

# Only Good Ones

by **Elmore Leonard, 1925-2013**

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PICTURE THE GROUND rising on the east side of the pasture with scrub trees thick on the slope and pines higher up. This is where everybody was. Not all in one place but scattered in small groups: about a dozen men in the scrub, the front-line men, the shooters who couldn't just stand around. They'd fire at the shack when they felt like it or, when Mr. Tanner passed the word, they would all fire at once. Other people were up in the pines and on the road which ran along the crest of the hill, some three hundred yards from the shack across the pasture.

Those watching made bets whether the man in the shack would give himself up or get shot first.

It was Saturday and that's why everybody had the time. They would arrive in town that morning, hear about what had happened, and, shortly after, head out to the cattle-company pasture. Almost all of the men went out alone, leaving their families in town: though there were a few women who came. The other women waited. And the people who had business in town and couldn't leave waited. Now and then somebody came back to have a drink or their dinner and

would tell what was going on. No, they hadn't got him yet. Still inside the line shack and not showing his face.

But they'd get him. A few more would go out when they heard this.

Also a wagon from De Spain's went out with whiskey. That's how the saloon was set up in the pines overlooking the pasture and why nobody went back to town after that.

Barely a mile from town those going out would hear the gunfire, like a skirmish way over on the other side of a woods, thin specks of sound, and this would hurry them. They were careful, though, topping the slope, looking across the pasture, getting their bearings, then peering to see who was present. They would see a friend and ask about this Mr. Tanner and the friend would point him out. The man there in the dark suit: thin and bony, not big but looking like he was made of gristle and hard to kill, with a mustache and a thin nose and a dark dusty hat worn square over his eyes. That was him. Nobody had ever seen him before that morning. They would look at Mr. Tanner, then across the pasture again to the line shack three hundred yards away. It was a little bake-oven of a hut, wood framed and made of sod and built against a rise where there were pines so the hut would be in shade part of the day. There were no windows in the hut, no gear lying around to show anybody lived there. The hut stood in the sun now with its door closed, the door chipped and splintered by all the bullets that had poured into it and through it.

Off to the right where the pine shapes against the sky rounded and became willows, there in the trees by the creek bed, was the man's wagon and team. In the wagon were the supplies he had bought that morning in town before Mr. Tanner spotted him.

Out in front of the hut, about ten or fifteen feet, was something on the ground. From the slope three hundred yards away nobody could tell what it was until a man came who had field glasses. He looked up and said, frowning, it was a doll: one made of cloth scraps, a stuffed doll with buttons for eyes.

The woman must have dropped it, somebody said.

The woman? the man with the field glasses said.

A Lipan Apache woman who was his wife or his woman or just with him. Mr. Tanner hadn't been clear about that. All they knew was she was in the hut with him and if the man wanted her to stay and get shot, that was his business.

Bob Valdez, twenty years old and town constable for three weeks, carrying a shotgun and glad he had something to hold on to, was present at the Maricopa pasture. He arrived about noon. He told Mr. Tanner who he was, speaking quietly and waiting for Mr. Tanner to answer.

Mr. Tanner nodded but did not shake hands and turned away to say something to an R. L. Davis, who rode for Maricopa when he was working. Bob Valdez stood there and didn't know what to do.

He watched the two men. Two of a kind, uh? Both cut from the same stringy hide and looking like father and son: Tanner talking, never smiling, hardly moving his mouth; R. L. Davis standing hipcocked, posing with his revolver and rifle and a cartridge belt over his shoulder and the funneled, pointed brim of his sweaty hat nodding up and down as he listened to Mr. Tanner, smiling at what Mr. Tanner said, laughing out loud while still Mr. Tanner did not even show the twitch of a lip. Bob Valdez did not like R. L. Davis or any of the R. L. Davises he had met. He was civil, he listened to them, but, God, there were a lot of them to listen to.

A Mr. Beaudry, who leased land to the cattle company, was there.

Also Mr. Malsom, manager of Maricopa, and a horsebreaker by the name of Diego Luz, who was big for a Mexican but never offensive and he drank pretty well.

Mr. Beaudry, nodding and also squinting so he could picture the man inside the line shack, said, „There was something peculiar about him. I mean having a name like Orlando Rincon.“

„He worked for me,“ Mr. Malsom said. He was looking at Mr. Tanner. „I mistrusted him and I believe that was part of it, his name being Orlando Rincon.“

„Johnson,“ Mr. Tanner said.

„I hired him two, three times,“ Mr. Malsom said. „For heavy work. When I had work you couldn't kick a man to doing.“

„His name is Johnson,“ Mr. Tanner said. „There is no fuzz-head by the name of Orlando Rincon. I'm telling you, this one is a fuzz-head from the Fort Huachuca Tenth fuzz-head cavalry and his name was Johnson when he killed James C. Baxter a year ago and nothing else.“

He spoke as you might speak to young children to press something into their minds. This man had no warmth and he was probably not very smart. But there was no reason to doubt him.

Bob Valdez kept near Mr. Tanner because he was the center of what was going on here. They would discuss the situation and decide what to do. As the law-enforcement man he, Bob Valdez, should be in on the discussion and the decision. If someone was to arrest Orlando Rincon or Johnson or whatever his name was, then he should do it; he was town constable. They were out of town maybe, but where did the town end? The town had moved out here now; it was the same thing.

Wait for Rincon to give up. Then arrest him.

If he wasn't dead already.

„Mr. Malsom.“ Bob Valdez stepped toward the cattle-company manager, who glanced over but looked out across the pasture again, indifferent.

„I wondered if maybe he's already dead,“ Valdez said.

Mr. Malsom, standing heavier and taller and twenty years older than Bob Valdez, said, „Why don't you find out?“

„I was thinking,“ Valdez said, "if he was dead we could stand here a long time.“

R. L. Davis adjusted his hat, which he did often, grabbing the funneled brim, loosening it on his head and pulling it down close to his eyes again and shifting from one cocked hip to the other. „This constable here's got better things to do,“ R. L. Davis said. „He's busy.“

„No,“ Bob Valdez said. „I was thinking of the man, Rincon. He's dead or he's alive. He's alive maybe he wants to give himself up. In there he has time to think, uh? Maybe—“ He stopped. Not one of them was listening. Not even R. L. Davis.

Mr. Malsom was looking at the whiskey wagon; it was on the road above them and over a little ways with men standing by it, being served off the tailgate. „I think we could use something,“ Mr. Malsom said. His gaze went to Diego Luz the horsebreaker, and Diego straightened up; not much, but a little. He was heavy and very dark and his shirt was tight across the thickness of his body. They said that Diego Luz hit green horses on the muzzle with his fist and

they minded him. He had the hands for it; they hung at his sides, not touching or fooling with anything. They turned open, gestured, when Mr. Malsom told him to get the whiskey and as he moved off, climbing the slope, one hand held his holstered revolver to his leg.

Mr. Malsom looked up at the sky, squinting and taking his hat off and putting it on again. He took off his coat and held it hooked over his shoulder by one finger, said something, gestured, and he and Mr. Beaudry and Mr. Tanner moved a few yards down the slope to a hollow where there was good shade. It was about two or two-thirty then, hot, fairly still and quiet considering the number of people there. Only some of them in the pines and down in the scrub could be seen from where Bob Valdez stood wondering whether he should follow the three men down to the hollow. Or wait for Diego Luz, who was at the whiskey wagon now, where most of the sounds that carried came from: a voice, a word or two that was suddenly clear, or laughter, and people would look up to see what was going on. Some of them by the whiskey wagon had lost interest in the line shack. Others were still watching, though: those farther along the road sitting in wagons and buggies. This was a day, a date, uh? that people would remember and talk about. Sure, I was there, the man in the buggy would be saying a year from now in a saloon over in Benson or St. David or somewhere. The day they got that army deserter, he had a Big-Fifty Sharps and an old Walker and I'll tell you it was ticklish business.

Down in that worn-out pasture, dusty and spotted with desert growth, prickly pear and brittlebush, there was just the sun. It showed the ground cleanly all the way to just in front of the line shack where now, toward the midafternoon, there was shadow coming out from the trees and from the mound the hut was set against.

Somebody in the scrub must have seen the door open. The shout came from there, and Bob Valdez and everybody on the slope was looking by the time the Lipan Apache woman had reached the edge of the shade. She walked out from the hut toward the willow trees carrying a bucket, not hurrying or even looking toward the slope.

Nobody fired at her; though this was not so strange. Putting the front sight on a sod hut and on a person are two different things. The men in the scrub and in the pines didn't know this woman. They weren't after her. She had just appeared. There she was; and no one was sure what to do about her.

She was in the trees a while by the creek, then she was in the open again, walking back toward the hut with the bucket and not hurrying at all: a small figure way across the pasture almost without shape or color, with only the long skirt reaching to the ground to tell it was the woman.

So he's alive, Bob Valdez thought. And he wants to stay alive and he's not giving himself up. He thought about the woman's nerve and whether Orlando Rincon had sent her out or she had decided this herself. You couldn't tell about an Indian woman. Maybe this was expected of her. The woman didn't count; the man did. You could lose the woman and get another one.

Mr. Tanner didn't look at R. L. Davis. His gaze held on the Lipan Apache woman, inched along with her toward the hut; but must have known R. L. Davis was right next to him.

„She's saying she don't give a goddamn about you and your rifle,“ Mr. Tanner said.

R. L. Davis looked at him funny. Then he said, „Shoot her?“ Like he hoped that's what Mr. Tanner meant.

„Well, you could make her jump some,“ Mr. Tanner said.

Now R. L. Davis was onstage and he knew it and Bob Valdez could tell he knew it by the way he levered the Winchester, raised it, and fired all in one motion, and as the dust kicked behind the Indian woman, who kept walking and didn't look up, R. L. Davis fired and fired and fired as fast as he could lever and half aim and with everybody watching him, hurrying him, he put four good ones right behind the woman. His last bullet socked into the door just as she reached it and now she did pause and look up at the slope, staring up like she was waiting for him to fire again and giving him a good target if he wanted it.

Mr. Malsom laughed out loud. „She still don't give a goddamn about your rifle.“

It stung R. L. Davis, which it was intended to do. „I wasn't aiming at her!“

„But she doesn't know that.“ Mr. Malsom was grinning, turning then and reaching out a hand as Diego Luz approached them with the whiskey.

„Hell, I wanted to hit her she'd be laying there, you know it.“

„Well, now, you go tell her that,“ Mr. Malsom said, working the cork loose, „and she'll know it.“ He took a drink from the bottle and passed it to Mr. Beaudry, who drank and handed the bottle to Mr. Tanner. Mr. Tanner did not drink; he passed the bottle to R. L. Davis, who was standing, staring at Mr. Malsom. Finally R. L. Davis jerked the bottle up, took a long swallow, and that part was over.

Mr. Malsom said to Mr. Tanner, „You don't want any?“

„Not today,“ Mr. Tanner answered. He continued to stare out across the pasture.

Mr. Malsom watched him. „You feel strongly about this army deserter.“

„I told you,“ Mr. Tanner said, „he killed a man was a friend of mine.“

„No, I don't believe you did.“

„James C. Baxter of Fort Huachuca,“ Mr. Tanner said. „He come across a tulapai still this nigger soldier was working with some Indians. The nigger thought Baxter would tell the army people, so he shot him and ran off with a woman.“

„And you saw him this morning.“

„I had come in last night and stopped off, going to Tucson,“ Mr. Tanner said. „This morning I was getting ready to leave when I saw him; him and the woman.“

„I was right there,“ R. L. Davis said. „Right, Mr. Tanner? Him and I were on the porch by the Republic and Rincon goes by in the wagon. Mr. Tanner said, ‚You know that man?‘ I said, ‚Only that he's lived up north of town a few months. Him and the woman.‘ ‚Well, I know him,‘ Mr. Tanner said. ‚That man's an army deserter wanted for murder.‘ I said, ‚Well, let's go get him.‘ He had a start on us and that's how he got to the hut before we could grab on to him. He's been holed up ever since.“

Mr. Malsom said, „Then you didn't talk to him.“

„Listen,“ Mr. Tanner said, „I've kept that man's face before my eyes this past year.“

Bob Valdez, somewhat behind Mr. Tanner and to the side, moved in a little closer. „You know this is the same man, uh?“

Mr. Tanner looked around. He stared at Valdez. That's all he did—just stared.

„I mean, we have to be sure,“ Bob Valdez said. „It's a serious thing.“

Now Mr. Malsom and Mr. Beaudry were looking up at him. „We,“ Mr. Beaudry said. „I'll tell you what, Roberto. We need help we'll call you. All right?“

„You hired me,“ Bob Valdez said, standing alone above them. He was serious but he shrugged and smiled a little to take the edge off the words. „What did you hire me for?“ „Well,“ Mr. Beaudry said, acting it out, looking past Bob Valdez and along the road both ways, „I was to see some drunk Mexicans I'd point them out.“

A person can be in two different places and he will be two different people. Maybe if you think of some more places the person will be more people, but don't take it too far. This is Bob Valdez standing by himself with the shotgun and having only the shotgun to hold on to.

This is one Bob Valdez. About twenty years old. Mr. Beaudry and others could try and think of a time when Bob Valdez might have drunk too much or swaggered or had a certain smart look on his face, but they would never recall such a time. This Bob Valdez was all right.

Another Bob Valdez inside the Bob Valdez at the pasture that day worked for the army one time and was a guide when Crook chased Chato and Chihuahua down into the Madres. He was seventeen then, with a Springfield and Apache moccasins that came up to his knees. He would sit at night with the Apache scouts from San Carlos, eating with them and talking some as he learned Chiricahua. He would keep up with them all day and shoot the Springfield one hell of a lot better than any of them could shoot. He came home with a scalp but never showed it to anyone and had thrown it away by the time he went to work for Maricopa. Shortly after that he was named town constable at twenty-five dollars a month, getting the job because he got along with people: the Mexicans in town who drank too much on Saturday night liked him and that was the main thing.

The men with the whiskey bottle had forgotten Valdez. They stayed in the hollow where the shade was cool watching the line shack and waiting for the army deserter to realize it was all up with him. He would realize it and open the door and be cut down as he came outside. It was a matter of time only.

Bob Valdez stayed on the open part of the slope that was turning to shade, sitting now like an Apache and every once in a while making a cigarette and smoking it slowly as he thought about himself and Mr. Tanner and the others, then thinking about the army deserter.

Diego Luz came and squatted next to him, his arms on his knees and his big hands that he used for breaking horses hanging in front of him.

„Stay near if they want you for something,“ Valdez said. He was watching Beaudry tilt the bottle up. Diego Luz said nothing.

„One of them bends over,“ Bob Valdez said then, „you kiss it, uh?“

Diego Luz looked at him, patient about it. Not mad or even stirred up. „Why don't you go home?“

„He says Get me a bottle, you run.“

„I get it. I don't run.“

„Smile and hold your hat, uh?“

„And don't talk so much.“

„Not unless they talk to you first.“

„You better go home,“ Diego said.

Bob Valdez said, „That’s why you hit the hosses.“

„Listen,“ Diego Luz said, scowling a bit now. „They pay me to break horses. They pay you to talk to drunks on Saturday night and keep them from killing somebody. They don’t pay you for what you think or how you feel, so if you take their money, keep your mouth shut. All right?“

Diego Luz got up and walked away, down toward the hollow. The hell with this kid, he was thinking. He’ll learn or he won’t learn, but the hell with him. He was also thinking that maybe he could get a drink from that bottle. Maybe there’d be a half inch left nobody wanted and Mr. Malsom would tell him to kill it.

But it was already finished. R. L. Davis was playing with the bottle, holding it by the neck and flipping it up and catching it as it came down. Beaudry was saying, „What about after dark?“ Looking at Mr. Tanner, who was thinking about something else and didn’t notice. R L. Davis stopped flipping the bottle. He said, „Put some men on the rise right above the hut; he comes out, bust him.“

„Well, they should get the men over there,“ Mr. Beaudry said, looking at the sky. „It won’t be long till dark.“

„Where’s he going?“ Mr. Malsom said.

The others looked up, stopped in whatever they were doing or thinking by the suddenness of Mr. Malsom’s voice.

„Hey, Valdez!“ R. L. Davis yelled out. „Where do you think you’re going?“

Bob Valdez had circled them and was already below them on the slope, leaving the pines now and entering the scrub brush. He didn’t stop or look back. „Valdez!“

Mr. Tanner raised one hand to silence R. L. Davis, all the time watching Bob Valdez getting smaller, going straight through the scrub, not just walking or passing the time but going right out to the pasture.

„Look at him,“ Mr. Malsom said. There was some admiration in the voice.

„He’s dumber than he looks,“ R. L. Davis said. Then jumped a little as Mr. Tanner touched his arm.

„Come on,“ Mr. Tanner said. „With a rifle.“ And started down the slope, hurrying and not seeming to care if he might stumble on the loose gravel.

Bob Valdez was now halfway across the pasture, the shotgun pointed down at his side, his eyes not leaving the door of the line shack. The door was probably already open enough for a rifle barrel to poke through. He guessed the army deserter was covering him, letting him get as close as he wanted; the closer he came, the easier to hit him.

Now he could see all the bullet marks in the door and the clean inner wood where the door was splintered. Two people in that little bakeoven of a place. He saw the door move.

He saw the rag doll on the ground. It was a strange thing, the woman having a doll. Valdez hardly glanced at it but was aware of the button eyes looking up and the discomforted twist of the red wool mouth. Then, just past the doll, when he was wondering if he would go right up to the door and knock on it and wouldn’t that be a crazy thing, like visiting somebody, the door opened and the Negro was in the doorway, filling it, standing there in pants and boots but without a shirt in that hot place and holding a long-barreled Walker that was already cocked.

They stood ten feet apart looking at each other, close enough so that no one could fire from the slope.

„I can kill you first,“ the Negro said, „if you raise that.“

With his free hand, the left one, Bob Valdez motioned back over his shoulder. „There’s a man there said you killed somebody a year ago.“

„What man?“

„Said his name is Tanner.“

The Negro shook his head, once each way.

„Said your name is Johnson.“

„You know my name.“

„I’m telling you what he said.“

„Where’d I kill this man?“

„Huachuca.“

The Negro hesitated. „That was some time ago I was in the Tenth. More than a year.“

„You a deserter?“

„I served it out.“

„Then you got something that says so.“

„In the wagon, there’s a bag there my things are in.“

„Will you talk to this man Tanner?“

„If I can hold from hitting him one.“

„Listen, why did you run this morning?“

„They come chasing. I don’t know what they want.“ He lowered the gun a little, his brown-stained-looking tired eyes staring intently at Bob Valdez. „What would you do? They came on the run. Next thing I know they a-firing at us. So I pop in this place.“

„Will you come with me and talk to him?“

The Negro hesitated again. Then shook his head. „I don’t know him.“

„Then he won’t know you, uh?“

„He didn’t know me this morning.“

„All right,“ Bob Valdez said. „I’ll get your paper says you were discharged. Then we’ll show it to this man, uh?“

The Negro thought it over before he nodded, very slowly, as if still thinking. „All right. Bring him here, I’ll say a few words to him.“

Bob Valdez smiled a little. „You can point that gun some other way.“

„Well...“ the Negro said, „if everybody’s friends.“ He lowered the Walker to his side.

The wagon was in the willow trees by the creek. Off to the right. But Bob Valdez did not turn right away in that direction. He backed away, watching Orlando Rincon for no reason that he knew of. Maybe because the man was holding a gun and that was reason enough.

He had backed off six or seven feet when Orlando Rincon shoved the Walker down into his belt. Bob Valdez turned and started for the trees. This was when he looked across the pasture. He saw Mr. Tanner and R. L. Davis at the edge of the scrub trees but wasn’t sure it was them.

Something tried to tell him it was them, but he did not accept it until he was off to the right, out of the line of fire, and by then the time to yell at them or run toward them was past, for R. L. Davis had the Winchester up and was firing.

They say R. L. Davis was drunk or he would have pinned him square.

As it was the bullet shaved Rincon and plowed past him into the hut.



Bob Valdez saw him half turn, either to go inside or look inside, and as he came around again saw the man's eyes on him and his hand pulling the Walker from his belt.

„They weren't supposed to,“ Bob Valdez said, holding one hand out as if to stop Rincon. „Listen, they weren't supposed to do that!“

The Walker was out of Rincon's belt and he was cocking it. „Don't!“ Bob Valdez yelled. „Don't!“ Looking right in the man's eyes and seeing it was no use and suddenly hurrying, jerking the shotgun up and pulling both triggers so that the explosions came out in one big blast and Orlando Rincon was spun and thrown back inside.

They came out across the pasture to have a look at the carcass, some going inside where they found the woman also dead, killed by a rifle bullet. They noticed she would have had a child in a few months. Those by the doorway made room as Mr. Tanner and R. L. Davis approached.

Diego Luz came over by Bob Valdez, who had not moved. Valdez stood watching them and he saw Mr. Tanner look down at Rincon and after a moment shake his head.

„It looked like him,“ Mr. Tanner said. „It sure looked like him.“

He saw R. L. Davis squint at Mr. Tanner. „It ain't the one you said?“

Mr. Tanner shook his head again. „I've seen him before, though. Know I've seen him somewheres.“

Valdez saw R. L. Davis shrug. „You ask me, they all look alike.“ He was yawning then, fooling with his hat, and then his eyes swiveled over at Bob Valdez standing with the empty shotgun.

„Constable,“ R. L. Davis said, „you went and killed the wrong coon.“

Bob Valdez started for him, raising the shotgun to swing it like a club, but Diego Luz drew his revolver and came down with it and Valdez dropped to the ground.

Some three years later there was a piece in the paper about a Robert Eladio Valdez who had been hanged for murder in Tularosa, New Mexico. He had shot a man coming out of the Regent Hotel, called him an unprintable name, and shot him four times. This Valdez had previously killed a man in Contention and two in Sands during a bank holdup, had been caught once, escaped from the jail in Mesilla before trial, and identified another time during a holdup near Lordsburg.

„If it is the same Bob Valdez used to live here,“ Mr. Beaudry said, „it's good we got rid of him.“

„Well, it could be,“ Mr. Malsom said. „But I guess there are Bob Valdezes all over.“

„You wonder what gets into them,“ Mr. Beaudry said.

