

Ghost Town

Bleak horizon under a glazed sky, flat desert, clumps of sage, scrub, distant butte, lone rider, This is a land of sand, dry rocks, and dead things. Buzzard country. And he is migrating through it. Because: it is where he is now, and out here there's nothing to stop for, no turning back either, no back to turn to. His lean face is shaded from the sun directly overhead by a round felt hat with a wide brim, dun-colored like the land around, old and crumpled. A neckerchief, probably once red, knotted around his throat, collects what sweat, in his parched saddle-sore state, he sweats. A soft tattered vest, gray shirt, trailworn cowhide chaps over dark jeans tucked into dust-caked boots with pointed toes, all of it busted up and threadbare and rained on, dried out by sun and wind and grimed with dust, that's the picture he makes, forlorn horseman on the desert plain, obstinately plodding along. He wears a wooden-butted six-shooter just under his ribs, a bowie knife with a staghorn handle in his belt, and a rifle dangles, barrel aimed at his partnering shadow on the desert floor, from the saddlehorn. He is leathery and sunburnt and old as the hills. Yet just a kid. Won't ever be anything else.

It wasn't always like this. There were mountains before, a rugged and dangerous terrain, with crags and chasms, raging rivers in deep gorges, and dense forests, unsociably inhabited. He's known rattlesnake bites, grizzly attacks, blizzards and thunderstorms, frostbite, windburn, gnats and mosquitos, wolves,

too, arrow wounds—a black-haired scalp, hair braided with shells and beads, is strung from his gunbelt, though if asked he couldn't say where it came from, just something that happened, must have. Back then, he was maybe chasing someone or something. Or was being chased, some vague threat at his back, that's mostly what he remembers now from that time, an overwhelming feeling of danger, or else of despair, that filled the air whenever the sky darkened or the trail petered out. He had to bury someone on one occasion, as he recalls, someone like a brother, only the dead man in the hole he'd dug wasn't really dead, but kept moving blindly, kicking the dirt away, in fact he was himself the one who kept twisting and turning, the one blindly kicking, he was down in the burial pit with dirt peppering his face, but then he wasn't again, and the one who was crawling out suddenly to flail at the air, flesh sliding off the bone like lard off a hot pan, so he left that place, to go chase someone, or to be chased, or finally just to move on to somewhere else, not to see things like that.

Then one day, climbing up out of a steep canyon cut by a wild frothy river way down below, struggling all the while against some kind of unseen force pressing down on him, almost palpable, as if a big flopping bird were expiring on his chest, having to dismount finally and haul his shying wild-eyed horse up through the last fierce pass, he found himself out upon this vast, empty plain, where nothing seems to have happened yet and yet everything seems already over, done before begun. A space there and not there, like a monumental void, dreadful and ordinary all at once. As if the ground the horse treads, for all its extension, might be paper thin and stretched over nothing. He doesn't expect to come to the end of the world out here, but he doesn't expect not to.

What he's aiming at is a town over on the far horizon, first thing he saw when he rose up out of the canyon. It's still out there, sitting on the edge like a gateway to oblivion. Sometimes it disappears behind a slight rise, then reappears when that rise is reached, often as not even further away to the naked eye, his naked eye, than when last seen, like a receding mirage, which it likely is. Sometimes there's no horizon at all, burned away by the sun's glare or night's sudden erasure, so no town either, and his

goal is more like the memory of a goal, but he keeps moving on and sooner or later it shows itself again, wavering in the distance as if made of a limp sheet that the wind was ruffling. He doesn't know what it's rightly called, nor feels he any need to know it. It's just the place he's going to.

Maybe he dozes off between times, but out here it seems always to be either dark and starcast or else the sun is directly overhead, beating down on him as though fingering him for some forgotten crime, just one condition or its contrary like the two pictures on a magic lantern slide, flickering back and forth, as he opens and closes and opens his eyes. Nothing much could sneak up on him out here in all this emptiness as long as he's mounted above it, so in the saddle is where he does most of his sleeping, his eating too, which is largely confined to the strips of old buffalo jerky, black as tar and half as tasty, that came with the horse. He could use a watering hole, a bit of forage for the beast between his legs, the best prospects for which would seem to be that town on the horizon, unsubstantial though it appears. Out here, nothing but stumpy cactus and tumbleweeds and a few old dry bones, provender unfit for the dead.

Who haunt him, or seem to, whispering at his back like a dry wind with eyes. That feeling of eyes in the air gets so potent at times that he has to stretch round in his saddle to cast his gaze on what's behind him, and one day, bent round like that, he discovers another town on the opposite horizon, a kind of mirror image of the one he's headed toward, as if he were coming from the same place he was 'going. A vapor of the atmosphere, he supposes, but next time he looks it's back there still and clearer than it was before, as if it might be gaining on him. Which is the case, for as the days, if they are days, go on, the town behind him closes upon him even as the one in front recedes, until at last it glides up under his horse's hoofs from behind and proceeds to pass him by even as he ambles forward. He tries to turn his horse around to face this advent, but the creature's course is set and it is clearly past considering further instruction. It's a plain town that comes past, empty and silent, made of the desert itself with a few ramshackle false-fronted frame structures lined up to conjure a street out of the

desolation. Nothing moves in it. In an open window, a lace curtain droops limply, ropes dangle lifelessly from the gallows and hitching posts, the sign over the saloon door hangs heavy in the noontime sun as the blade of an ax. A water trough catches his eye as it drags lazily by, and he spurs the horse forward, but he cannot seem to overtake it. The whole dusty street heaves lazily past like that, leaving him soon at the edge of town and then outside it. He halloos once at the outskirts, but without conviction, and gets no reply, having expected none. He is alone again on the desert. The town slowly slips away ahead of him and grows ever more distant and finally vanishes over the horizon and night falls.

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There's a dull flickering light on the desert floor as if a decaying star has slipped from its rightful place and he follows it to a warmthless campfire where a group of men huddle under serapes and horse blankets, smoking and drinking and chewing, bandits by the look of them.

Look whut the cat drug in, one of them says and spits into the low flame.

Reckon it's human?

Might be. Might not. Turd on a stick more like.

He's just stood in his stirrups to ease himself down out of the saddle, but he changes his mind and rests back down. A tin pot squats at the edge of the smoldering fire, leaning into it as though in mockery of the squatting men and emitting a burnt coffee stink that mingles unfavorably with the viscid reek of burning dung.

It dont make a damn to me, says another without looking up from under the wide floppy hat brim that covers his lowered face, lest I kin neither eat it nor fuck it.

Dont look much good fer one'r tother. Lest mebbe it's one a them transvested pussies.

Yuh reckon? Little shitass dont look very beardy at that.

C'mere, kid. Bend over'n show us yer credentials.

Ifn they aint been down outa that saddle in a spell, I doubt I wishta witness em.

The men hoot drily and spit some more. What's yer game, kid? the one under the floppy hat asks into the fire, his voice gravelly and hollow like one erupting from a fissure in the earth deep below him. Whaddaya hustlin'?

Nuthin. Jist passin through.

That also seems to amuse them all for some reason. Lordy lordy! Jist passin through!

Ifn that dont beat all!

A one-eyed mestizo in a rag blanket lifts a buttock and farts fulminously. Sorry, boys. That one wuz jist passin through.

I thought yuh might point me at some water, the rider says into their humorless laughter. His rifle is off the saddlehorn now and resting on his thighs.

Here, I'm pointin, kid, says a grizzled hunchback with greasy handlebars sloping to his clavicle like a line drawing of the hump behind him. He clutches his crotch and shakes it. C'mere'n have a sup of ole used whuskey.

Just as well to keep moving on, he figures, and to that purpose he gives his mustang a dig in the flanks, but the horse drops its head in solemn abjuration, inclined, it seems, to go no further.

So where yuh passin through to, kid? asks a wizened graybeard in filthy striped pants, red undershirt, and a rumpled derby. Next to him, the man in the floppy hat is deftly rolling shredded tobacco into a thin yellow leaf between knotty fingers.

That town over there.

Yuh dont say.

Wastin yer time, boy. Nuthin over there.

Then nuthin'll hafta do.

Yuh'll never git there, kid.

Aint nuthin but a ghost town.

I'll git there.

Hunh!

Ifn they's any gittin to be done, son, says the graybeard in red skivvies and derby, I'd advise yuh git yer peagreen ass back home agin. Pronto.

Caint do that.

No?

Caint go back.

Floppy hat licks the tobacco leaf, presses it down. Why not, kid? Where yuh from?

Nowheres.

Nobody's from nowheres. Who's yer people?

Aint got none.

Everbody's got people.

I aint.

That's downright worrisome. The man tucks the thin yellow tube away under the hat brim at the same time that a tall ugly gent in a flatcrowned cap, much punctured, and with stiff tangled hair spidering down to his hairy shirt, stuffs a fresh chaw into his jaws and asks him what's his mustang's name.

That's it.

Whut's it?

Mustang.

Shit, that aint much of a name. He spits a gob against the tin pot to fry it there.

Dont need no other.

Dont fuck with me, son. Hoss must have a name.

Ifn he does, he never tole it to me.

That boy's a real smartass, aint he?

Either him or the hoss is.

Tell me, kid, says floppy hat, holding an unstruck match out in front of his fresh-made cigarillo. And I dont want no shit. Whut's yer name?

Whut's yers?

We call him Daddy Dunne, says the humpback with the handlebars. On accounta he dont do no more. And they all laugh bitterly again, all except the man under discussion, who is lighting up.

Why dont yuh git down off that mizzerbul critter and come set with us a spell, says the one-eyed mestizo, unsmiling.

He watches them without expression, knowing what must come next, even while not knowing where that knowing has come from.

That young feller dont seem over friendly.

Looks like he's plumb stuck on that dang animule.

Looks like he's hitched to it.

Is that it, kid? You a hoss-fucker?

Lissen, boy. I ast yuh a question, floppy hat says, straightening up ever so slightly, so the glowing tip of his cigarillo: can be seen in the voided dark beneath the brim, both hands braced, like talons on his kness.

The rider shifts his seat for balance, his finger edging up the rifle stock toward the trigger, and in the fallen silence the saddle creaks audibly like a door suddenly opening under him. And I done answered it, old man, he says.

Nobody moves. There is a long direful stillness during which a wolf howls somewhere and stars fall in a scatter, streaking across the domed dark like flicked butts. Then that dies out, too, and everything stops. It goes on so long, this star-stunned silence, it starts to feel like it won't ever not go on. As if time had quit on them and turned them all to stone. The rider, the horse under him gone rigid and cold, feels his own heart winding down. Only his hands have any action left in them. He uses them, struggling against the torpor that fetters him, to raise his rifle barrel and shoot the man in the floppy hat. The impact explodes into the man's chest and his hat flies off and his mouth lets go the cigarillo and he pitches backwards onto the desert floor. With that, things ease up somewhat, his mustang snorting and shifting under him, the skies awirl once more, the others watching him warily but returned to an animate state, more or less. Chewing. Spitting.

Yuh shouldna done that, kid, grumbles the ugly man with the spidery hair.

He rests the rifle back on his thighs again. Werent my fault. He shoulda drawn.

Shit, sumbitch werent even armed.

He's blind, kid. Stark starin.

Wuz.

The man he's shot lies arms asprawl on the desert floor, staring up at the night sky with eyes, he sees, as white as moons.

Yuh shot an ole unarmed blind man, son. Whaddaya got t'say fer yerself?

He walks his horse over to the dead man, bends down from

the saddle, and picks up the fallen cigarillo. Not a bandit, as he'd supposed, after all. Wearing a sheriff's starry badge, pierced by his rifle shot and black with blood. Probably he should shoot them all. Maybe they expect him to. Instead, he tucks the half-spent cigarillo between his cracked lips, suck on it to recover the glow, and, without a backward glance, quits their wearisome company and slowly rides away.

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It is high noon and the main street of the vaporous town which has been so long eluding him now rolls up under his mustang's plodding hoofs as though in abrupt repair of some mechanical disorder. The street, with its dilapidated gray frame buildings squared off against the boundless desolation, is empty and silent and yet full of dimly heard echoes, a remote disturbance of mumbled voices, swept into town perhaps by the hot desert wind. A saloon sign creaks desultorily in this talking wind, frayed strands of hitching rail rope turn idly, a lace curtain flutters in an open window. Particles of dust gather into airy spirals that dance in the street like hung men with their arms tied behind them and as soon dissolve and then as soon regather to wind about again.

He dismounts and leads his horse to the water trough. Nothing but a dry dust bed in its tin hollow. At one end by a tottering porch column he finds a well pump with a rusty handle, gives it a crank. No resistance. Like wagging a dead man's bones. Under the saloon sign overhead, a small board hangs by two cords with the word ROOMS on it, though it's the crudely lettered COLD BEER notice tacked up over the doorway that gets his attention. Rifle in hand, he steps through the swinging doors into the saloon's dense murk, ready for whatever doesn't happen. The place is dark and empty, hotter inside than out. There's a scatter of tipped chairs and tables, broken lamps, a few empty, dust-caked bottles lying about, but nothing with which to wet the thirst. An old grand piano, one of its legs caved in, sits on its haunches in one corner like a skulking beast showing its wide grinning row of yellowing teeth, its broken wires sprouting wildly like hair

standing on end. A cobwebbed staircase leads up to the dim suggestion of the advertised rooms. No promise there, and that low muttering hum is worse in here, the way the wind is blowing through the shattered windows maybe, so he strolls back out into the glare, sand crunching under his boots on the board floors.

His horse has wandered away toward the edge of town. He can see it far off, head down, rear to the wind. Looking for water probably. He heads that way, but is distracted by a sign painted on the crusted window of an old frame building: GOLD! It says. CLAIMS OFFICE. The door hangs loose on its sprung hinges. Inside, there's a wooden swivel chair and rolltop desk behind a counter, all blanketed by dust laid down over time, and on the counter a stack of cards with the sign: TAKE ONE. He takes the lot, turns them over: a pack of ordinary playing cards, but with coordinates of some kind inked onto each of their faces. He pockets the jack of spades, flings the others at the desk to make the dust erupt, steps back out onto the street.

The mustang has drifted further away, almost out of sight. He tries to whistle it back but his mouth is too dry, so he sets off after it once more, cursing it under his breath. The dusty wind tugs at his hat brim and flaps his raggedy vest in brief irregular gusts, and the horse keeps moving as he moves. As though trying to suck him out of this place. Or into trouble. He watches himself as though from high above as he strides down this street of derelict banks and saloons, hardware, dry goods, and grocery stores, stables and brothels, laid out on the desert floor like two parallel lines drawn on a slate for the practice of handwriting, his passage the looped, crossed, and dotted text inscribed between, signifying nothing, and he is reminded at this high remove of something a lawman once told him in ancient times. Livin a life out here is shit, son. It's got no more meanin than writin in the sand with yer dick when the wind's up. To keep goin on, knowin that, sufferin that, is plain stupid. Loco, in fact. But to keep goin on, in the face a such shit, a such futility and stupidity and craziness—that, son *that* is fuckin *suh-blime*.

This highminded overview is disrupted and he is brought swiftly down to earth again and back behind his own two eyes,

when before those eyes appears, behind a dust-grimed window well beyond the town center, a beautiful woman, very pale, dark hair done up in a tight bun, dressed all in black and staring out at him, as though in judgment, or else in longing. He pauses, holding on to his rifle and hat out there in the middle of the gusty street, transfixed by the inviolable purity of her framed visage, like something dreamt and come to life; but as, in a daze, he steps toward her, she fades back out of sight. He peers in through the window when he reaches it, face to the glass and cupped hand for an eyeshade: a barren room sparsely furnished with a couple of long midget-sized tables and a dozen chairs with their legs sawed down, long since out of use. No sign of the woman. If a woman. Likely not. No more likely than that murmurous drone in his head is really carried on the fiftul wind. It's that damned sun. Getting to him. Still as directly overhead as when first he rode in.

No sign of his horse now either, nothing but another spectral dust devil coming and going where he saw him last. Although in such utter solitude he cannot figure where such a thought might come from, he thinks his horse may have been stolen, or might have allowed itself to be. But then he spies the perverse creature again, back by the saloon, nosing once more the empty trough. Must have circled back when he wasn't looking. He calls to him and the horse looks up at him with a stricken expression, then turns away again. He walks back toward him, boots hurting him now, but the wind gusts briefly, curtaining the street with flying dust, and when it settles the horse is gone again. In its stead, in the sunbaked distance, four or five horsemen come riding in at a slow canter, dust popping in tiny explosions under their horses' hoofs, giving them the impression of approaching on smutched clouds. They pull up at the saloon in dead silence, dismount into their own shadows, hitch their animals to the rail there, and, the tread of their boots on the wooden sidewalk unheard as if they trod on goose feathers, disappear through the swinging doors. Though he knows full well that no good can come of it, he follows them on in.