

# The Boy Who Smiled

by Elmore Leonard, 1925-2013

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WHEN MICKEY SEGUNDO was fourteen, he tracked a man almost two hundred miles—from the Jicarilla Subagency down into the malpais.

He caught up with him at a water hole in late afternoon and stayed behind a rock outcropping watching the man drink. Mickey Segundo had not tasted water in three days, but he sat patiently behind the cover while the man quenched his thirst, watching him relax and make himself comfortable as the hot lava country cooled with the approach of evening.

Finally Mickey Segundo stirred. He broke open the .50-caliber Gallagher and inserted the paper cartridge and the cap. Then he eased the carbine between a niche in the rocks, sighting on the back of the man's head. He called in a low voice, „Tony Choddi...“ and as the face with the wide-open eyes came around, he fired casually.

He lay on his stomach and slowly drank the water he needed, filling his canteen and the one that had belonged to Tony Choddi. Then he took his hunting knife and sawed both of the man's ears off, close to the head. These he put into his saddle pouch, leaving the rest for the buzzards.

A week later Mickey Segundo carried the pouch into the agency office and dropped the ears on my desk. He said very simply, „Tony Choddi is sorry he has caused trouble.“

I remember telling him, „You’re not thinking of going after McKay now, are you?“

„This man, Tony Choddi, stole stuff, a horse and clothes and a gun,“ he said with his pleasant smile. „So I thought I would do a good thing and fix it so Tony Choddi didn’t steal no more.“ With the smile there was a look of surprise, as if to say, „Why would I want to get Mr. McKay?“

A few days later I saw McKay and told him about it and mentioned that he might keep his eyes open. But he said that he didn’t give a damn about any breed Jicarilla kid. If the kid felt like avenging his old man, he could try, but he’d probably cash in before his time. And as for getting Tony Choddi, he didn’t give a damn about that either. He’d got the horse back and that’d all he cared about.

After he had said his piece, I was sorry I had warned him. And I felt a little foolish telling one of the biggest men in the Territory to look out for a half-breed Apache kid. I told myself, Maybe you’re just rubbing up to him because he’s important and could use his influence to help out the agency ... and maybe he knows it.

Actually I had more respect for Mickey Segundo, as a human being, than I did for T. O. McKay. Maybe I felt I owed the warning to McKay because he was a white man. Like saying, „Mickey Segundo’s a good boy, but, hell, he’s half Indian.“ Just one of those things you catch yourself doing.

Like habit. You do something wrong the first time and you know it, but if you keep it up, it becomes a habit and it’s no longer wrong because it’s something you’ve always been doing.

McKay and a lot of people said Apaches were no damn good. The only good one was a dead one. They never stopped to reason it out.

They’d been saying it so long, they knew it was true. Certainly any such statement was unreasonable, but damned if I wouldn’t sometimes nod my head in agreement, because at those times I’d be with white men and that’s the way white men talked.

I might have thought I was foolish, but actually it was McKay who was the fool. He underestimated Mickey Segundo.

That was five years ago. It had begun with a hanging.

EARLY IN THE morning, Tudishishn, sergeant of Apache police at the Jicarilla Agency, rode in to tell me that Tony Choddi had jumped the boundaries again and might be in my locale. Tudishishn stayed for half a dozen cups of coffee, though his information didn’t last that long.

When he’d had enough, he left as leisurely as he had arrived. Hunting renegades, reservation jumpers, was Tudishishn’s job; still, it wasn’t something to get excited about. Tomorrows were for work; todays were for thinking about it.

Up at the agency they were used to Tony Choddi skipping off. Usually they’d find him later in some shaded barranca, full of tulapai.

It was quiet until late afternoon, but not unusually so. It wasn’t often that anything out of the ordinary happened at the subagency. There were twenty-six families, one hundred eight Jicarillas all told, under my charge. We were

located almost twenty miles below the reservation proper, and most of the people had been there long before the reservation had been marked off. They had been fairly peaceful then, and remained so now. It was one of the few instances where the Bureau allowed the sleeping dog to lie; and because of that we had less trouble than they did up at the reservation.

There was a sign on the door of the adobe office which described it formally. It read:

d. j. merritt  
agent, jicarilla apache subagency  
puerco, new mexico territory.

It was a startling announcement to post on the door of a squat adobe sitting all alone in the shadow of the Nacimentos. My Apaches preferred higher ground and the closest jacales were two miles up into the foothills. The office had to remain on the mail run, even though the mail consisted chiefly of impossible-to-apply Bureau memoranda.

Just before supper Tudishishn returned. He came in at a run this time and swung off before his pony had come to a full stop. He was excited and spoke in a confusion of Apache, Spanish, and a word here and there of English.

Returning to the reservation, he had decided to stop off and see his friends of the Puerco Agency. There had been friends he had not seen for some time, and the morning had lengthened into afternoon with tulapai, good talking, and even coffee. People had come from the more remote jacales, deeper in the hills, when they learned Tudishishn was there, to hear news of friends at the reservation. Soon there were many people and what looked like the beginning of a good time. Then Senor McKay had come.

McKay had men with him, many men, and they were looking for Mickey Solner—the squaw man, as the Americans called him. Most of the details I learned later on, but briefly this is what had happened: McKay and some of his men were out on a hunting trip.

When they got up that morning, McKay's horse was gone, along with a shotgun and some personal articles. They got on the tracks, which were fresh and easy to follow, and by that afternoon they were at Mickey Solner's jacale. His woman and boy were there, and the horse was tethered in front of the mud hut. Mickey Segundo, the boy, was honored to lead such important people to his father, who was visiting with Tudishishn.

McKay brought the horse along, and when they found Mickey Solner, they took hold of him without asking questions and looped a rope around his neck. Then they boosted him up onto the horse they claimed he had stolen. McKay said it would be fitting that way. Tudishishn had left fast when he saw what was about to happen. He knew they wouldn't waste time arguing with an Apache, so he had come to me.

When I got there, Mickey Solner was still sitting McKay's chestnut mare with the rope reaching from his neck to the cottonwood bough overhead. His head drooped as if all the fight was out of him, and when I came up in front of the chestnut, he looked at me with tired eyes, watery and red from tulapai.

I had known Solner for years, but had never become close to him.

He wasn't a man with whom you became fast friends. Just his living in an Apache rancheria testified to his being of a different breed. He was friendly

enough, but few of the whites liked him—they said he drank all the time and never worked. Maybe most were just envious. Solner was a white man gone Indian, whole hog. That was the cause of the resentment.

His son, Mickey the Second, stood near his dad's stirrup looking at him with a bewildered, pathetic look on his slim face. He held on to the stirrup as if he'd never let it go. And it was the first time, the only time, I ever saw Mickey Segundo without a faint smile on his face.

„Mr. McKay,“ I said to the cattleman, who was standing relaxed with his hands in his pockets, „I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to take that man down. He's under bureau jurisdiction and will have to be tried by a court.“

McKay said nothing, but Bowie Allison, who was his herd boss, laughed and then said, „You ought to be afraid.“

Dolph Bettzinger was there, along with his brothers Kirk and Sim.

They were hired for their guns and usually kept pretty close to McKay.

They did not laugh when Allison did.

And all around the clearing by the cottonwood were eight or ten others. Most of them I recognized as McKay riders. They stood solemnly, some with rifles and shotguns. There wasn't any doubt in their minds what stealing a horse meant.

„Tudishishn says that Mickey didn't steal your horse. These people told him that he was at home all night and most of the morning until Tudishishn dropped in, and then he came down here.“ A line of Apaches stood a few yards off and as I pointed to them, some nodded their heads.

„Mister,“ McKay said, „I found the horse at this man's hut. Now, you argue that down, and I'll kiss the behind of every Apache you got living around here.“

„Well, your horse could have been left there by someone else.“

„Either way, he had a hand in it,“ he said curtly.

„What does he say?“ I looked up at Mickey Solner and asked him quickly, „How did you get the horse, Mickey?“

„I just traded with a fella.“ His voice shook, and he held on to the saddle horn as if afraid he'd fall off. „This fella come along and traded with me, that's all.“

„Who was it?“

Mickey Solner didn't answer. I asked him again, but still he refused to speak. McKay was about to say something, but Tudishishn came over quickly from the group of Apaches.

„They say it was Tony Choddi. He was seen to come into camp in early morning.“

I asked Mickey if it was Tony Choddi, and finally he admitted that it was. I felt better then. McKay couldn't hang a man for trading a horse.

„Are you satisfied, Mr. McKay? He didn't know it was yours. Just a matter of trading a horse.“

McKay looked at me, narrowing his eyes. He looked as if he were trying to figure out what kind of a man I was. Finally he said, „You think I'm going to believe them?“

It dawned on me suddenly that McKay had been using what patience he had for the past few minutes. Now he was ready to continue what they had come for. He had made up his mind long before. „Wait a minute, Mr. McKay, you're talking about the life of an innocent man. You can't just toy with it like it was a head of cattle.“

He looked at me and his puffy face seemed to harden. He was a heavy man, beginning to sag about the stomach. „You think you're going to tell me what I

can do and what I can't? I don't need a government representative to tell me why my horse was stolen!"

"I'm not telling you anything. You know Mickey didn't steal the horse. You can see for yourself you're making a mistake."

McKay shrugged and looked at his herd boss. "Well, if it is, it isn't a very big one—leastwise we'll be sure he won't be trading in stolen horses again." He nodded to Bowie Allison.

Bowie grinned, and brought his quirt up and then down across the rump of the chestnut.

"Yiiiiiiiiiii..."

The chestnut broke fast. Allison stood yelling after it, then jumped aside quickly as Mickey Solner swung back toward him on the end of the rope.

IT WAS TWO weeks later, to the day, that Mickey Segundo came in with Tony Choddi's ears. You can see why I asked him if he had a notion of going after McKay. And it was a strange thing. I was talking to a different boy than the one I had last seen under the cottonwood.

When the horse shot out from under his dad, he ran to him like something wild, screaming, and wrapped his arms around the kicking legs trying to hold the weight off the rope.

Bowie Allison cuffed him away, and they held him back with pistols while he watched his dad die. From then on he didn't say a word, and when it was over, walked away with his head down. Then, when he came in with Tony Choddi's ears, he was himself again. All smiles.

I might mention that I wrote to the Bureau of Indian Affairs about the incident, since Mickey Solner, legally, was one of my charges; but nothing came of it. In fact, I didn't even get a reply.

Over the next few years Mickey Segundo changed a lot. He became Apache. That is, his appearance changed and almost everything else about him—except the smile. The smile was always there, as if he knew a monumental secret which was going to make everyone happy.

He let his hair grow to his shoulders and usually he wore only a frayed cotton shirt and breechclout; his moccasins were Apache—curled toes and leggings which reached to his thighs. He went under his Apache name, which was Peza-a, but I called him Mickey when I saw him, and he was never reluctant to talk to me in English. His English was good, discounting grammar.

Most of the time he lived in the same jacale his dad had built, providing for his mother and fitting closer into the life of the rancheria than he did before. But when he was about eighteen, he went up to the agency and joined Tudishishn's police. His mother went with him to live at the reservation, but within a year the two of them were back.

Tracking friends who happened to wander off the reservation didn't set right with him. It didn't go with his smile.

Tudishishn told me he was sorry to lose him because he was an expert tracker and a dead shot. I know the sergeant had a dozen good sign followers, but very few who were above average with a gun.

He must have been nineteen when he came back to Puerco. In all those years he never once mentioned McKay's name. And I can tell you I never brought it up either.

I saw McKay even less after the hanging incident. If he ignored me before, he avoided me now. As I said, I felt like a fool after warning him about Mickey Segundo, and I'm certain McKay felt only contempt for me for doing it, after sticking up for the boy's dad.

McKay would come through every once in a while, usually going on a hunt up into the Nacimentos. He was a great hunter and would go out for a few days every month or so. Usually with his herd boss, Bowie Allison. He hunted everything that walked, squirmed, or flew and I'm told his ranch trophy room was really something to see.

You couldn't take it away from the man; everything he did, he did well. He was in his fifties, but he could shoot straighter and stay in the saddle longer than any of his riders. And he knew how to make money.

But it was his arrogance that irked me. Even though he was polite, he made you feel far beneath him. He talked to you as if you were one of the hired help. One afternoon, fairly late, Tudishishn rode in and said that he was supposed to meet McKay at the adobe office early the next morning.

McKay wanted to try the shooting down southwest toward the malpais, on the other side of it, actually, and Tudishishn was going to guide for him.

The Indian policeman drank coffee until almost sundown and then rode off into the shadows of the Nacimentos. He was staying at one of the rancherias, visiting with his friends until the morning.

McKay appeared first. It was a cool morning, bright and crisp. I looked out of the window and saw the five riders coming up the road from the south, and when they were close enough I made out McKay and Bowie Allison and the three Bettzinger brothers. When they reached the office, McKay and Bowie dismounted, but the Bettzingers reined around and started back down the road.

McKay nodded and was civil enough, though he didn't direct more than a few words to me. Bowie was ready when I asked them if they wanted coffee, but McKay shook his head and said they were leaving shortly. Just about then the rider appeared coming down out of the hills.

McKay was squinting, studying the figure on the pony.

I didn't really look at him until I noticed McKay's close attention.

And when I looked at the rider again, he was almost on us. I didn't have to squint then to see that it was Mickey Segundo.

McKay said, „Who's that?“ with a ring of suspicion to his voice.

I felt a sudden heat on my face, like the feeling you get when you're talking about someone, then suddenly find the person standing next to you.

Without thinking about it I told McKay, „That's Peza-a, one of my people.“ What made me call him by his Apache name I don't know. Perhaps because he looked so Indian. But I had never called him Peza-a before.

He approached us somewhat shyly, wearing his faded shirt and breechclout but now with a streak of ochre painted across his nose from ear to ear. He didn't look as if he could have a drop of white blood in him.

„What's he doing here?“ McKay's voice still held a note of suspicion, and he looked at him as if he were trying to place him.

Bowie Allison studied him the same way, saying nothing.

„Where's Tudishishn? These gentlemen are waiting for him.“

„Tudishishn is ill with a demon in his stomach,“ Peza-a answered.

„He has asked me to substitute myself for him.“ He spoke in Spanish, hesitantly, the way an Apache does.

McKay studied him for some time. Finally, he said, „Well ... can he track?“

„He was with Tudishishn for a year. Tudishishn speaks highly of him.“ Again I don't know what made me say it. A hundred things were going through my head. What I said was true, but I saw it getting me into something. Mickey never looked directly at me. He kept watching McKay, with the faint smile on his mouth.

McKay seemed to hesitate, but then he said, „Well, come on. I don't need a reference ... long as he can track.“

They mounted and rode out.

McKay wanted prongbuck. Tudishishn had described where they would find the elusive herds and promised to show him all he could shoot. But they were many days away. McKay had said if he didn't have time, he'd make time. He wanted good shooting.

Off and on during the first day he questioned Mickey Segundo closely to see what he knew about the herds.

„I have seen them many times. Their hide the color of sand, and black horns that reach into the air like bayonets of the soldiers. But they are far.“

McKay wasn't concerned with distance. After a while he was satisfied that this Indian guide knew as much about tracking antelope as Tudishishn, and that's what counted. Still, there was something about the young Apache...

„TOMORROW, WE begin the crossing of the malpais,“ Mickey Segundo said. It was evening of the third day, as they made camp at Yucca Springs.

Bowie Allison looked at him quickly. „Tudishishn planned we'd follow the high country down and come out on the plain from the east.“

„What's the matter with keeping a straight line,“ McKay said. „Keeping to the hills is longer, isn't it?“

„Yeah, but that malpais is a blood-dryin' furnace in the middle of August,“ Bowie grumbled. „You got to be able to pinpoint the wells. And even if you find them, they might be dry.“

McKay looked at Peza-a for an answer.

„If Senor McKay wishes to ride for two additional days, that is for him to say. But we can carry our water with ease.“ He went to his saddle pouch and drew out two collapsed, rubbery bags. „These, from the stomach of the horse, will hold much water. Tomorrow we fill canteens and these, and the water can be made to last five, six days. Even if the wells are dry, we have water.“

Bowie Allison grumbled under his breath, looking with distaste at the horse-intestine water sacks.

McKay rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He was thinking of prongbuck.

Finally he said, „We'll cut across the lava.“

Bowie Allison was right in his description of the malpais. It was a furnace, a crusted expanse of desert that stretched into another world.

Saguaro and ocotillo stood nakedly sharp against the whiteness, and off in the distance were ghostly looming buttes, gigantic tombstones for the lava waste. Horses shuffled choking white dust, and the sun glare was a white blistering shock that screamed its brightness. Then the sun would drop suddenly, leaving a nothingness that could be felt. A life that had died a hundred million years ago.

McKay felt it and that night he spoke little.

The second day was a copy of the first, for the lava country remained monotonously the same. McKay grew more irritable as the day wore on, and time and again he would snap at Bowie Allison for his grumbling. The country worked at the nerves of the two white men, while Mickey Segundo watched them.

On the third day they passed two water holes. They could see the shallow crusted bottoms and the fissures that the tight sand had made cracking in the hot air. That night McKay said nothing.

In the morning there was a blue haze on the edge of the glare; they could feel the land beneath them begin to rise. Chaparral and patches of toboso grass became thicker and dotted the flatness, and by early afternoon the towering rock formations loomed near at hand. They had then one water sack two thirds full; but the other, with their canteens, was empty.

Bowie Allison studied the gradual rise of the rock wall, passing his tongue over cracked lips. „There could be water up there. Sometimes the rain catches in hollows and stays there a long time if it's shady.“

McKay squinted into the air. The irregular crests were high and dead still against the sky. „Could be.“

Mickey Segundo looked up and then nodded.

„How far to the next hole?“ McKay asked.

„Maybe one day.“

„If it's got water... Then how far?“

„Maybe two day. We come out on the plain then near the Datil Mountains and there is water, streams to be found.“

McKay said, „That means we're halfway. We can make last what we got, but there's no use killing ourselves.“ His eyes lifted to the peaks again, then dropped to the mouth of a barranca which cut into the rock.

He nodded to the dark canyon which was partly hidden by a dense growth of mesquite. „We'll leave our stuff there and go on to see what we can find.“

They unsaddled the horses and ground-tied them and hung their last water bag in the shade of a mesquite bush.

Then they walked up-canyon until they found a place which would be the easiest to climb.

They went up and they came down, but when they were again on the canyon floor, their canteens still rattled lightly with their steps.

Mickey Segundo carried McKay's rifle in one hand and the limp, empty water bag in the other.

He walked a step behind the two men and watched their faces as they turned to look back overhead. There was no water.

The rocks held nothing, not even a dampness. They were naked now and loomed brutally indifferent, and bone dry with no promise of moisture.

The canyon sloped gradually into the opening. And now, ahead, they could see the horses and the small fat bulge of the water bag hanging from the mesquite bough.

Mickey Segundo's eyes were fixed on the water sack. He looked steadily at it. Then a horse screamed. They saw the horses suddenly pawing the ground and pulling at the hackamores that held them fast. The three horses and the pack mule joined together now, neighing shrilly as they strained dancing at the ropes.



And then a shape the color of sand darted through the mesquite thicket, so quickly that it seemed a shadow.

Mickey Segundo threw the rifle to his shoulder. He hesitated. Then he fired.

The shape kept going, past the mesquite background and out into the open.

He fired again and the coyote went up into the air and came down to lie motionless.

It only jerked in death. McKay looked at him angrily. „Why the hell didn't you let me have it! You could have hit one of the horses!“

„There was not time.“

„That's two hundred yards! You could have hit a horse, that's what I'm talking about!“

„But I shot it,“ Mickey Segundo said.

When they reached the mesquite clump, they did not go over to inspect the dead coyote. Something else took their attention. It stopped the white men in their tracks.

They stared unbelieving at the wetness seeping into the sand, and above the spot, the water bag hanging like a punctured bladder. The water had quickly run out.

MICKEY SEGUNDO told the story at the inquiry. They had attempted to find water, but it was no use; so they were compelled to try to return.

They had almost reached Yucca Springs when the two men died.

Mickey Segundo told it simply. He was sorry he had shot the water bag, but what could he say? God directs the actions of men in mysterious ways.

The county authorities were disconcerted, but they had to be satisfied with the apparent facts.

McKay and Allison were found ten miles from Yucca Springs and brought in. There were no marks of violence on either of them, and they found three hundred dollars in McKay's wallet. It was officially recorded that they died from thirst and exposure.

A terrible way to die just because some damn Apache couldn't shoot straight. Peza-a survived because he was lucky, along with the fact that he was Apache, which made him tougher. Just one of those things.

Mickey continued living with his mother at the subagency. His old Gallagher carbine kept them in meat, and they seemed happy enough just existing.

Tudishishn visited them occasionally, and when he did they would have a tulapai party. Everything was normal.

Mickey's smile was still there but maybe a little different.

But I've often wondered what Mickey Segundo would have done if that coyote had not run across the mesquite thicket...

