

GRANDPA: Prelude

Aw, please, grandpa, please,” pleaded Rachael, her round face mournful and her head cocked. As usual, she was using her blue eyes and long blond hair in an attempt to manipulate her grandfather into telling a story about his youth. “Please, just one story?”

They were sitting around a campfire on their back patio, making s’mores. “I’ll make you a huge s’more if you will.” Rachael, a vivacious nine-year old, was trying to bribe her grandpa who was more than a little overweight and liked to eat. She also had the habit of rubbing his grey beard just to annoy him. Grandpa, whose real name was Jack Elliott, looked over to Austin, a hefty fourteen-year-old, who had a strange look on his face. He knew what Austin was thinking. He was attempting to make a choice: a story from grandpa or back to his ever present X-game.

“Well, Austin,” grandpa said. “Do you want to hear a story?” “I’m not sure. Will it be a good story, grandpa?”

“It is true,” thought grandpa. “Sometimes my stories are boring.” “I think it will be interesting. It has cowboys, ghosts, rustlers, and it is a semi-true story that really might have happened. But you don’t have to stay. You may leave at any time”

Austin hesitated and shifted in his chair. “I guess I’ll stay.”

“Can we make s’mores while you tell it?” Rachael asked with a flip of her blond hair.

“Sure.” He settled back into his cushioned patio chair. “Now this story takes place a long time ago, when I was just a little snapper—just twelve years old—1951. We lived in small town called Bryan, Texas.”

“Was that before there were cars?” giped Austin, as he stuck another marshmallow on the end of his willow stick.

“No, we had cars, but we didn’t have television in the town yet, and air conditioning was unknown. We ran around barefoot from the day school was over until the day school began—except for Sundays. We were forced to wear shoes to church.

“Our story begins in January, I think. Maybe it was February.”

CHAPTER ONE: Unexpected Encounter

Jack Elliott ran to get the door. His sixteen-year-old sister was expecting her date and he wanted to see the guy who was brave enough to take her out. Opening the door, he came face to face with two buckles on a tooled cowboy belt. His eyes moved upwards past a checkered Western style shirt to a tall, tough, youngish man, with a face which already seemed lined with wisdom.

"Good evening," said the young man, taking off a grey Stetson, the ultimate cowboy hat. He placed it over his heart and gave a little bow. "I'm Frank Rollin. Is Dianne in?"

“Who’s Dianne?” interrupted Rachael. “Don’t you remember your great aunt Dianne?”

“Oh yeah. I remember her now.” “Let’s get back to the story. Let’s see...”

“Oh my!” Jack thought. “My sister's got her a cowboy.” He looked down and saw, jutting out from faded stovepipe blue jeans, a pair of polished but well-worn cowboy boots.

"Excuse me," the cowboy requested again, politely. "Is Dianne home?"

"Yes," Jack stammered, filled with awe at being in the presence of a real cowboy. Ever since he saw his first cowboy movie, Jack had wanted to be a cowboy. He was overjoyed when the Elliott family moved to Texas in 1950. They had arrived just in time to start school, but he had yet to meet a real cowboy. The way the movies depicted the West, everyone in Texas was a cowboy. He knew some men who wore cowboy boots were not the real thing. They wore them just for show. This was the first real cowboy he had seen in person. "Come in. Have a seat. I'm Jack, Dianne's brother," he said, then ran down the hallway to his sister's room.

"Dianne, your boyfriend is here!" Jack yelled through the closed door. He used the word boyfriend because he knew it would rile her.

"Shut up, Jack," Dianne responded in anger. "Tell him I'll be out soon. And don't call him my 'boyfriend!'"

Jack went back to the living room and sat across from his new idol. He couldn't help staring at Frank. He was close shaven with lines around his eyes from squinting at the sun while herding cattle on the back of his palomino horse, Jack knew for sure. Yet he also knew that he must be only eighteen or nineteen years old or his sister would not have been allowed to date him. Frank had an easy smile and Jack liked him at first sight, even though he was dating his dumb sister.

"May I get you something to drink, Mr. Rollin?" Jack asked timidly.

"Naw, Jack," he replied. "Please call me Frank. What's your favorite game?"

"I like shooting marbles best of all." Jack was a fair marble shooter and had a large bag of winnings to prove it.

"That's great, Jack. Have you ever played poker?" If Jack had not believed he was a true cowboy before, this proved it. In the movies, the cowboys always played poker in their spare time.

"No. I don't know how to play poker, but I'd like to learn."

"Great. I'll show you. Do you have a deck of cards?" Jack ran and got the cards out of the dining room drawer, praying his sister would take her time. Frank shuffled the cards expertly, ruffling them forward and backward.

"Can you show me how to do that, Frank?"

"Sure, but let's learn the game first." He explained the order of succession, from a pair to a royal flush.

"Ready to play?" he asked as he started dealing the cards face down. "Five card draw is the easiest one to start with."

They started playing and, to Jack's surprise, he was winning. Pennies were used to bet, and Frank even supplied Jack five to start with. In the midst of a game, Dianne appeared in all her glory, but Frank was intent on a decision to raise or just meet Jack's bet. Jack saw, out of the corner of his eye, Dianne begin to fume. Whenever she became angry, she turned red around her neck and face, which spoiled her rather pretty looks. Dianne had a nice smile when she used it, long brunette hair and brown eyes. She was even wearing her best spring dress. It was yellow with little green butterflies. Even Jack had to admit, though he'd never tell her, she looked good in it. A few minutes later, when the play was finished, Frank stood.

"Dianne, I hope you will excuse me for being so engrossed in the poker game. I was just teaching your brother." Frank's speech flowed with a soft Texan drawl that was smooth. It seemed to placate Dianne.

"That's all right," she said with a blush and her best smile. "I'm sorry I was late getting ready."

"Are you ready to go?" Frank asked. Dianne nodded, and Jack said to Frank,

"Wait. Let me return the money you lent me to play with."

“Never mind Jack,” Frank said. “You won it square. Save it for next time.” After they left, Jack went and looked into the full-length mirror in the hall. What he saw was a kid wearing flannel pants and a short-sleeved shirt. He attempted to picture himself dressed in a Stetson hat and he sighed. His big ears sticking out from his head would spoil its looks. Jack's hazel eyes were his best feature, he thought. He felt his cheeks for hair, but there was nothing he could shave yet.

And he was short. Jack knew he would never be as tall as Frank. But wasn't Billy the Kid short? Maybe with cowboy boots on, he might look taller. Sighing again, he knew he would never be a cowboy.

To Dianne's consternation, they played poker every time Frank came over. He discovered that the faster he disappeared right after Dianne came out the more money he won. So Jack made a habit of going to the corner drug store for a cherry phosphate. He figured if Frank wanted to let him win, it was not his problem.

“What’s a cherry phosphate?” Austin asked. “That was like a cherry soda, but was best known for curing an uneasy stomach. I liked it better than a cherry coke. Now, back to the story.”

The next few months Jack and Frank became good friends. Frank was finishing his freshman year at Texas A & M and told Jack stories of the hazing he had to undergo as a freshman. "The seniors beat the juniors, the juniors beat the sophomores, and the sophomores beat the freshmen. Well," he sighed, "after this year I'll only have two years to go before I'm out of it all."

During one of many poker games, Frank told of his experiences on the ranch. Jack listened wide eyed to every word. Cutting out cattle,

branding the new calves, the annual roundup were all very interesting, but the story that stuck most in his mind was the ghost.

"We've had some trouble over the past two years because our herd seems to be getting smaller rather than larger. I think we have rustlers that are somehow stealing our cattle. But according to some of our ranch hands, a ghost has been taking them." Frank laughed as Jack dealt another poker hand.

"A ghost?" Jack stopped dealing and looked Frank in the eyes, attempting to find out if he was being teased. "You really mean it?"

"I'm not kidding," Frank continued as he looked through the cards in his new hand. "This ghost is supposed to be Don Cuerno de Vaca, a Spanish grandee who owned most of southwest Texas. When the Texas Republic overthrew Mexico, Cuerno de Vaca was killed in the fighting and his land was divided and sold." Frank threw two cards face down.

"I'll have two," he continued as Jack considered his own hand. "My great, great, great grandfather bought a lot of this land and we still own some of it." Jack threw down three cards, dealt Frank two and himself three.

"And?" he asked as he looked at his new cards. Frank was quiet for a few minutes as he considered his hand. He frowned and then continued.

"And over the years there have been many sightings of Cuerno de Vaca riding across the range on a ghostly white horse. Some have even said they hear him moaning near the corral on nights when the moon is full."

Jack raised his bet and asked, "Did you ever hear the ghost?"

"Nope, I never did," Frank said, raised his bet again and called. Jack revealed his hand and grinned. Three aces were staring up from the table.

"Got ya!" said Frank as he placed three deuces and two sevens next to Jack's cards. "I knew you would fall for that frown I gave you. Never trust the face of your opponent. Bluffing is part of the game." Frank picked up seven cents, his winnings. "Anyway, I think it's all rubbish."

"Bluffing?" asked Jack, confused.

"No, partner," Frank continued, beginning to shuffle the cards. "I don't believe the ghost story."

That night Jack dreamed that a ghost wearing armor and riding a white horse was chasing him. He got so near Jack could hear the armor clatter and clang as Don Cuerno de Vaca galloped after him. Jack knew he was doomed. He turned and looked over his shoulder as he tried to run even faster. The ghost was nearing him, his long white goatee blowing back over his armor, his mouth in rictus, a silent grin and coals of fire burning in his vacant eyes.

Jack woke up in a sweat. He punched his pillow and pulled the covers over his head.