

A desert landscape featuring a large, flat-topped rock formation in the background. In the foreground, a wooden wagon with large, spoked red wheels is parked on a dirt path. The ground is covered with sparse, green and brown vegetation. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

C'EST LA VIE

A SHORT STORY

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by

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I leaned back in my chair, with my dusty boots propped up on the empty desk and held up the yellowing envelope that had arrived by messenger. It had the mayor's office stamp, and my name scrawled across the front. I had been expecting the letter, just not quite so soon. The world outside my office doors had been getting more dangerous, and unfortunately, I was getting older. The circulating whispers around Jessup Flats were about how long I could do the job, partly from what I imagine was seeing nearby towns with younger and younger sheriffs. But to me, it was less about my age and more about the fact La Vie was still causing havoc in these parts after an entire year, despite my best attempts to the contrary to stop him.

I already knew what the letter would say without having to open it, but I hoped I was wrong. With the flick of my belt knife, I slit the envelope open and shook out the folded letter. After scanning the contents, I balled them up and threw them into a corner beyond the two jail cells we had.

They wanted me to retire, turn in my badge after some 20 years of service so some younger blood could come in and take out La Vie for good. It stung, like a briar in the backside. The same people I spilled sweat and blood for were ready to turn me out to pasture. Jessup Flats wasn't big as towns went, with a population shy of 300, but it did have some wealthy folks living there. Most of them lived outside the city limits, but their wealth resided in the only bank in town, the same one La Vie kept targeting, and it made them mighty nervous each time he struck.

La Vie had a reputation for being tenacious and getting what he wanted. My deputies and I had foiled his only direct attempt on the bank, a rare accomplishment if the stories are right, but that hadn't stopped him from sticking up any stagecoach bound for the

bank or leaving it. In the mayor's estimation, along with the wealthy townsfolk, they felt it was only a matter of time before he tried for the bank again. They were probably right. La Vie had been the only stain on my record, and it stuck in my craw. I suppose he felt the same way about me for that same reason.

I slid open the desk drawer to my right, pulled out the half empty bottle of whiskey and the shot glass I kept there. The label had since faded on the bottle but the burn that amber liquid produced never had. With the prospect of retirement, it was a burn I needed. I'd nearly lost my life more times than I could count doing this job, but I couldn't imagine myself doing anything else, especially with La Vie still on the loose. Could I turn in my badge and live with myself without catching him first? I didn't know, but retirement was coming, whether I liked it or not.

I pulled out the cork with my teeth and poured myself a shot. No sooner had that amber heat hit the back of my throat, my thin skeleton of a deputy threw open the front door all excited like holding his flat-topped Stetson hat to his head. Dust covered every portion of him, like everything in these parts.

"Boss! It's La Vie. He just robbed the bank and is high tailing it out of town."

Irritated, I slammed my fist down on the desk. "Damnation." In the past, I would have run out that door and chased after La Vie myself, but the letter from the mayor's office made me take pause. I didn't have to do this job anymore. They already thought I couldn't stop him so why try? I could tell the deputy to go after him, remain here and be safe, retire like they wanted me to do.

"Boss?" There was a frantic urgency to the deputy's voice.

My eyes shifted to the crumpled-up letter in the corner, and I frowned. They were getting in my head, and I didn't like it. What they wanted me to do didn't matter. I still had my badge, and so long as I had it, I had a duty to uphold. And by damn, I was going to do it.

"Get my horse! And round up the others, we got ourselves an outlaw to catch."

The deputy bobbed his head and tore out of sight. If I was going to be forced to retire, so be it. But by god, I was going to see that La Vie saw justice first or die trying. Who the hell wants to retire and die of old age anyway? I grabbed my hat off the wall next to the door, the same one where La Vie's wanted poster hung, strapped on my gun belt and stepped out into the empty street ready to face whatever my fate was going to be.

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The trail of dust up ahead said we were catching up to La Vie. I could taste the anticipation like I could the thick dust in the air. The leather reins scrunched beneath white knuckles as I dug my hooks into my horse, trying to spur it to go faster. The boys were several horse lengths behind me, greenhorns the lot of them. Outside of town, there wasn't much to see. Except for a few cacti and dried up bushes, there was only flat sandy ground as far as the eye could see. The heat waves coming off that ground made everything in the distance look like it was moving. Without warning, the road in front of me exploded and rained down dirt in all directions.

My horse reared in the chaos, and I had a devil of a time regaining control of the beast. By the time I had, more explosions had gone off. "Hell-fire, he's got dynamite! Keep your eyes open!"

Between the debris and dust, the pits he made in the road were hard to spot. One by one those pits swallowed up my boys. My

deputy and I were the only ones still riding. La Vie must have run out of dynamite because soon after the explosions stopped, bullets zitted by.

I heard a yelp behind me and knew what had happened before I looked back. My deputy laid sprawled on the ground, his horse down next to him. Part of me wanted to stop and check on him to see if it was fatal or not but if I did, I knew I'd lose my chance to get La Vie and that was something I couldn't let happen. I decided to use that trail of dust he kicked up to my advantage instead of his.

Using it to hide my approach, I pulled my horse alongside the wagon and saw La Vie sitting in the driver's seat wearing a black duster, hands whipping the reins. He occasionally kept looking back trying to spot me but hadn't yet. When he wasn't looking back, I climbed up onto my saddle and levered myself into the back of the wagon. It contained a now empty wooden crate that had held the dynamite and a slew of smaller chests about the length of my boot, presumably the small fortune he had stolen from the bank. As my horse pulled away from the wagon, I brandished my gun and thumbed the hammer back. "Pull it over, La Vie! I'm bringing you in!"

La Vie looked back at me; sweat rolled down his pitted face. "Lawman! How in Sam Hill did you-"

But before he finished his statement, he jerked the reins, and the wagon swerved causing my footing to go out from beneath me. I had to grab hold of the edge to keep from going over. The wagon veered again, this time the opposite way, but I held on. La Vie growled and pulled his six-shooter, firing a few stray shots in my direction.

I ducked away from his line of sight long enough to get closer to him before he squeezed off another shot. He got off two more

shots before I finally reached him and pressed my gun into his back.
“Drop it.”

La Vie complied, and the gun fell from his hand, down to the moving ground below. “Now pull it over, La Vie.” He stiffened as I pulled back the hammer. “Don’t make me tell you again.”

La Vie pulled back on the reins until the wagon came to a full stop.

“Now stand up slowly, hands to the sky.”

The outlaw cracked his neck by tilting it side to side and did as instructed. Once standing he turned around to face me. La Vie spat a wad of tobacco juice and shook his head. “You don’t think you can actually win this, do you, lawman?”

I motioned with my gun for him to jump down from the wagon. “It’s not about winning. It’s about keeping this town safe. We can’t keep doing this, you and me. It’s gone on far too long already.”

His brown eyes went to my gun and my face as if judging what I’d do. “In that regard, I agree. It has gone on far too long for my taste. You just keep getting in my way, lawman and one day it’s going to get you killed.”

“Maybe so but while I still have this badge, I’m going to always be between you and my town. Step down, La Vie. Now.” I motioned again with my gun once more.

La Vie scowled and spat again before finally jumping down to the ground below. As soon as he hit the ground, he went for his right boot. I didn’t know if he had a gun or a knife there, but I knew I couldn’t let him draw whatever it was. Shooting a man in the back wasn’t my style, and there wasn’t time to holster my weapon. I did the only thing I could do and jumped out of the wagon, tackling him

to the ground. The small derringer pistol he had pulled from his boot skittered away as we both crashed into the sunbaked clay and sand below. He grunted from the impact but belted me with his fist before I could land one myself, causing my vision to swim. La Vie had one hell of a punch.

We rolled in the sandy dirt, struggling against each other. He tried to pull the gun from my hand, but I wouldn't let him have it. We rolled again, this time with him ending up on top. With one hand trying the wrestle the gun away from me, he slammed his other fist into my shoulder, an attempt to force me to drop it. Pain shot up my arm, and my grip on the firearm faltered. He made a scramble for the gun as it fell, and I used that chance to roll him away from it.

We exchanged a few more blows during our struggle, all the while vying for my dropped gun or his derringer that wasn't far away. Though it hurt like hell, when I saw my chance, I cracked my forehead against his and grabbed my gun. La Vie lunged for it, but it was too late. I struck him across the temple with the butt of the gun, and he dropped to the ground beside me. A thin spiderweb of blood trickled down from where I'd struck him. I waited for a few heartbeats to be sure he was out and let out a long breath. "Damn, that was harder than it had to be."

I got to my feet, collected his derringer, and brushed myself off. As I didn't have any handcuffs on me, I used a little bit of the rope from the back of the wagon to tie up La Vie. I dragged him over to it by his boots, hefted him over my now sore shoulder and plopped him down into the back. After all this time, I had finally caught the man I'd been after. It felt better than I imagined it would. I'd almost go as far as to say I was downright happy.

I climbed up in the front seat of the wagon and turned it around. I wasn't too concerned about my horse, who had gone

meandering off in the distance. He'd find his way back, and if not, I'd have someone come to look for him.

On the way back to town, I found my deputy in good spirits, though he sported a tied bandana around his arm where La Vie had shot him. His horse laid motionless nearby, and one of its legs was at an unnatural angle. It looked as if he had to put it down, the poor thing. "You alright, Emmett?"

"Yeah, boss. I'll have the doc look at it when we get back to town. What about you?"

I thumbed over my shoulder, and he peaked inside the wagon. "Woo-doggy. We finally got him. About dang time."

I understood how he felt. "My horse is up the road a bit. You think you can go collect him?"

My deputy tapped the front of his hat, giving a salute of sorts with his forefinger. "Oh, I sent the rest of the boys on back to town to get looked at. I think they only have bumps and bruises, but the doc will say for sure."

"That'll do. Make sure the doc looks at you too and then come to see me when you get done."

My deputy gave me another forefinger salute. "Yes, sir."

In no time at all, I had pulled the wagon to a stop in front of the bank. All the townsfolk on the streets had stopped to gawk, pointing fingers in my direction and talking to one another. I jumped down off the wagon and opened the back. All the chests were still there, but La Vie wasn't. "Damnation." I slammed my fists down on the wagon and shook my head. That devil had escaped again. I had been so close this time too. I wasn't sure what the town would think of me, money in hand but without the outlaw who took it. I guess it didn't

matter. I would see him behind bars if it was the last thing I ever did,
retirement be damned.

THE END

NOTE: This story first appeared in [Frontier Tales](#) in June 2019.