

## Where the Tracks End

Somewhere along the Turquoise Trail lies Perdido. New Mexico's a big state, yet people know Perdido. Photographers can't miss it, but lead-footed drivers always do. I'd say a person doing sixty would zip through in half a minute. It was desert, then a road, and a mine, and some buildings: a saloon, a general store, a railroad station. The men who manned the mines left after some time though, letting the desert reclaim the real estate. Perdido was reabsorbed by yucca and red rock dust. Until maybe thirty years ago when the hippies decided to hippie things up. It's cute now. And the purple flames of the sunsets burn deep, smattering white ash into the dark sky.

Christmas is coming. I can see from my window, a lighted town called Nariz de Lobo sitting some place far from me, in the Sandia Mountains. Just like Perdido, they go nuts for Christmas lights. And I sit here with the only house that's not decorated. It's a shack. Three rooms, that's all. Better than the lean-to's I've had to get used to over the past few months. A bathroom, a kitchen, and the whatchamacallit where I have my sleeping bag in front of the fireplace.

Sleeping here is a killer. I wake up every morning in my sleeping bag and the wood floor is hell on my bad hip. The desert cold still slides under the doors and the through the windows, but now I breathe it in and smell all the places it's been. You get used to it.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't like it here. The people are nice enough, and the town is pretty, and I've got a place of my own, so it'll do. It's a nice place to end things, ya know? Whichever way it ends. I know that Perdido is where I throw in the towel. It always ends. Perdido is the place. And I like it. And I've lived long enough, seen enough to know what I do and don't like. There isn't all that much, but Perdido checks every box.

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It's so long ago, now, that my father brought me west. I was maybe ten or eleven. He told me that we were driving out to California. But he stopped when we arrived in Río del Deseo. A Hooverville near the White Sands which the war forgot to heal. He said he had an old friend there. I sat in the car while he was in the shade of the bar, speaking to this old friend.

An hour later, he was taking some painful steps out the propped open door, with his shirt askew and his belt unbuckled.

He pulled the car out of the dirt lot and we went back the way we came. Back to the east coast.

I knew better than to ask him if we were still headed to the Pacific. He was a man with quiet pride. Quiet, but forceful. And despite our home on the Atlantic, I saw the cowboy in him. I wanted to be the cowboy in him.

*If your mother was around she'd kill me, ya hear? A man's not supposed...*

He paused cautiously. *Ya hear?*

*Okay.*

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I shaved my eyebrows and grew out my beard before getting here. The silver in my mustache has spread to my chin. I don't like the look, but it'll have to do. I read somewhere that there was this study. They showed people pictures of celebrities with their eyes edited out. Everyone could identify them. Reagan. Clint Eastwood. Liberace. Etcetera. But then the researchers showed pictures of other famous faces with their eyebrows edited out. The test

subjects failed miserably. I think I'd do a bit better. Most people are just so darn unobservant. When I lived in the city, a whole lot of people missed a whole lot of crazy stuff, because their eyes were glued to the sidewalk, searching for dog crap. It didn't really matter what they stepped in, they stunk to high heaven anyways.

But for what it's worth, I don't think that the no-eyebrows look has helped me here. If anything, it's made me stick out. I'm willing to accept that though. Sometimes you're a car, sometimes you're a train. Ya see, a car can always make a turn. A train is at the mercy of its tracks. I think I might be the train today. But I guess that's why I brought Lizzie here. She's good company in a pinch. A .30 caliber Springfield. A little old, but she still works just as well as when my dad handed her to me on my eighteenth birthday.

*My man, you'll be a regular John Wayne before you're eighteen and a half.*

I don't know about that, but I did shoot clays for a while in my twenties. My fingers are rusted with some arthritis now, but last I checked, I could peg a sparrow at sixty paces. I don't have the speed I once had. I'm a little ham-handed. Can't really whip her out like I did back when everything that happened, happened. But I still got my aim.

But I just have that feeling today. I have that feeling, that today, here, in Perdido, is where the tracks will stop. But there's only one direction for a train, isn't there? Forward. You just follow the tracks. Or maybe you go where the tracks push you. I don't know.

But I'm thirsty. I think I'll head to the Mineshaft. I think that might clear things up.

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A train rumbles by Perdido. The half-empty glasses shiver nervously on the bar counter. The two Spanish guys in the corner booth pause their machinegun-fast conversation to feel the iron horse's stride. The clock's saluting the eight. Or maybe it's nine. One of the two. Things are a bit fuzzy without my glasses. And of course, with a few *empty* glasses. The minute hand rattles to the beat of the desert. Someone's talking about sports in the kitchen.

"Sounds like a freighter," I say.

It's not a freighter. I know it's not a freighter. But I say it just to say it. Freighters are the anacondas of trains. I've always enjoyed them. They can go on forever. And then they just stop. I try to imagine what it'd be like to hop in one of the cars. Just let it take me away. It'll bring me wherever. Alaska? New York? Juarez? Sign me up. Here I come. Every time I see them, I'm in awe. This one time I was watching one of them roll on by. I watched it for a good thirty minutes. And ya know what? I never saw the end of it. It just kept going on, and on, and on, it's really something isn't...

"Have you ever seen a freighter?" I ask Dora. My lord, she's ancient. And she's lived here since God made dirt. The channels running through her cheeks and branching from the corners of her lips tell me all I need to know. There's no way she hasn't seen one. But what's left of the whiskey tells me to ask anyway.

"Mm."

Dora's a real conversationalist. Sometimes I even get an "mhm" out of her. I guess something's on her mind tonight. Truth be told, I don't think she likes alcohol. I don't think she likes me either. But tonight, she won't seem to make eye contact. If there's anything Dora's good at—and God, is it not bartending—it's staring through a drinker with her dead doll's eyes. She's

a pretty closed book. She's almost puritanical in her modesty. She's probably a witch. Maybe she'll turn me into a newt. That would make things easier.

I slam my wallet on the counter. My keyring goes with it and clatters noisily. I watch Dora jump. Her hand grips her heart.

"Ha! Dora, you are one Nervous Nellie. Listen..." I step up from my stool, flop my arms back down on the stained walnut, and look her right in her half-terrified eyes. "Listen. I trust you, Dora. Just take what I owe from my wallet. I'm headin' to the little boys' room" I smile.

I swim through the whiskey to the door that says, "ME". It seems as though, if you want to drain the pool in this joint you either gotta be a woman or "ME". I guess the poor bastards who aren't "ME" have to step out into the cold and relieve themselves by the trash. I crack myself up.

My last drink was over an hour ago. But I sway and smile as I stand at the urinal, thinking about trains, and my old man, and Rooster Cogburn. I'm not a trusting guy. But I'm not worried about Dora taking any more than I owe.

Even so, times like these teach you to keep a wad of cash in your pocket. You can't stash all your Franklins in your wallet, or you're a dead man. I've gotten rid of that ominous feeling. And I need to take a walk in the desert air.

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My father and I were once out stalking this big buck. This was before I had gotten Lizzie. I wasn't too young to have a gun of my own, but we didn't have the money. I might've been twelve. The two of us sat camouflaged on a forested hill littered with wet, dead leaves. The fella

was right in front of us now. Who knew that Bambi could get so big? He was combing the branches of a late-fruiting blueberry bush with his teeth, maybe a hundred feet away at most. There was a line from one of those radio western's that was stuck in my head. A thought came to me. I whispered.

*Dad?*

*Yeah?*

*Can I ask you a question?*

*Yeah.*

*Would you rather go out with a bang, or go peacefully? Ya know, like in your sleep.*

My father stood up. He lifted his rifle and aimed it at Bambi. He remained silent.

Bang.

Bambi dropped, pulling a switch of the blueberry bush away in his mouth.

My father laid the rifle on the forest floor. He sniffled. He was fighting a cold. He rubbed his right eye. He didn't turn to me when he said it.

*What do you think?*

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I return from the bathroom. I swipe my wallet from the bar. Tell Dora, "G'night". She's restocking the shelves with bottles of miscellaneous liquids one, two, and three.

I pull open the door which the wind has jammed in its frame. It's dark now. But not really. I've been to a lot of towns. Lived in New York, and D.C. I've been to some places that

don't even have names. But I've never seen a town brighter than Perdido. This blip in the desert is a kaleidoscope. It's pretty cold tonight. And the sky is raining lace. That's alright though. My vest keeps my guts warm. It'll do.

I figure I'll walk to the edge of McKenna's gulch and back home.

The Jimenez family owns the general store. The green paint on the siding of what used to be the travelling doctor's office is starting to peel. But the wreath that the Jimenezes have nailed to the door makes up for the building's wrinkles.

Michael, the oldest Jimenez son is making small talk with a customer purchasing jerky. I can see this through the window. I don't remember the last time I ate jerky. I've heard some bad things about it on the news. MSG or free radicals or something. I remember because I looked it up.

My dad always said that *Their science isn't always your science*. He always used to say that. Especially in his last few years.

The last time I saw him he had on lipstick. The next time I heard his name, it was because he made toast in the bathtub.

He didn't leave a note. But a man who claimed to know him told me he had that queer disease. The one with the acronym I can't remember. I guess he thought that sooner was better than later.

I walk on. I walk past the empty lot, and the train tracks and past old Cosi's house. He's an Indian fella, but devout Catholic. I think of knocking, and thanking him again for getting me

my place. That was back in September though, and I've thanked him enough to last him a second and third lifetime. A shot or four can make you want to do the strangest things.

But I see the lights are out. He sleeps early. He's pushing eighty. Yet he can still do a line like nobody's business. That must be what keeps his ticker ticking. He's told me a lot. And he's helped me a lot. But he knows why I'm in Perdido. I don't believe in unconditional trust.

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Thankfully the street isn't icy yet. That won't take long though. A dusting has already built up in the fissures of the pavement. I turn my eyes from the dark drop-off just a few dozen feet from Cosi's and I decide that I'm cold. I think I'll head back to my place; it's getting late anyway. I'll get a fire going. Maybe I'll even write a little.

"Evening," I say to a young couple, also out for a stroll. So beautiful. And hopeful. Cars. Not trains.

"Hi."

I start heading back past Cosi's house, and the tracks, and the empty lot. The general store has since shut down for the night. I walk on by. I arrive on my front stoop and take a moment to breathe. But in the reflection of the darkened windows I see something. Some enormous black fish swim through the sea of lights behind me. Towards me. I turn. Three black vans are driving up the road in a slow predatorial precession.

I spin with the urgency of a sober man. Lizzie is locked up inside, by the fireplace, all alone. I jam my fist into my pants pocket, fishing clumsily for my keys.

My keys.



I have my wallet, but my keys are still getting drunk at the Mineshaft.

And in the distance, the whistle of a train is blowing. I hang my head. Resigned.

It's now that I realize, they always come in black. The unorganized guys, the vigilante types, come in their Sunday best. The funny ones come in Hawaiian shirts. But the men in black vests, dressed in acronyms, sure know how to make the fat lady sing a sad, sad note. They bring those peaceful, outnumbered ends that are heralded on the morning news as a fantastic success. The press conference. The pats on the back.

The embarrassment.

It's times like these that I hate whiskey even more than I do when it's on my tongue. I think about Bambi, and the Lone Ranger, and freighters, and men in lipstick. If I could only get to Lizzie. If I could just do that. If I was only young enough. If I was only spry enough. I'd break the door down. Or a window. Lizzie, and I, and SWAT would dance. Me and my father would play cowboys and Indians. If these tracks led me elsewhere.