

# From the short story collection, "People of the West: A Short Story Timeline"

## Lucky

By D.M. McGowan

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His first conscious thought was that he was soaked to the skin. Opening his eyes, he discovered that he was laying on rocks and mud while a hard, warm rain pounded down. He appeared to be laying along the bottom of a steep-sided ravine, his head pointing down hill. However, he had no idea how he got there. For that matter, there was very little he did remember, including his name.

It felt like a six-inch rock was digging into his shoulder blade. When he tried to move off the rock, pain shot up through his left leg and exploded in his hip. He froze immediately, but not before a scream had been torn from his throat.

Looking down at his foot he could see it lay at an impossible angle. Obviously, the lower leg was broken just above the ankle. He dropped his head back into the mud.

"I'm in the mountains in the rain with a broken leg," he said aloud. He raised his head slightly and looked up beyond his feet toward the head of the ravine. "And this is probably one of those mountain stream beds that will become a rushing torrent during a rain storm." Dropping his head back in the mud, he added, "Looks like it's my lucky day."

*'Why did I say that?'* he asked himself. *'Is luck something that's important to me?'*

"Hey! You alive?"

He swung his head around looking for the source of the voice. There appeared to be some movement by a large rock that jutted out near the top of the right-hand bank.

"I feel wet, hurt, and lost," he hollered back, "and I can hear you. I suspect I'm alive." In a lower tone he added, "Then again, perhaps this is meant to be my eventual destination."

"I'll throw you a rope," called the voice from above.

"Don't think it will do much good. I don't think I could hang onto it very long. My leg's broken."

There was a short pause, then the voice said, "I'll have t' go down hill an' work back up the gully. Be awhile."

He propped himself up on one elbow and looked again at the twisted leg. "I believe I shall wait right here for you," he said softly, and then realized that he should acknowledge that he understood. "Thank you," he hollered. He reached around to remove the offending rock from his resting place but it would not budge. Gently he lay back on it.

Several moments later he swung his head to look at the small stream that had formed beside him. *'You'd better hurry, stranger,'* he thought. *'If this rain keeps up there's likely to be slightly more than a trickle of water running through here.'*

*'How did I come to know that?'* he asked himself. *'Was I raised in the mountains, or did someone tell me to steer clear of mountain ravines during a rain storm?'* He closed his eyes against the throbbing that had started in his leg.

Suddenly a picture came into his mind as clear as if he was actually there. Someone was dealing cards onto a large round table. Three men stood by a bar on the opposite side of the room, each of them with their hands on drinks. The bartender was polishing glasses.

One of the men sitting at the table was picking up the cards that had been dealt to him. "I tell you, Lucky," he said, "you find yourself in the mountains when it's rainin', you got to get t' high ground. Ever little hole is gonna fill up with water. It don't last long, mind, but runs right off. You get caught in one o' them floods though, an' it won't matter t' you when the water runs off, 'cause you'll already be dead. Drowned 'r washed over a cliff."

The picture faded and he found himself still lying on his back in the mud and rain. *'So, I probably know to avoid these places because of something someone told me'* he thought.

"Spect that leg's painful," a voice said.

He turned his head to see a man with a full gray beard and long gray hair under a wide-brimmed, high-crowned and battered hat. The stranger's shirt was of faded red cotton and covered by a leather vest. The pants were of heavy wool and held up by the same belt that held a holstered pistol and knife.

"Mostly it aches enough to make me sick," he responded. Suddenly it seemed to ache more than it had over the past several minutes. Perhaps it was because he had turned sharply to look at the stranger, or perhaps it was only because the broken bone had been brought to his attention.

"Name's Orton Gilles," the stranger said, dropping some saplings on the ground. He pointed at the sticks he had cut and added, "We'll use these t' splint 'er up." He knelt down, slipped the Bowie knife from the sheath on his left side and began cutting the pant leg away.

There was a flash of light and thunder rolled across the hills.

With the pant leg cut away, Gilles began laying the sticks close to the leg. As he began to cut the cloth into strips, he asked, "You got one?"

The same picture returned to his mind. The same voice was saying, "Now, when there's lightnin', that's another thing. Stay off the high ground. Up high like that, she's liable t' cook you. Folks 'll think you're a well-done roast and start cuttin' pieces off yuh."

He looked at Gilles for a moment, puzzled. "I'm afraid I don't understand. Do I have one?"

"A name."

"Oh, sorry. I'm not sure." He thought about the scene that had run through his mind. "I think it might be Lucky. Nickname I suppose."

"You ain't sure?" Gilles asked. "Don't seem reasonable. Man should know his own name."

Lucky smiled. "Well, I may have known it at one time, but right now I don't remember much before waking up right here with the rain beating down on me and a rock digging into my back."

"An' a broke leg," Gilles added.

"Mr. Gilles, I appreciate what you are doing. However, I would be much further in your debt if you could refrain from mentioning my skeletal imperfections." He tried to smile but it was a poor effort, "Each time you bring it up, it seems the discomfort also rises."

"Hell, I 'spect you're still in shock," Gilles said. "Give it awhile an' you'll know what it means to hurt." Gently he placed one hand below Lucky's knee and one above the ankle. "Don't much like that mister stuff," he said casually, and almost too low to be heard above the rain, making Lucky strain to hear. "Folks call me Ort." Suddenly he straightened the leg.

Lucky screamed.

*People of the West: A short story timeline*

**Nine** short stories and **twelve** rhymes covering a span of 170 years.

What has changed from the 1790s to the 1960s?

Who are some of the people who created what we now see?

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