

A History Of Blood

A Short Story In Contemporary Western Fiction

By

W. Michael Farmer

Something black, about the size of a sombrero, shimmered on the sand. Its crinkled, shiny surface casting a thousand glints, pulled Newt's attention off the path. The same stuff was scattered on surrounding creosotes and weeds. Running shoe tracks from the south lead to the spot, stopped, turned and went back along their original path.

Flexing his painful, arthritic knees, he scooped up sand covered with the stuff and rubbed it between the tips of his fingers and his thumb. He sniffed a faint, oddly familiar odor of iron. Sticky, in the early light it had a dark red tint. Blood.

Finding a straight weed stem, he probed the depth of the spot's center. At seven or eight inches deep, the blood-soaked sand held a lot of blood. Leaning on his walking staff, he studied the scene, memorizing its details. He paused, his rheumy blue eyes staring at the far desert horizon. A sense of déjà vu made his stomach feel like he was falling, uncertain where he'd land or where he'd started.

The old stage road he followed led to the edge of a subdivision nibbling away at the desert's edge. On the walk back, he tried to remember where he'd seen blood-soaked sand like that spot before. The memory stayed hidden. Walking a wide paved street, he stopped to get the morning paper tossed in front of his small house filled with mementos from long-gone ranching years, walls covered with photographs of Katie and their children, his ancient rocking chair, and books he had collected since he was a boy.

He waited until he made a pot of coffee and poured a cup before he called the sheriff. A long-familiar voice answered. "Stoddard."

The two old friends made small talk until Newt remembered why he called.

"Charlie, main reason I called was to tell yuh about this big blood spot I found close to my walkin' path on the old stage road this mornin'. It was..."

Charlie leaned back in his chair and took time to listen to Newt rattle on. A man Newt's age was due some respect and Charlie gave it to him. Getting to the end of his ramble, Newt asked, "Yuh wanna see it?"

“I’m tied up with a hot case right now, Newt. I’ll try to get over there after lunch.”

“Okay. Come when yuh can. I ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

Newt picked up his paper and dropped in his rocker. Drinking his coffee, he read the headline story about an attorney who had disappeared in the middle of a trial. The memory for which he’d been searching drifted out of the haze. Groaning with effort, he pushed himself out of the rocker and padded down the hall in his socked feet to his collection of books. He found the memory in the third volume he pulled off the shelf.

Reading as he went back to the rocker, he paused, stared at the page, and then turned back down the hall. He scanned the shelves until he found a little book on town history from the old days until four or five years past. Returning to his rocker, he read chapters in them both until he dozed off, the first book opened face down on his chest.

The ringing telephone interrupted his siesta.

“Hey, Newt! Charlie here. You got time for me to come take a look at your bloody sand?”

“Charlie, if there’s anything I got these days its time, but it’s runnin’ out fast. Come on.”

“Be there in thirty minutes.”

Charlie’s shiny new SUV covered in sheriff’s office war paint pulled in Newt’s drive. He helped Newt climb into the high front seat and drove down the old stage road. Its sandy ruts snaking out across the desert like bits of brown rope, it appeared the old road hadn’t been used for anything except walking or cycling since stagecoach days. After a couple of miles of pointing out where to avoid deep, soft sand places in the ruts and swapping stories about the old days, Newt told him to stop.

Charlie grimaced. “You’re right Newt, that is a lot of blood.” Before starting work, he went back to the SUV, got his digital camera, a tape measure, and a DNA sample kit. He put up a yellow tape crime scene barrier on a twenty-yard radius around the blood spot, took several hundred pictures, measured and probed, and collected a large sample of blood-soaked sand.

On the way back to the paved roads, he pumped Newt for anything he could remember about the scene when he first found it. Newt gave him an impressive, detailed description of scene details.

When he finished, he cut his eyes over to Charlie. “This here is about that lawyer missin’ in the middle of the trial, ain’t it? That feller lives down the street from me. I seen him walkin’ a lot of times in the early evenin’.”

Charlie scratched his jaw thinking and then nodded. “Yeah, it’s about F. John Darden. Judge says if he ain’t back in a couple of days, he’s gonna have to toss the Moss case out and call it a mistrial.”

“I was readin’ about it in the paper this mornin’. Moss, ain’t he related to the Moss family that goes way back around here? Big speculator and real estate development buzzard, ain’t that the one?”

“Yep, one in the same.”

“How long’s Darden been missin’?”

“His wife called us two days ago when he didn’t come back from his walk and didn’t show up in court. He just up and disappeared. We haven’t been able to find hide nor hair of him since we started lookin’. Any chance you missed that spot for a couple of days before you found it?”

“Well, I ain’t been out walkin’ on that stage road fer three days before this ‘un. Been up to Albuquerque visitin’ my first son. What’d Moss do that Darden’s a prosecutin’ him?”

“Swindling and extortion to get the mineral rights from some folks out west of town. Darden’s associates say he had an airtight case on the charges and Moss was headed straight for the state pen. There was just the little matter of a trial to get out of the way first.”

“So you think Moss did Darden? Just so he’d beat the charges?”

“Don’t know. We haven’t even found a corpus delecti.”

“A what?”

“A corpus delecti, a body. Without a body, we don’t know for sure if Darden just left or somebody did him in. A DNA blood test will tell us if that’s his blood in the sand. If it is, that much blood is about as good as a body to prove he was done in. That’d make old Moss our leading suspect. But I bet he has a bullet proof alibi for where he was when Darden disappeared.”

“If it is Darden’s blood, you gonna tell me?”

“Yes, sir. If anybody deserves to know, it’s you. How about coming down to the office sometime tomorrow? We need a formal statement of what you just told me.”

“Shore, I can do that.”

Two days later Charlie told Newt the blood was Darden’s. A week went by as reporter and deputy SUVs made the ruts deep and wide on the stretch of stage road to the blood spot. Pictures in the paper showed deputies investigating the blood spot and tracks to it. Local television news stations tracked case progress every night.

Backed into a corner during an interview on Channel 2, Charlie told the reporters that Moss was ‘a person of interest’ but refused to say more. He told Newt in private that none of the evidence tied anyone to the scene.

Moss’s attorney was on television everyday preaching his client’s innocence. “...It’s ridiculous to think he’d murder Mr. Darden...the tracks leading to and away from the spot must belong to the murderers...no murder has yet been proved and no body has yet been produced...the sheriff is just trying to railroad Mr. Moss...”

Newt watched the evening news and thought about whether he ought to tell Charlie his theory of the case. It required a big stretch of the imagination.

Charlie’s answered his telephone on the second ring. “Stoddard.”

“Charlie! Figured out the blood?”

“Well, howdy, Newt. No, sir, we’re running out of ideas and are short on evidence for this one. Dogs followed the tracks from the blood over to the next paved road and lost the scent. We’ve searched the ground inch by inch inside a twenty-yard radius around the spot and didn’t find a thing. An expert says the tracks were made by about size ten Air Jordan Nikes and the wearer weighted about 210 pounds coming and going. That’s about all we have. Why?”

“Want a new idea?”

Charlie leaned back and grinned. “Any of your ideas are welcome, Newt.”

“Yuh know that big green soap weed on the north side of the road ‘bout fifty yards down the path from the blood?”

“Yeah?”

“Scratch in the dirt around it, yuh’ll likely find some empty cartridges.”

Charlie frowned. “Why?”

“I’ll tell yuh after yuh look. It’s likely if yuh go a few yards north from the weed yuh’ll find some horse tracks that’ll lead yuh to another road about a half mile away. I walk that ‘un too once in a while. It parallels the stage road and that’s where them horse tracks will disappear. Moss, or somebody who worked for him, did the deed.”

“Newt, where’d you get all this information? Have you been holdin’ out on me? Maybe messin’ around the crime scene and found somethin’ we missed?”

Newt grinned and shook his head. “Naw, naw not so’s you’d think it. I just remembered a little inside information that give me an idea. Yuh gonna foller it up or not?”

Charlie rubbed his forehead and stared at the stack of reports on his desk leading nowhere. He sighed. “Okay, Newt, I’ll check it out. We’ve run out our string here and I need an excuse to get out of the office for a while.”

“I’m a thinkin’ I got this ‘un right, Charlie. Just go see if I ain’t.”

Two days later, the doorbell jolted Newt out of his afternoon siesta. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes and scratching his three-day beard, he looked through the front window curtains and saw Charlie standing on the porch, shivering in the wind.

As Newt pulled the door open, Charlie said in a voice that could be heard all over the neighborhood, “You old coot! You were dead on the money. How’d you figure all that out?”

Newt’s grin pushed eighty years worth of wrinkles back toward his ears. “Come on in. I’ll show yuh.”

They sat at the kitchen table sipping cups of coffee. Charlie’s fingers beat a tattoo on a placemat while Newt hunched over a dog-eared book flipping its pages back and forth looking for a passage to show Charlie.

“Come on, Newt! Quit screwing around with that old book. Tell me how you figured all that stuff out.”

Newt quit flipping the pages and stared, as though in a trance, at the desert toward the stage road.

“Newt?”

Newt shook his head as if awakening from a dream. “Sorry Charlie, just thinking how things go in circles.

“Let’s see, yuh was askin’ how I figured out them ideas I give yuh? Well, sir, when I first saw that blood, I had the strangest feelin’ I’d seen it all before. Later that day, it hit me...” Newt waved the book he’d been searching.

Charlie waved his hand to hurry him along. “And?”

“I hadn’t seen it before. I read it about. This here book tells about a murder around the turn of the century. A prosecuting lawyer just up and disappeared, his body’s never found. A posse out lookin’ fer him found a big pool of blood on the side of the road where he’s last seen. There was a set of tracks that led straight toward a ranch ten or twelve miles away. Ever’body thought the rancher done it cause the lawyer had indictments against him fer rustlin’. The Territory tried the rancher fer the murder. Of course, he swore up and down he didn’t do it. The only evidence the prosecution had was circumstantial. Didn’t take no time fer the jury to declare the rancher not guilty.”

Charlie scratched his jaw. “Okay, so both cases are similar in that they each have blood by the side of the road and the body is missin’. What made you think to look for empty shells behind that soap weed?”

“The posse found empty shells, get this Charlie, behind a big soap weed not fifty yards from the blood – by the way, that blood spot was about the same size as this ‘un.”

Charlie crossed his arms and cocked his head to one side. “What about the horse tracks?”

Newt nodded. “Smart man described how he believed the murder actually happened in this here book. He says the real murderers loaded up the body on a horse and took off in the opposite direction while a couple of their compadres wiped out their tracks and then rode off toward that ranch makin’ tracks to frame the rancher and lead the posse in the wrong direction. Since there ain’t no body this time, either, I figured yore killers musta done about the same thing. Them tracks up next to the blood spot was to get you lookin’ in the wrong direction and blaming the wrong folks. And it worked too, didn’t it?”

Newt studied Charlie's frown before asking, "So how'd yuh prove Moss was behind Darden's murder?"

Charlie made a clicking sound, pointed a finger pistol at him and grinned. "State lab found a thumb print from a Moss hired man on one of the shells under the soap weed and there were traces of Darden's blood in Moss's horse trailer. When we started squeezin' the hired man with the evidence, it didn't take long for him to start babblin' about how Moss had paid him and three others to get rid of Darden.

"Fess up Newt, what convinced you Moss did it?"

Newt sighed and shook his head. "You ain't gonna believe this, but this book says Moss's great granddaddy was the real killer, not the feller they tried to hang..."

Charlie's jaw dropped. "You're yankin' my chain!"

"No, sir, I ain't. I figured it had to be Moss soon as I read in this other book here he was old man Moss's great grandson."

"Why'd you think that? Murder isn't genetic."

Newt crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair grinning. "Well, Charlie, it's like the Bible says, sins of the fathers is visited on the sons. Moss most likely figured if his great granddaddy was smart enough to get away with killin' his prosecutor, he was too. Besides, don't you believe hist'ry repeats itself?"

Charlie nodded and laughed out loud. "I do now."