

Loola.

The sheriff looked at him and then through the window at the pecan trees greeting one another in the cold evening breeze and then again at him.

‘Son, are you lookin’ for death?’ he said and he said it the way a concerned father would to his son on the vigil of a terrible war. But Anders Terrance weren’t his son and even if he were he’d have shook his head the same and said ‘No sir, I’m lookin’ to deal it.’

Loola stood in the road and she kicked and neighed and shook her head no.

‘It’s alright, girl,’ said Terrance and he patted her neck and then he said it again and after the third time Loola listened.

They rode for a few days across the dry plains and the sky was troubled and the yellow grass stood no taller than a foot. They came upon a dry riverbed and Terrance was unsure what river it was for he hadn’t been this way for some decades. What little water remained they drank and it tasted like mud but Loola didn’t mind it and so neither did Terrance.

Downriver they found a town by the name of New Margaret and unlike its name might suggest it weren’t young and fine but old and ugly. The saloon was empty save the barkeep who polished a glass for god knows who.

He wore a white shirt and a black vest and a crooked bow-tie around his neck.

‘Pour ya some’n?’ he said and Terrance nodded and the barkeep poured him a beer and it tasted fine.

‘Where’d ya ride from?’

‘Nowhere.’

‘Where ya ridin’ to?’ asked the barkeep and Terrance asked if he’d heard of a man by the name of Wispy Joe and the barkeep looked at him.

‘Ain’t been through here,’ he told him. ‘Only his name.’

‘So he been through there.’

It rained the next day and the day after and the land smelled of minerals and petrichor. There were no roads in these parts ‘cause there was none to ride to and none to ride from. Travel was for the wicked, folks said, and for those who hunted ‘em.

Loola didn’t mind the rain and so neither did Terrance but the air was cold and he worried they might catch a disease. When they came upon a farm Terrance asked if they might stay in the stables and the rancher said fine.

‘You’ll have supper too,’ he said and Terrance agreed even if he didn’t like being fed.

They stayed for three days during which he tended to the farmer’s horses of which there were five and at first they thought him a foe but soon enough they nickered as he brushed their brown coats. When the weather turned he asked the rancher if he’d heard of a man by the name of Wispy Joe and the rancher puffed a smoke ring and said ‘You best be goin’.’

The land became uneven and Loola grew tired of it and Terrance dismounted and walked for twenty miles before

they came upon a fence cut the world in half. For a good while they followed it but then they learned it weren't never gonna end. Terrance was unsure if it meant to keep them out or keep them in but Loola jumped it all the same.

The land became drier until it was a desert except the sand weren't yellow or red but grey. There were no ranches or towns. In fact there weren't much of anything, not even a lone mesquite or creosote bush and no marigolds popping their yellow buds through the moistened soil. There was only sand.

After some days the sun went down and never rose again. There were no stars and there was no moon and yet there was a glow about the earth like a fire burned beneath it. The sand flickered like faint candlelight and Loola didn't like it none but she was a fine horse and she didn't falter and so neither did Terrance. He dismounted and stood in the soil for some time. He listened to the wind and asked if it had heard of a man by the name of Wispy Joe and when after some time the wind didn't answer Terrance mounted up and rode on.

There was a quiet about the desert unlike any quiet he'd heard before and Terrance knew trouble was a-comin' long before it came but he also knew he weren't fit to stop it. The black wall rose higher than the heavens and wider than the earth and thundered towards them across the grey desert and then it swallowed them. It whispered stories and names and some of them Terrance knew and others he didn't. When finally it passed Loola lay still in the dust and Terrance lay beside her for some hours before he knew just like the sun she weren't gonna rise again. He took his cat-tleman and put it to his temple and pulled the trigger

twice. He found no bullets in the chambers nor did he find 'em in his bandolier and he threw the gun and sat in the dust and wept.

His boots sunk in the grey sand and the further he walked the further they sunk and before long he stood in it to his pull straps. The wind picked up and swept the dust into choreographies that mirrored the murmurations of a flock of starlings and it was then that through the dark and through the dust Anders Terrance saw the blackened outline of a rider.

He called out to him even though he knew his voice was lost in the dust and the wind but still when the rider didn't answer he called again. The rider pulled his reins and made a turn and rode past the crest of a hill and vanished from his sight.

It was a day later when he saw him again or maybe it'd been two or even three for there was no way to know. The rider stood beside his horse this time some hundred yards away. He crouched and took a hand of dust and let it trickle through his gloved fingers and then he looked up at him and erected. Terrance remained still and as his heart slowed so slowed the dust and it settled in the soil like a dying bull. The wind calmed and his mind calmed. Then the rider pulled his gun and cocked it and aimed it at him and shot it.

There was no sound. There was only a breath of gunpowder as it coughed out from the barrel and then came the sound anyway and it split the air and crepitated into the unending distance. Terrance cowered and at once he felt ashamed because never had he been afraid to die, and yet right in that moment he weren't no tough man but a

scared boy, a scared boy in foreign country and more than anything in the world he wished to go home.

He sat in the dust and he prayed for Loola and prayed for absolution not for his crimes but for his foolishness. He closed his eyes and bowed to the earth. In that terrible storm he'd heard a whisper and it had told him a story of a young man who died and how there was no glory in his bloodshed but only vanity and still he hadn't been afraid to die for he felt in his heart this young man weren't him.

When he opened his eyes the rider stood before him and even up close there was no colour to his shape. He held his horse by its reins and stood there in quiet. Anders Terrance rose up and faced him and asked if he'd heard of a man by the name of Wispy Joe and the rider handed him his reins and turned around and walked until the distance took the last of his form.

Anders Terrance watched him go.

The horse whinnied and he patted her neck and said it's alright girl and then he said it again and after the third time she listened and pushed her head into his chest.

Riemer de Vries