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THE STORE
A Scenario

A vacant store is a special, total emptiness. From the street, the two display windows of this one, framing the door, appear dull, the grime as if painted on, mapping an impossible terrain, streaked by lunar thoroughfares. Inside, there is only the murky space. No furniture or goods remain: no counters, racks or cases, no signs or showcards. In the dimness, black wires may be made out, their ends split and separately taped, dangling from holes in the plaster ceiling. One could suppose they reached to conduits of power in the world outside the walls, and could bring light.

The man came to the town in the rain, one of those sudden torrents of an arid country that make swamps of wagon roads and dirt streets. In the hills, waves of muddy water rush through dry gullies with killing force, driving boulders on millennial journeys to further rest, answering exquisite purposes. In their holes, the desert animals wait or drown, unquestioning, until the sun returns, baking the surfaces in a haze of steam, making a thin crust to keep a membrane of vital moisture in the earth, under an implacable wind.

Few people took notice as he rode in, man and horse a single figure blurred by the downpour. Stepping carefully in the deep mud, the animal walked slowly the length of the street that was the arrangement of the town, turning at the end as if in response to a signal of the reins.

Later, the blacksmith said the man had simply ridden out of the rain into the livery shed, had paid for stabling the horse without remark or question, and only then had asked about the old store at the end of the street.

The blacksmith went on that he had seen no pack of merchandise, nor any case of instruments for practice of some wanderer's trade. It was near to the season when strangers came to the place, but this man did not have the look of the itinerant drummer or gambler, or of the other familiar flankers of cattle-drives and freighters' wagon-trains.

At first, it was of no more than a moment's interest that someone had rented the store, vacant for so long. And the boy from the cantina,

playing at marching up the street in its direction, the battered lunch-pail hanging from one arm and the worn broom-handle canted over one shoulder like a cavalryman's sabre, was observed as one more sign of the coming seasonal renewal of the town's business.

What the minister's wife, with a mind to her position, later called "the drama", began slowly enough, and without any effort by the man in the store.

A couple of women were the first, walking to the open door as they would come to any store, entering and stopping a few feet inside, gaping in silence at what they saw, turning and rushing out as if bursting with speech, which they could hold no longer than it took to run into the middle of the street, where they babbled indignant questions at each other.

Other women came, in couples or in groups, and then children, hanging back at the door, the boys taunting each other to venture inside, to dare the unspeakable dangers of the place. People hailed each other in the street, asking if they had heard of the dread marvel, or had seen it for themselves.

The men were slower to follow, at first disdaining the shrill complaints of the women, and ignoring the excitement of the children. They arrived towards evening, two or three at a time, at first with some show of self-importance, as they acknowledged the new event of moment in their town.

Each took only a few steps into the store. Most stood in silence, looking around. One or two muttered mild obscenities, before moving to leave. Outside, a few lingered, sharing their puzzlement, and a growing anger.

As dusk fell, the people saw the man light two lamps. And it was later, after nightfall, that the minister strode out of the darkness towards the new beacon at the end of the street.

The minister sensed a sullen resentment, a kind of force, as he approached, the little crowd opening for him as if unclenching, murmurs of greeting rising to a chorus of indignation. As he listened, he said later, he realized that these people were afraid, and did not know what it was they feared, or why.

They were silent as he went up the two steps to the doorway of the store, watching his momentary hesitation there, as he prepared a cordial smile before crossing the worn threshold. As they strained to hear, the sound of his voice dwindled, the familiar resonances lowering to a murmur, then to a silence, that each person heard for himself with dread.

Backing through the doorway, as had most of the men before him, the minister did not turn until he felt the first step to the street. The people were restless but silent as they waited for him to speak.

At last, his eyes staring down at the dirt, he told them to go home, to leave the man in the store alone, to be calm, as whoever was there would soon go away, and all their lives would be as before. He spoke softly, almost in whispers, but all there knew his every word could be heard inside.

It was now night, and the people began to leave, walking in groups, not speaking until they parted, muttering conventional wishes for the night. Soon, the space near the store was empty and silent, and only one man, staggering from the side door of the cantina on his postprandial errand to the shed out back, noticed the lights dimming and vanishing in the store at the end of the street.

Perhaps it was the women badgering the men, as the minister's wife later maintained, recalling the angry challenges and bickering in the houses of the town that night. Or, perhaps it was some braggart wager in the cantina. Or, perhaps just one man taking up the burden of an intolerable novelty, as was suggested, in differing words, by several people who urged, in their own ways, the wish that the life of the town go on without change.

The champion came in mid-morning. The store had been open for several hours. Anyway, the door had been open since dawn, and the boy from the cantina had already taken breakfast to the man inside, and had carried out the coffee pail and utensils he had brought before. But he had not gone back to the cantina, and was standing in the street with the crowd that was gathering, awaiting the inevitable event, whatever it was going to be.

They knew the man well: ranch-hand who sometimes stayed for periods in the town, waiting to join groups driving cattle or horses, or for some rancher or foreman to offer a few months' work. They knew him as someone who did not want to be considered a transient, who often walked the street seeming to seek out people to greet, taking pleasure in exchanging the least commonplaces about the weather or the hour of the day.

He came armed — not only with the revolver so many cattlemen carried at their belts as part of their costume, but cradling in his arms a long fowling-piece, two-barreled, such as farmers used to defend their chickens against hawks and foxes. Some of the men in the street thought such a scattershot weapon was inappropriate and unwarranted, and one or two said so aloud. But the paladin appeared to take comfort or reassurance from the piece, and seemed to have adopted an uncompromising rhetoric about there being vermin in the town to be driven out or exterminated.

He approached the store as if entering to some center-stage, pausing at the door and turning to the crowd with a slight smile, as if listening for applause. A boy snickered as he stepped inside, but the

rest of the people were silent, many actually holding their breath. A few were suddenly reminded of the instant at public hangings, before the gallows' trap-door was tripped open. One or two men remembered the sudden fall of quiet during battles years before, when the batteries of guns behind them ceased firing and the ranks prepared to advance into the hostile air.

Inside, the ranch-hand was first confronted by the absolute emptiness of the space, the sunlight pouring through the doorway seeming to thrust him forward. Vacancy. Empty floor, empty walls, emptiness. Only at the far end of the room, at the back wall, a small, plain table, and what must have been a chair behind it, for there was a figure there, sitting stiffly upright: the stranger who had come in the rain, his sharp, bony features without expression, his deep-set eyes fixed on the man coming in the door, his long-fingered hands resting on the surface before him.

On this, there was only a small stoneware water-pitcher and a huge pistol of a pattern none of the townspeople had seen before. It lay so that the thick barrel, showing four muzzle openings of enormous calibre, was pointed into the room, towards the doorway. Then, as the ranch-hand took one or two steps forward, he could see something on the far wall behind the stranger, a rectangular banner or pennant of black cloth, with plain white tape lettering within straight white tape borders, announcing to the emptiness:

NOTHING IS FOR SALE

The minister had told his wife that it had been the stark explicitness of the sign, as direct, yet ambiguous description of the bare space, that had unnerved him. The gaunt man at the table, the strange weapon close to his hand, had become instantly menacing, his very presence portending a terrible meaning for the emptiness. He said that he suddenly felt the empty room itself as an indictment, and that he, too, felt the cold foreboding he had sensed in the townfolk.

His wife had demurred, observing him with a puzzled frown. What she had seen, she said, when she had visited what she thought would be the first new emporium of the season, was one more lunatic moralizer, another wanderer of the desert country with another mad evangelical message. This time, at least, the prophet did not set up a tent, or demand or request use of the church for proclamation of his gospel. What had sent fear through the bones and viscera of the people, she said, was probably the man's demeanour and appearance, and that unfamiliar armament he had placed before him.

Not the banner, which she thought was only his text, so to speak, on which he would elaborate, one could be certain, if he ever got anyone to attend the preaching he surely was waiting to deliver. She

said she regretted not asking him outright what he was up to, but she had had errands the morning she visited the store, and no idea then of any awesomeness in his presence.

As for the ranch-hand, he plainly had no wish to listen to whatever the figure at the table had to say. As he stepped into the store, several people came to the doorway behind him, and were peering inside. One boy bravely lay down prone across the first step, his head and shoulders over the threshold.

What happened next was understood afterward largely according to his account, as the others at the door each saw only the beginning of the action, leaping out of the way of any lines of gunfire at the first noise and movement in the store.

Of those who actually witnessed this, most agreed that it was the ranch-hand who had made the first move. But the boy insisted, as did several others, that he had only stumbled while stepping backward. The hero, they said, was actually trying to regain his balance, and had begun to raise the deadly shotgun to steady himself on his feet.

But there was less agreement about the shooting that followed, the four explosions coming so close together as to be heard in the street as one, as if a cannon had been fired within the store.

For this, there had been only one eyewitness, and, like it or not, it was the boy's account that had to be acknowledged, if not fully accepted.

And it was part of his story that he did not see the stranger actually take up the giant pistol, but that it seemed to suddenly materialize in his hand, already firing, the moment the shotgun moved in the ranch-hand's arms, both barrels discharging, blasting a large, jagged hole in the planks of one wall of the store before it fell to the floor.

And there were questions raised, again and again, in the whiskey air of the cantina, whether it was the shotgun that had been fired first, either by having its hair-triggers jarred by the ranch-hand's movement or by his trying to point the weapon at the stranger; or whether it was the ranch-hand being struck by bullets as he stumbled, that had set off the long gun. The boy kept saying that he had seen two gouts of flame burst from the great pistol, and that he was certain the stranger had aimed, and could have killed the ranch-hand easily, had he wanted to.

He insisted, further, that he had not observed the pistol being returned to the table. It simply was back in its place, the moment the shooting was over. The stranger sat motionless as before, under the fearsome banner, staring into the empty room while the ranch-hand lay writhing and screaming on the floor, his right elbow and left knee apparently shattered.

Nor did the man in the chair move or change expression as the

boy scrambled to his feet and ran from the store, or when, long minutes later, two men came in from the street, their hands ostentatiously raised before them, and bent to lift the wounded ranch-hand, then hurriedly carried him outside.

It had all happened quickly, and the sun was still high and relentlessly bright as the people scattered in the street. Later, the minister's wife enjoyed remarking that the new storekeeper, who had advertised that he had nothing to sell, had actually driven all his possible customers away. Most who heard her smiled politely, or shrugged.

By evening of that day, it was clear that there had been a change of mind or attitude in the town. It was noticed, for one thing, that the boy from the cantina was again serving the stranger, arriving at the store with food just before dark — although nobody was near enough to see that he put the dinner pail and cup on the floor just inside the doorway, before scurrying off.

The following morning, when the boy carried breakfast to the store, he saw that the empty pail and cup for the previous evening's meal were placed neatly at the doorsill. This time, although he did hesitate, it was only for a moment. Then, he stepped resolutely into the store, walking boldly past the dark stains in the floor-boards to bring the tin plate and chipped coffee pot to the table.

Somehow, too, the stranger's murmured thanks inspired the boy, and he turned and strode proudly from the store. A few hours later, he came back with a mop and bucket of soapy water. He worked earnestly at the stained boards, but it was plain that the marks would remain.

That day and the one after, only the boy from the cantina came to the store, as the stranger continued his vigil in the empty place.

It was the blacksmith who last saw him, at dawn of the fifth day. The stranger, he said, carefully saddled his horse himself, strapping a bulky blanket-roll at the cantle behind. Then, he counted out a number of coins, separating payment for the horse's keep and money for the meals from the cantina and rental of the store. One large coin he requested be given to the boy who had served him.

When the man said goodbye, the blacksmith said, it was almost in a whisper. But his fierce eyes were brilliant, belying calm. He did not look like someone who had completed whatever he had come to do.

Once more, the horse and rider stepped along the street of the town, but this time rode through. As he watched from the corner of his shed, the smith could see the rider pass the last building, the vacant store, and move slowly towards the fork in the road beyond. There, the horse halted, as if pondering a choice of which direction to take. But this was not for long.

And nobody from the town thought it odd in any way that the blacksmith could not say straightly which road the horse and man had taken, or that he put it that they seemed simply to have disappeared, as the brightening sun rose in the empty sky, heating the dry air to turn figures of the desert landscape into wavy shapes in constant motion.