

Days of Light and Grace

By Leviathan Joe

How was I, in the 24 hours allotted to me before my execution, going to find a good cup of coffee in this podunk town? Of the 305 people that populated the dusty streets and ramshackle buildings that looked more like stage props than habitable spaces, it was doubtful any of them were willing to brew a cup to my specifications. Especially considering that, before I'd rolled in, there had been 306.

I strolled through the street, dragging my suede shoes so that a trail of dust followed in my wake like a dorsal fin, signaling to the natives that their best bet would be to simply dispose of me before I could cause any more trouble.

The gallows loomed to my left in the town square. Though I didn't look, I could feel them tugging at my peripheral vision like Jacqueline's tantalizing cleavage back at the office. A million miles away.

A few paces later, I came across an adequately-stocked firearms shop, the sleek and polished pieces leaning against the front window like dogs who need only be given the smallest chance to be let out after me and do what they do best.

I came upon a couple of horses puttering in the dirt outside a storefront. They hadn't been bred for pony shows. They were work horses, bred to pull entire wagons, and probably wouldn't even notice the burden of a single man, on their backs or otherwise.

I stood clear of them. One of those massive heads, a solid trunk of bone, swung as though on an overburdened swivel to size me up with vacant brown eyes.

It seemed to notice my slacks and tweed jacket and recognized that I was no rider. Or maybe that was giving it too much credit. Finding nothing of interest, it looked back to the store. I followed its gaze.

"You sure you want to go in there, friend?"

The man stood several paces behind me with his hands on his hips, his frame lanky, tall and angular. He looked as if he could cover the distance between us in two steps.

"Sheriff," I said, "buy you a drink?"

"You're kind of funny," he rumbled. He took two steps like a giant spider and was in front of me. Glistening black slits peered at me from behind folds of brown skin like dry, cracked clay. He plucked the sunglasses from my face and placed them on his own. The sleek, dark lenses seemed to soften his features, and he looked about, amused. "I like these. I think I might get myself some."

The sun shouted its light in my eyes as a child might scream in a parent's ear.

He'd probably have this very pair himself by tomorrow.

"They're \$300," I said.

This seemed to startle him. "Boy, why would you spend that kind of money on a pair of glasses that don't even help a man read? We got some nice hats for no more'n two dollars right down the street. Don't they have hats where you come from?"

"We have hats."

"Then why?" His mouth twisted in confusion. I saw myself twice in the sunglasses, slack, small.

“It’s complicated,” I said.

He took the glasses off with the urgency and care one might take in flicking a poisonous spider from one’s face. “Son, everyone around here knows...” he slid the glasses back onto my face, “nothing that makes any sense is ever complicated.”

I considered this. It sounded good. But I wasn’t about to fawn for his approval.

The sheriff straightened up and sighed, his head now a good foot above mine. He nodded toward the end of the street, at the sprawling plains beyond, a gust of dry wind accentuating the gesture. “I suppose you’ve thought about it...running.”

“Who wouldn’t?” I challenged. Stark honesty was the only genuine thing I could offer.

The sheriff spared my defiant gaze no attention. “Well, it’s no picnic out there. There’s civilization, or whatever you think it is that separates you from us, but I don’t suppose it would be in my interests to tell you where, now, would it?”

“I don’t suppose so.”

A moment of dry silence passed as we looked out at where the last storefront stood unceremoniously against the flat void beyond. Another gust came through the street, a hollow sound in my ears, echoing in my chest.

“You were looking for a drink?” The sheriff looked at me as if I might suddenly be sick, probably questioning his own wisdom in bringing thoughts of escape to my head.

I nodded, my collar raking my sunburned neck “I could actually use a cup of joe.”

He reacted as if to a foul stench.

“Coffee,” I corrected, in my lowest grumble.

He grinned. “My secretary makes the best in town, if you’d like to come on back down to the station.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Right behind you then, would be your next best bet.”

“Thanks.”

Neither his gaze nor his grin wavered. Neither did mine, emboldened by the sunglasses.

At last he tipped his hat. “Be seein’ ya. Good luck.” He turned, limbs hinging and unhinging as he moved, unfolding like a Jacob’s ladder as he strolled down the center of the empty street, at peace with himself, his decisions, his town.

I looked back to the horizon, trying to follow the earth as it tilted away. Nothingness as far as I could see, and around the corner, who knew? I had a wife out there somewhere. And friends. They were going on now as they always did when I was away on business. Same thing tomorrow, and the next day. Someone might say something at the weekly cribbage game a few weeks down the line. They’d grow used to my absence, come to expect it. Even my wife. Especially her.

The first rush of longing and desperation hit me then, like a cold worm in my heart, deep, where aloofness and irony failed.

The horses snorted.

I stepped across the groaning planks and through the swinging door.

My eyes grasped for light, and my ears operated in a complete vacuum of sound. I froze, gripped by a sense of vulnerability.

My eyes adjusted, taking in first the glints off the glasses and the heavily-lacquered floors and walls. A dozen pairs of eyes shimmered, set deep in folds of

weathered skin that hung from bone like leather blankets draped over boulders. Fleeting, I thought of the aloe gel product I'd brought to town in my briefcase. These people were good candidates. I had been sentenced to death but that needn't impede a final few sales.

I took it all in, the bar, the tables, the utter lack of motion as they stared at me, and the thought dissolved. Never had I felt so witless.

Finally someone decided they'd rather go back to their scrambled eggs than stare at the city slicker. A fork clattered on a plate and they all went back to eating. For them, even breakfast was a somber task to be performed without interruption.

The counter space behind the bar was occupied by mugs, iron skillet, silverware and bowls of sugar.

I sat at the counter and the proprietor clopped my way, his frame dwindled with age and toil. He wiped out a glass with his stained apron. "Thurman Good," he said.

I knew him better as juror #4 or #5, the one who kept dozing off until his elbow would slip off the arm of his chair or he'd snort himself awake. I wondered if he'd caught some z's during the ten-minute deliberation period, or if the burden of deciding my fate been enough to keep him spry.

"You getting enough sleep these days, Good?"

The brown spines of his facial hair bristled like a waddling porcupine, denoting a change in his expression. "I get by, Sir. What can I get for ya?"

"What do you recommend?"

"We got bacon, eggs, coffee..."

"I'll have all that," I said.

Good put a napkin in a funnel and placed it over a mug, scooped some black grinds into it and poured in a pan of boiling water. I imagined the napkin sagging with the burden. The first drips gathered in the mug.

"I'll have a scotch while I wait." Good poured me one and I took it outside.

I sat on the railing and looked at the stretch of storefronts down the street. Occasionally a small group of men would appear from one building, carrying boxes or other burdens to another.

The beasts were still snorting and idling, waiting to be of use. I sipped the scotch, wondering, with a curious detachment, what use I'd ever been to this world.

A tumbleweed bounced down the street and stuck in the railing's slats. Shortly thereafter, a kid came similarly bounding through the dust, stuck his head through the slats and looked at me. He didn't get stuck, though. He had denim overalls and his sandy hair seemed to lift with every suggestion of the wind. He was maybe ten, but had probably seen all there was to see of his world.

"Hey, you're that guy, aren't you, mister?"

I raised my glass. "You're that kid."

His young face screwed up, foreshadowing the effects of wind and sun ten years down the line. "What kid? What did I do?"

"Nothing," I said. "I was just being funny."

He thought about it and shrugged. "I don't think that's very funny."

"Eh... well..." I took a deeper sip.

"My dad says you killed Mr. Decker."

"I did."

"How come?"

"Well.... I didn't exactly mean to."

"So... it was an accident?" He squinted and his mouth twisted in confusion, revealing a somewhat haphazard collection of large teeth. I wondered what my wife and friends would look like if they allowed their facial expressions to manifest such emotion.

"Sort of."

"So it was an accident." He seemed hesitant of this logical conclusion.

I shrugged.

"Mister, how come you won't tell me?"

"Look, kid. I know you think the world should all be straight answers. But they aren't. And I don't have one. I just came here to sell lotion."

"My dad says the sheriff's gonna hang you."

"Yep."

The kid thought for a minute. I could practically hear the gear grinding.

"I don't think you should have to die if it was an accident," he said at last.

I toasted this conclusion and drained the glass. "They do that where I come from. If it's an accident, they go easy on you."

"Maybe our town should do that."

"There's an idea," I said.

"You talk funny. I don't like it."

"What do you mean?"

"Aren't you scared that you're gonna die?"

"We all gotta die, kid."

He was humming with inquisitive energy, on the verge of an overload. "But you're gonna die *tomorrow*."

I didn't know what to say to this. His anxiousness was contagious.

Good brought out a plate with the bacon and eggs and a steaming mug. I saw it all and perked up, my eyes sending the good news to my stomach. I sat in a wooden rocking chair with the plate and went to work.

The kid watched me. I didn't mind. I just ate and looked up and down the street while he slumped against the slats and waited. I scraped up every scrap and set the plate aside, wanting more.

The steaming mug smelled of the richest soil. I brought it to my lips and drank. Heat pooled in my stomach and sweat gathered on my forehead, cooling then in the breeze.

"Kid," I said, "any chance you know where the nearest town is?"

"You gonna try to 'ex-cape'?"

"Jesus. Keep it down!"

"Sorry. Well, one time I went with my dad to get some supplies." He pointed down the street. "We went that way and a little bit that way in a wagon and it was night when we got there."

"Is there a trail?" I hunched forward.

"I don't think so. It was really bumpy and we kept getting weeds stuck in the wheels."

"What did this town look like?" I asked.

"It was a city. There were streets everywhere and they were all smooth and black.

We got lost. There were a lot of people but no one would help us."

Sounds like home, I thought.

"Look, kid. You don't tell anyone about our conversation, okay?"

He nodded, his eyes wide with the gravity of it. It was the most solid assurance I'd ever been given about anything.

I sat back and slurped at the mug, my eyes drawn down the road, to the emptiness beyond, in the direction the kid had pointed. *It was worth a shot*. With a glimmer of real hope came the first true gust of fear and panic. I thought of the smooth streets, the labyrinthine roadways, the towering gray buildings and the rivers of gaudy color on the sidewalks and hundred of people of conflicting fashion senses did their best to get past one another. The people who wouldn't give you the time of day. My wife and my friends.

"Was that your city, mister?"

"I think so." I sure as hell hoped so.

"Do you miss it."

"Yes,"

"What's it like?" The kid had clambered up on the railing and sat there now, kicking his bare heels on the slats.

I thought about it. "There's a lot of different kinds of people. A lot of them don't like each other. Some of them don't like anyone, it seems."

"Then why do they live in the same city? That's just stupid."

I looked at the kid and took in his words. My wife always fawned over the latest "intellectuals" in the city and had them to dinner so that she could cherry-pick nuggets of rhetoric to fill her own empty cavity. If any of them or even my wife spoke with half the candor of this kid, I might not have been so glad to accept a job that kept me away from home 300 days out of the year.

Still, I felt I had to defend it. "There's a lot of people there coming up with new ideas about life and science. People are learning more, and they are able to get all those new things you saw. Paved roads and moving pictures so you can see something that happened very far away."

A voice called out. The kid looked down the way before looking back at me. "I hope you make it, mister." He leapt off the railing to the street, crouching barefoot in the dust before sprinting off.

I sipped the coffee and rocked, waiting for nightfall.

I do not recommend foot travel by night.

I stood on the threshold of moonlit shadow cast by the last storefront, breathing in the night, peering into the sprawling emptiness. I took a breath and then my first bounding step toward freedom. It faltered, my eyes scrabbling at glints of light. I could see the desert vegetation, but their shadows cast the ground in complete darkness.

I ran with my limbs casting about wildly, as though in freefall, the town slipping away behind me, the nothingness rushing up too fast to greet me.

Moonlight is a vacuum of time and a great conductor of sound. I have no idea how long I stumbled through the prairie, the only sounds my ragged breath and the thrumming of blood through my ears.

It was as though the planet had been dribbled like a cosmic basketball, this was where the impact had scraped everything away but the dirt and shrubs.

I never looked back. My thudding heart already kept the idea of the rumbling horse beasts dispatched to retrieve me fresh in my mind.

Whenever the doubts came up, the fear, the loneliness, the what-the-hell-am-I-doing-out-here feelings, I pushed on harder.

I came upon the city by dusk the second day. It had been forever since I'd seen the six-story buildings, the trundling trams, the street urchins. They were all just coming out now; the night was better for their complexions and consciences.

I walked inside my house, white foam caked to the corners of my mouth, my cheeks and nose flaring red.

My wife was setting out eight places at the dinner table, with the good silverware and sparkling china.

"They were going to kill me," I said.

"With manners like that, I'm not surprised. If you were going to be home early you could have sent word." She spared me only a quick glance while setting the table.

I burped up some acid.

"And for God's sake, get yourself cleaned up. It's couples-only tonight and I need you to be presentable if I'm going to squeeze you in somewhere. Or maybe you should just stay upstairs."

She stopped, as if remembering something, and at last looked me in the eyes.

"How were the sales?"

I sprawled in the bathtub. The world of the sheriff and the kid was buffered by the jaunt across the desert, a world all its own. And now I was back into the dinner parties, just where I'd left off eighty days ago.

I sighed, hoping a feeling of relief would follow. It was just another stale breath.

At the next party my wife had some of her friends over and their husbands. The guest of honor was some young guy named Hank with impeccably trimmed facial hair who'd spoken at seminar in town hall. He'd taught Chinese families in California to read political cartoons and believed that things like blindness were psychological conditions.

I was still waiting for the feeling of relief, of comfort. It didn't come, so I drank glass after glass of Merlot.

Hank was prattling on, puppeteering nods of interest from the other guests with the prompt "Do you see?"

"What do you think, friend?" he said, drawing the table's attention to me. My wife rolled her eyes.

"Huh?" Alcohol saturated my thoughts.

"What would you say is the core, the life-force of yours and Maggie's marriage?"

I blinked at him.

The other guests giggled.

"What's the spiritual plateau you've discovered through marriage?" he asked softly, hunching in.

I looked across the table and imagined the kid sitting there. He'd be looking at me with his lips drawn back in utter confusion, his teeth bursting from the gums. We'd share

that look.

"You talk funny. I don't like it. " I stood up, the alcohol swirling in my head like dirty dishwater circling the drain.

I stumbled up the stairs, vomited, and slept.

Five years later I came back from another round of aloe peddling in Nevada and found my wife and Hank sharing a spiritual plateau of their own. The courts excused her infidelity in light of my travels and 'deteriorating emotional state' and gave her the house.

I didn't mind so much.

I saw something odd on the way back to the apartment from the bar one night. It was only six but I hadn't paced myself very well. The incessant colors and motion of the masses dizzied me. Some bumping occurred one bump in particular sent a clatter of books to the sidewalk. By the time I'd focused on the man, he was already at his knees scooping up the books. I manages to decipher a few of the intricacies of the titles and subjects. History of the Old West. Electricity. Something about pyramids. A stack of Jesse James dime novels.

The stream of people bunched up to avoid this mess.

Light brown hair had been parted to the side, so light as to be almost completely ruffled by the scuffles of simply going outside. Flannel shirt and stained white slacks. A cardboard briefcase lay in pieces, the books spilling forth.

I watched as everything swirled around us. I put out a hand for support but it was batted back to my side by the stream of passersby.

At last the man stood, and I could see that he was very young. Large eyeglasses adorned his face. They slid down his nose and I could see that they had left a red mark on the bridge. Pushing them back up still seemed to be a vexing correction rather than an unconscious adjustment.

"Sorry," he said, looking down, his voice small. Teeth not quite straight.

Our eyes met, and maybe something happened then. Something flexed in his gaze.

He was looking at me and I was looking at him, and neither of us had experienced that in a while.

"Sorry," I muttered back. The swirl of foot traffic around us left me unsteady. I found myself shuffling, falling back into the stream, moving along with everyone else, while the crowd going the other way swallowed the young man up.

I rummaged through my belongings and found the \$300 sunglasses. I carried them with me through the desert that night, with a sense of purpose that gave form to my gait. I didn't sprint or stumble. When I got back to the town, morning was a gray stain bleeding through the night on the horizon.

I strolled down the center of the road, ready.