in case it still carried the bugs.

Everything was alcohol wiped.

Thought he had 'er.

He heard some noises so he looked outside.

Those danged birds had swooped down. One was hopping right at Grandpa's naked body.

His .22 rifle cracked.

The bullet hit the vulture in the head.

His buddies took off with a frightened squawk.

Aaron yelled, "I'll kill ya all if ya come back!"

He left the door open in case. They were hungry like he used to be. Now he had no appetite and looked skinny like his naked Grandpa lying in the dust out front. He thought, "We're ashes to ashes and dust to dust like Gramma said." He shook his head, seeing his corpse out there. They'd toss it naked into the coffin with Grampa's and burn both of them to kill the bugs. "We'll be together."

Made him feel better for a second.

A moment later, Aaron shivered. He coughed up black and yellar stuff, his chest burned, and every muscle and joint in his body hurt like the dickens. He fell unconscious onto the wooden floor and dreamed he was drowning in a sea of corn since he couldn't get any oxygen into his lungs.

The next morning, he was still on earth to his dismay. He managed to stand up and used the bucket. Aaron opened the door and looked out. Sure was purty with a beautiful sunrise hitting the peaks of them blue Rocky Mountains. He imagined that when he died, he'd fly over there and take a look and see the snow in the fields on the

north sides of the mountains. Heard there was gold and silver in the streams that a guy could pan. He imagined buying some pink bubble gum with the money he got.

Pa was standing out near the shed, checking if the boy was still with the living. He waved.

Aaron hollered but it was soft and weak, "Love you, Pa. Tell Ma and the girls how much I love them..."

Then Pa was gone across the popping up green corn shoots. Aaron thought he shoulda told him to tell Washington's family he loved them too.

He stood, skinny, bare-assed, and alcohol rubbed as he stared at the beautiful peaks for the last time, a yearning in his soon-to-be dead heart. He looked out and saw the buzzards eye-balling him since Pa had moved Grandpa's body into the barn. Using all his strength, he got the .22 rifle up and ready but was too weak to aim and the barrel swung around. He thought about how Grandpa had ridden into town for the ammo and got the TB bug. He fired a couple of rounds and the shots momentarily kept the buzzards from circling. The smell of death hit his nose so he shut the old wooden door. He didn't want his family to see him skinny, naked, and dead. The girls was too young and the women too tender. He thought about it, wishing for a shot of morphine. The pain was horrible. They was gonna see his body all shrunk up and ugly.

A couple of days went by in a strange waiting zone, not dead or alive, then outside, Aaron heard his family singing, "What a friend we have in Jesus." He recognized that Washington and his family was also singing and the women folk was crying. They was waiting for him to kick off.

Aaron felt bad for them, waiting like that.

His whole body hurt and he was as weak as a newborn puppy with its eyes still closed. He hoped he could get this dying done and do 'er rightly. He thought, *So this my last adventure*. He lay on the wood floor, thinking it was a shame he and grandpa had to die.

The last adventure was nearly over because he couldn't hold his head up. Aaron thought he was like that old bull deer with eight points that he'd shot a few weeks back with its legs twitching. Hoped he'd forgive him for killing him.

Oddly, he was feeling a lot of joy.