

## Part Twenty-Three

In the late winter of 1878, the protagonist finds himself on the desolate plains of north Texas. He sets up camp beside the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos River, where he encounters an old hunter. Sharing stories, the hunter reminisces about the once-thriving buffalo herds that have vanished under the relentless gunfire and exploitation of hunters. He describes the elaborate hunting expeditions that now lay abandoned, illustrating the horror of hundreds of thousands of buffalo carcasses left to rot amidst the relentless buzz of flies and the harrowing presence of wolves.

As the night progresses, the protagonist rides through eerie landscapes littered with the bones of the extinct herds. He observes bone-pickers laboring among the skeletal remains, gathering what's left of the creatures to sell. The stark imagery of their grim work contrasts with the silence of the plains, haunted by the ghosts of what once existed. Approaching a group of ragged individuals, he interacts cautiously. They seek tobacco and whiskey, revealing their miserable existence in this desolate land filled with despair and loss. The presence of a necklace made from human ears raises suspicion and leads to a confrontation through a series of escalating dialogues surrounding the grotesque trophy and its possible origins.

Amidst the tension, the group's youth speaks, suggesting a combination of bravado and vulnerability. Under threats and taunts, the protagonist asserts his identity, claiming knowledge of the ears' origin while also confronting the boys' assumptions about their value. As tensions simmer and clash, the dynamics shift, revealing the pervasive cruelty of their shared lives and memories of violence.

Events take a darker turn when the youth of the group is fatally shot, their collective grief stark against the wasteland they inhabit. At the same time, the harsh realities of orphaned children surviving in an unforgiving world come to light. As the protagonist observes the aftermath of violence and loss, he eventually finds his way into a dark town lit by flickering lamps, where he seeks solace in whiskey, only to encounter the Judge, an enigmatic figure who embodies the primal chaos and brutality that pervades their existence. The chapter culminates in a chaotic scene within a saloon, filled with laughter and violence, blending merriment with an undertone of inevitable dread, underscoring the novel's themes of survival amidst the desolation of the West.