



THE BALLAD OF SEXY GULCH:
Scenario For a Modern
Major Motion (Western-type) Picture

So here's the story a' all the trouble what happened when the books came to Sexy Gulch.

A' course that were back in the days afore folks was starin' at the internetty all day. In them days, Sexy Gulch... what were known as Dentonville... were a right peaceful place... 'cept for the usual gunplay an' killin'. It weren't till Miss Abigail DuWright, the town Librarian an' a fine upstanding' young woman, sent fer some books back East that caused some ruckus. When them books arrived, Miss Abigail were showin' em to everybody what come t' the Library, pointing out that Jesus were a liberal, an' a socialist, an' how he were preachin' the Golden Rule, an' givin' the inheritance tax to the meek, an' tellin' the money changers... them bankers... that they was runnin' whatchya a 'thieves kitchen'. They's wasn't the kinda books that decent folk'd wanna read... like how to make a billion dollars an' pay no taxes.

Naturally, this made the stalwart folk of Sexy Gulch mad, damn mad, so Mrs. Dumont who were the head a' yur local crem della crems, called in Sheriff Norman to git rid a' em. Norm, who were also president a' the local chapter of the Guns For Life Club, didn't care fer Miss Abigail none too much cause she were so uppity an' righteous all the time an' refusin' his attentions, but there weren't nothin' he could do 'bout them books. He hated them books. Books like Candidee by some Frenchie (Norm hated Frenchie), an' Knuckleberry Finn by that mealy-mouthed Mark T'wayne, books that hadn't oughta bin where decent folks might see one an' get all kinds a' bad iders. The other thing,

a'course, were that Sherrif Norm couldn't read, so's the sight a' them books, well, they just made him plumb mad.

But the real problem were Coup, the local billionaire. Coup Burdoch (folks said he were named Burdoch cause he stuck to ya like one, heh, heh) owned the Burdoch Saloon, the Burdoch Gun shoppe, Burdoch Hardware, the Burdoch First, Second & Third Local Banks, the Burdoch Feed Store, the Burdoch Gazette, the Burdoch Printing Establishment, the Burdoch General Store, The Burdoch Liquor Store, Burdoch Realty, Burdoch Gas, the Burdoch Hotel an' the Burdoch Video Outlet.

But what he really owned were the biggest business in Sexy Gulch. You see, the trouble started back years afore when ol' Poop... that is, Coup... folks called Coup 'Poop' cause he also owned the Burdoch Sewage Works (except for Miss Abigail who called him Mr. Burdoch cause she were so polite an' all) had bought hisself Ye Olde Pajama Shoppe, a bow-teek on the main drag fer whatchya yur sleepin' apparel, and which were goin' broke cause t'weren't nobody in the desert wearin' them pajamas.

Then one day, the Shoppe got a shipment a' jist pajama tops. Well sir, most a' yur business types woulda giv up at that point, but not ol' Poop. No sir, he had a real nose fer opportunity, an' he could smell it knockin'. He got the Burdoch Printing Establishment to run up a bunch of posters that read, 'Is You Sexy Enough?' an' 'Get Sexy' an' 'Be Sexier Than a Rattlesnake' wit a picture a' a girl weaing jist a top wit her buttons undone, which he got posted for miles around. Soon everybody in the territory was all hepped up 'bout 'gettin' sexy' an' 'bein' sexy' an' spendin' they bucks buyin' them pajama tops.

Well, Coup plowed all them profits back inta that bow-teek an' after 8 years a' expandin', Ye Olde Pajama Shoppe become the Sexy Gulch Lingerie Emporium, which took up half the town, were painted all pink with all kinds a' do-dads stickin' out from it like the udders on a cow, an' folks were buyin' all kinds a' fine frilly garments... the best this side a' Chicagy... an' Poop were rakin' in the bucks. He even discovered that some a' the local ranchhands liked to get dolled up in them frilly outfits an' promenade around the campfire at night when they cattle was asleep. He know'd this cause he had a hidin' place 'hind the changing rooms in the Emporium so's he could eavesdrop on the customers an' put the talkin' in his Gazette which's why everyone were so a' feared of him.

Poop were rakin' so much money his pants was fallin' down, so it weren't no trouble for him to get Mayor Stank an' the Town Council to change the name of the town from Dentonville to Sexy Gulch so's all them sexy folks'd would wanna come spend their money at the Emporium. Now what he wanted were to tear down the library, which were next door, so's he could expand the emporium, makin' it into the biggest store fer women's unmentionables this side a' Paree.

But here's where he come up agin Miss Abigail, who were agin it. Poop didn't like her cause she were a liberal do-gooders, an' "too damn lippy". When he sent his real estator, Dickie Wall, to inform the town Council that he were offerin' big bucks to buy out the library, the council turned Dickie down. They couldn't stand Dickie cause he were just about the most snivelling being in God's desert, an' cause he were known for gettin' Sheriff Norm to foreclose on widdas. In fact, he was so repulsatating that a gang a' desperados wanted to plug a hole in him, an' they become known as the Hole-in-Dickie-Wall gang.

But ‘cause Poop had Mayor Stank in his pocket, he thought it were a done deal, until Miss Abigail were speakin’ to the Council. Now, ‘cause she were so charmin’, an’ ‘cause she brought along some a’her home-made cherry pie fer samplin’, she talked them councillors outta selling the library to Poop, an’ read them a story from one a’ them books about how edifyin’ them libraries was, so there weren’t a dry eye in the saloon, which is where they used to hold they Council meetin’s, an’ them councillors said no to sellin’ it. When that happened, Poop were damn mad. Here he owned the whole town, an’ he still had to walk on egg shells to git what he wanted. It didn’t matter none that he owned Robbie Stank, the biggest mayor this side a’ anywhere, a man who were stoppin’ the gravy train when it reached his end of the table (if ya know what I mean).

But Poop were more determined than ever to git his way. He were gonna fire them Councillors an’ demolish that library, just to show all them uppity folk. But first he had to take care a’ Miss Abigail, an’ t’avoid anyone pointin’ the finger at him when somethin’ awful happened t’her, Poop decided to get an outsider, someone professional-like, to arrange a little accident which’d take care of Missy an’ stop the townsfolk from talkin’. For days, he were a’searchin’ the outta town newspapers for just the right kind of individual, an’ on the third day he saw an advertisement that read,

Squintin’ Terroteeny,
I shoot guns an’ movies for money, an’ Liberals for free.
Hollywood, California

Well, old Poop, who’d seed one or two a’ Squintin’s movies, got real excited an’ sent him a telegram right off care of the Beverly Hills Hotel where Squintin’ were residin’ (him being a part-time movie director an’ all), tellin’ him to get in his car an’ drive to Sexy Gulch right quick.

Poop knew that if Miss Abigail were allowed to continya her do-goodin’ folks would wanna rid the town of gunplay an’ all the ‘loose’ women wandering up an’ down the main street, pouting an’ breathing heavy in they frilly outfits, which would not be good business fer the Burdoch Group a’ Companies.

Now Miss Abigail, she knew that Poop weren’t her friend an’ had no doubt that he were capable a’ plannin’ some mischief to her person, but she were determined to stand up to him, an’ save the Dentonville Library so’s the children of the town would be able t’ git all that learnin’ from them books. An’ even though the townsfolk knew this, there weren’t none steppin’ forward to help her. ‘Oh contraries’ as the Frenchies say, they was avoidin’ her, so the Library was empty most days, except for Nathaniel Scruples.

Nathaniel were a young man from back East spendin’ his days in the desert studin’ the matin’ habits of the Tequila Cactus, them big cacti what they make tequila from, an’ every now an’ then he’d step into the Library to look up something in one of them big books.

“Miss Abigail?” he said one day, noticin’ that there t’weren’t nobody in the Library. “Have you closed early?”

“No.”

“Where have all the people gone?”

“I expect they’re staying away because of the trouble.”

“Trouble?” asked Nathaniel.

“Yes, Mr. Scruples, I would advise you to find a safer venue in which to conduct your studies.”

When Miss Abigail explained to Nathaniel ‘bout Poop wantin’ to tear down the Library, she said he got this strange, steely look in his eye, an’ his jaw firmed up real tight, just like the heroes in them romance books.

“Miss Abigail, if there is anything I can do of a protecting nature in respect to yourself and the library, I trust you will call on me.”

Abigail looked Nathaniel up an’ down. She weren’t impressed. He weren’t no Albert Schwitzarnegger. Even though he were stood ‘bout 6’-3”, he were thin as a rake, an’ awful quietlike. An’ Miss Abigail, even though she thought she liked Nathaniel, knew he couldn’t stand up to ol’ Poop by hisself, an’ so she were a’ feared the days of the Library was numbered.

“I’m afraid, Mr. Scruples, that the days of the Library are numbered,” she said.

“Are they, Miss Abigail? I expect we’ll see about that.”

It were the next day that folks noticed, on the long dry road into town, a big cloud a’ dust, comin’ at ‘em like a cyclone. Sure enough, roaring into town come what folks said were the biggest Caddy convertible they’d ever seed, driv at a furious speed by Squintin’ Terroteeny hisself, wearin’ the biggest darned polka dot Stetson you ever saw an’ a pair of them wrap-all-around sunglasses, almost coverin’ his entire face. On the passenger seat ‘side him, sat Vicky Seecrat pouting an’ a’ gasping, an’ pushin’ her nipples taut against the thin fabric of her revealing negligee, an’ in the back seat were an entire movie crew with a big panevision camera, filming Vickie an’ Squintin’ as he drove into town with his guns blazin’ an’ shoutin’ “yippee!”

All the townsfolk would’ve run an’ hide, but as they ain’t never seed nothing like it afore, they was just stood there, their jaws droppin’ down to their boots as Squintin’, to show he meant business (or cause he didn’t know how to drive), driv that Caddy right into the side of the Burdoch Feed Store. Of course, Ol’ Poop came running down the main drag, madder than hell, an’ he were ‘bout to confront the “asshole (pardon my French) who run inta my store” when Squintin’ clumb out of the Caddy.

Seeing a man stride up to him, he said, “Hey old man, you tell Mr. Burdoch, I’s here.”

“I am Mr. Burdoch.”

“You is? Well, you tell them liberals, they’s as good as gone, or my name ain’t... ah, name ain’t...”

“Squintin’ Terroteeny?” said Poop.

“Yeah,” said Squintin’, “him.”

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When ol’ Poop realized that Squintin’ Terroteeny hisself had arrived in Sexy Gulch an’ were standin’ right in front a’ him, he felt so good he wanted to hug him so bad, but something ‘bout the gunslinger’s loose-goosey walk made him think again, ‘cause he didn’t wanna giv him the wrong ideo. So Poop invited Squintin’ an’ Miss Vickie to the Saloon, where he bought ‘em a drink on the house. While he were admirin’ the gunslinger, an’ thinkin’ how clever he were, hirin’ a professional an’ all, Squintin’ started makin’ growling noises, an’ Poop realized that Squintin’ wanted him to buy a round for the movie crew who was still a’ filimin’ him. Poop didn’t like spendin’ his

money more than he hadda, but the sight of Squintin' twirlin' his guns made him order up them drinks real quick.

He told Squintin' all 'bout Miss Abigail an' her liberal iders. Squintin', gittin' madder by the minute, took out his gun an' shot the bartender t'ween the eyes just like that, jist to show ol' Poop how mad he was. He were damn mad. The movie crew cheered. They liked it when Squintin' got mad, cause it were real dramatic like. The whole episode kinda impressed Poop, until it come to him that the cost of gittin' rid of Miss Abigail might be a tad high. Squintin' might be after destroying the town to save it.

Poop gave Squintin' all kinds a' details 'bout Miss Abigail, where she lived an' such, an' told him that he weren't to say nuthin' to nobody 'bout nuthin'.

"I trust you can keep a secret," said Poop.

"Course I can," said Squintin', "what?"

"Me. Nobody's supposed to know you're workin' for me."

"I am workin' fer ya."

"I know you are, but the townsfolk don't know that an' we don't want them to know."

Squintin' looked at Poop an' wondered if he were alright in the head. "Why?"

"So's if anythin' should happen t' her, nobody'd be pointin' their finger at me."

"Anybody points a finger at you Mr. Burdoch, you tell me, I'll plug'em."

"No, no, don't plug anybody. Just make sure that Miss Abigail has a little accident, if you know what I mean."

Squintin' thought on that. He weren't sure what Mr. Burdoch meant but he didn't want him thinkin' he were stupid.

"I gotcha," he said.

Squintin' got up, checked hisself in the mirror behind the bar an', being filimed by the movie crew, wandered out into the main drag towards the Library, shooting his guns in every direction, killing the odd stray cat an' dog, an' pluggin' Donny Dump, the town drunk, who'd wandered out into the street an' whose mop a'hair Squintin' took fer a varmit. All the other townsfolk, who was never so terrifyed in they lives, was hiding indoors.

When Squintin' got to the Library, he stood outside a spell, so's the movie crew could filim him against the light. He were staring at the door, gittin' hisself in the right mood, then, after lettin' the makeup lady attend to his face, he got that mean, killin' look in his eye an' strode in.

There were big windas in the library with the light a'streamin' in but it were also full of shada, so's it took a moment for Squintin's to adjust his eyes. When he did, he saw an old woman standing by a big desk. He wondered if that were Miss Abigail. He marched over an' asked her direct like, "Is you that Abigail chick?"

He were so sudden that the old woman almost fainted she were so frightened.

Squintin' frowned. He thought this Abigail were a chick, but this woman didn't look like no chick cause she weren't wearing no revealin' clothing, an' she were old.

"Abigail?" the old woman called out, an' a young woman holdin' a book came out from behind a whole shelf full.

Miss Abigail glanced at Squintin'. "I will attend to you in a moment," she said.

"My name's Squintin' Terroteeny, I expect you heard of me?"

"You'll have to wait. I am attending to this good lady."

“It’s alright, Abigail,” the old lady wheezed, “I’ll come back another time,” an’ hurried out the door.

“You that Abigail chick?”

The young woman glanced at his guns. “I need to inform you that you will have to remove your firearms,” she said.

Squintin’ stared at her. “Hunh?” he said.

Miss Abigail pointed to a sign that read “No guns, beverages, or comestibles.”

Only recognizing the words ‘no’ an’ ‘guns’, Squintin’ said, “Hunh?” again.

“No firearms are allowed on the premises.”

“Wha...?”

Miss Abigail came around the desk an’ faced Squintin’. “You will have to leave your firearms outside or you will not be permitted to stay.”

Squintin’ were flummoxed. No one had ever told him what to do, not even them big Hollywood producers. He woulda kilt’em if they had. But this Abigail chick, she were tellin’ him what to do. Now she were raisin’ her arm an’ pointing. He looked around an’ saw she were pointing at the door. The door? She were showin’ him the door?! No one ever showed Squintin’ Terroteeny the door! It made him mad, damn mad. He’d show her, even if his movie crew were on break. He grabbed his gun an’ were ‘bout to blow her to smithereens when he were struck in the head by the King James Bible. Droppin’ his gun, he fell to the floor.

Miss Abigail were surprised. She looked around an’ saw Nathaniel standing there a bit stunned like.

“Mr. Scruples, what do you think you are doing?” She knelt down an’ felt Squintin’'s hand for a pulse. “Do you realize you could have killed this man?”

“I’m sorry Miss Abigail, I was aiming for his pistol. I’m not that good a toss. I was never one for sports.”

“I can see that, Mr. Scruples.”

“I did not mean to interfere, I was concerned only for your safety.”

“Well, Mr. Scruples, I thank you for your thoughtfulness. It did appear he intended to do me bodily harm.”

“I believe so too. Is he alright?”

“He seems to be only unconscious so, as he has shown egregious intent, it might be prudent for you to take refuge elsewhere.”

“If it’s all the same to you, Miss Abigail, I would like to continue my studies here. May I stay?”

“Yes, Mr. Scruples, you may.”

Squintin’ came to kinda slowly, with his skull achin’ somethin’ bad. When he tried to sit up, he realized his face was being swabbed by a young woman. Being Squintin’ Terroteeny he couldn’t help hissself. “Kiss me baby,” he said, thrustin’ his face forward an’ closin’ his eyes.

Miss Abigail gave him a firm slap on the jaw with the wet rag she were holdin’ which stung but served to revive Squintin’. Lookin’ ‘bout, he found hissself sitting on a floor, in a place full of books. He realized it were the library, an’ that a beanpole of a man were sitting at a table in a corner by the winda, his nose inside a book. Since t’weren’t nobody else in there ‘cept him an’ Miss Abigail, slowly, Squintin’'s mind worked

it out. This book-readin' twerp must have been the one to knock him down. He'd kill'im. He jumped up an' reached for his guns, but they weren't there.

"Where's ma guns?" he bellowed, his head aching.

"As I explained, no firearms are allowed in the library, so I took the liberty of removing them."

"You gimme my guns!"

"I will give them to you when you have departed."

"You give'em t'me noooowww!"

"Miss Abigail," said Nathaniel, from his table by the winda, "can I be of any assistance?"

"No thank you, Mr. Scruples."

"I want my guuuuuuuunnnns." Squintin' was bawlin' now, he wanted his guns so bad.

"Outside, if you please."

"I ain't afeared to hit no lady," he said, suddenly turning mean.

"And I'm not afraid to turn the other cheek."

Just as Squintin' were pulling back his arm to let Miss Abigail have one on the jaw, another book, this time Webster's Deluxe Dictionary with them metal corners, came winging through the air an' caught Squintin' upside the head. He fell again.

"Mr. Scruples," said Miss Abigail. "I have asked you not to do that."

"Miss Abigail, I beg to differ, but you did not actually ask me. And I must confess that this time I was aiming for the head and hit my mark. I believe my toss is improving."

"I am not interested in your toss. Do not do that again. This is a library and not a refuge for hooligans."

"May I point out, Miss Abigail, that this man, and I suggest that that he is no gentleman, was about to inflict grievous harm to your person."

"Are you saying that I, as a woman, am incapable of standing up for myself?"

"No, but..."

"Then I suggest, Mr. Scruples, that you attend to your studying and let me attend to the running of the library."

"Yes, Miss." He stood staring at her.

"Yes, Mr. Scruples, was there something else?"

"Would you allow me to escort this gent... this man from the premises?"

Miss Abigail thought on it. "Yes, Mr. Scruples, I believe that would be acceptable."

Nathaniel bent down to pick up one o' Squintin's legs an' tried to drag him to the door, but he were too puny to move that gunslinger's flabby body even an inch. Seeing him struggle, Miss Abigail came an' grabbed t'other leg an' they pulled him outside, then Miss Abigail went back for Squintin's guns, placed them on the steps beside his still body, an' then they went back inside, Nathaniel to his book an' Miss Abigail to her desk.

When Squintin' came to again, the Costume lady were splashing cold water on his face.

"Get off me," he shouted. He looked around, saw his guns lying beside him, an' realized the movie crew were a'filiming... an' him without his guns on! "Cut, cut, cut" he screamed. He'd jumped up an' were puttin' his guns back on when an ol' man stepped up to him, an' started to cough like he were terrible sick.

“Accchhhggg... Mr. Burdoch... accchhhggg... wants to see you.”

“Who?”

“Mr. Burdoch... accchhhggg,” he said, hackin’. “... right away.”

“I got business here,” growled Squintin’, starin’ at the Library window.

“Mr. Burdoch said... accchhhggg... ‘right away,’” sputtered the old man.

“You tellin’ me what to do?” Squintin’ felt mean. His head were aching bad.

“I ain’t... tellin’ you... accchhhggg... nothing...” said the old man, who were coughin’ now like he were gonna bite the bullet. “But Mr. Burdoch... said if you weren’t to come... accchhhggg... right away... I was to tells you... I was to tells you... accchhhggg...”

“Tells me what?”

“You’s fired.”

Squintin’ looked at the man, thinkin’ to plug him, but he were old an’ toothless, an’ not worth killin’. An’, needin’ the money to git paid so’s he could pay for the filimin’, he followed the man back to Poop’s office.

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Poop sounded mad. “Of all clobber-headed, dumb-assed, stumblebumblin’, booby-headed, clod-brained, half-witted, imbecilic, nincompoop stunts...”

Squintin’ wondered who he were talkin’ ‘bout. “You mad at somebody, Mr. Burdoch?”

Poop stared at him again, an’ sputtered, “You can’t even put two an’ two together.”

Squint’s eyes twitched. That were a tough one. His head were hurtin’, but he’d show’im. He’d figure it out. He remembered his old school marm had taught him to think a’ two cows in a pasture an’ then two other cows comin’ into the pasture an’ comin’ together with them first two cows. How many cows were that? Six? No, no, six were too many, it were more like... two. “Three?” he said.

Poop was starin’ at him. It were that look that Squintin’ hated. People was always lookin’ at him like that, like he were dumb. He weren’t dumb, he just had better things to do than learnin’, like killin’ folk an’ making movies. That’s what he were good at, but what he were ‘specially good at were makin’ movies ‘bout killin’ folk.

“I’ll speak plain, Mr. Terroteeny,” said Poop. “I’m payin’ you to help me solve a problem, not t’create one. You understand?”

“Course I understand’. I ain’t dumb,” said Squintin’ staring at a bug on the corner a’ ol’ Poop’s desk. He wanted to shoot that bug, but didn’t think ol’ Poop’d be impressed.

Poop were still starin’ at him. “I were paying you to make somebody disappear, but now, cause of your blunderin’, folks know that. I do not need you to get the town all riled up agin’ me. So I have decided I do not want you hurtin’ Miss Abigail, but I want you to git her outta town for a couple a’ days. Do you think your meagre talents might be capable of managin’ such a task?”

Squint were watchin’ ol’ Poop. He weren’t sure, but he thought he were hearin’ disrespect in Poop’s voice. He didn’t like that. Folks oughta be more respectful, him being a notorious gunslinger an’ part time movie director an’ all. Maybe he’d gun down ol’ Poop just to show’im, but as he weren’t paid yet... well, maybe he’d just wait a’ spell.

“You want me to kill her?”

“No,” screamed Poop. “That’s the last thing I want!”

Squint gazed at Poop. A man like that outta be able to control hisself. “What do you want?” he asked.

“I want you to get her away from here for a time, but I do not want you to hurt her. You understand?”

“You want me to...ah, take her for a ride in my Caddy?”

“That’s exactly what I want. Now you’re thinkin’. You could take her to Vegas an’ back, heh, heh. Bet she never seed that ‘afore. That’d take a couple a’ days.”

“Can’t do that?”

“You can’t?”

“Where’d she sit? Miss Vicki’s used to havin’ the whole front seat to herself, likes to spread herself out, if you know what a’mean. An’ my movie crew takes up all the backseat. So where’d she sit?”

Poop thought he might scream, but he knew it’d have no effect on Squintin’ except to irritate him, so, quiet-like, he said, “You’re right, we have to think a’ Miss Vickie. Maybe Miss Vicki’d like to stay in Sexy Gulch an’ do some shoppin’ at the Lingerie Emporium while you’re away.”

“You mean buying them frilly garments an’ such?” This made Squintin’ nervous cause Miss Vicki like to spend money, his money, like water.

Poop heard the sound a’ desperation in Squintin’s voice an’ understood what were causin’ it. “If you’ll allow me,” he said, “I will present you with a Sexy Gulch Lingerie Emporium gift card.”

A tear come to Squint’s eye. Ain’t no one had ever been this kind to him. “That is so... so beautiful, Mr. Burdoch,” he said, “but I don’t like wearin’ them frilly garments. It ain’t manly.”

Poop restrained hisself from running at Squintin’ with his bare hands. “It’s for you to give to Miss Vicki so’s she can have herself some shoppin’ pleasure... while you’re taking Abigail on a nice long ride.”

Squintin’ started sobbin’.

“What’s wrong now?” said Poop.

“That’s the nicest thing anybody ever done for me or my kin.”

“I didn’t know you was married to Miss Vicki.”

“Oh, we ain’t married, she keeps askin’ me ‘bout getting’ hitched, but I don’t think a gunslingin’ part time movie director oughta be gittin’ tied down. Now you take some of them movie directors what got hitched, they movies got so bad...”

“As I was sayin’,” boomed Poop, “the next town meetin’s in two days, so I don’t want you back here with Miss Abigail until after. You understand?”

“Course I understand.”

“How many days till you come back?”

Poop were lookin’ at him again like he were dumb. He felt like quittin’. He’d show’im. He pictured two days in a pasture an’ then two other days comin’ together in the pasture with them first two days. How many days were that? Six? No, six were too many, it were more like... two. “Three?” he said.

Poop were amazed. “Yes,” he said. “Three days is good. So’s ya don’t come back tomorrow, or the day after, but the day after that, is that understood?”

“Course,” said Squintin’, “I ain’t dumb.”

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Miss Vicki were starin' at the mirror in the hotel room an' sulkin' an' attendin' to her skin an' hair an' nails an' such when Squintin' giv her the gift card in the amount a' \$100. She giggled an' squealed an' threw her arms around him while he were tryin' to figure how to get Miss Abigail into his Caddy so's he could drive her outta town. All the girlies he knew were proud to go ridin in his big old Caddy, but he suspected that Miss Abigail might not be like regular girlies. But because she'd stood up to him, Squintin'd begun thinkin' that she might be sweet on him. He were even picturin' them goin' away together permanent-like, but suspected she might need a lot a' sweet-talkin' to get to know him better.

What he needed was an ider, an' iders didn't come easy to Squint. Some folk were saying how he were washed up cause his last picture, Kiss My Bullet, all 'bout how Wyatt Erp an' John Wayne gunned down a bunch a' Nazis at the OK Corral in Dodge, had no iders an' only made 50 million bucks. Well, he'd show'em. If he'd a mind to, he could turn Miss Abigail into a movie star. Yeah, that's it, that's what he'd do. He'd tell Miss Abigail that he wanted her to star in his next movie, a... a desert picture. Yeah, a desert picture. He'd never done one a' them afore. What'd he call it? That were tough. He had to do some real hard thinkin'. Then, just like that, he thought a' the perfect title. He did. All by hisself. He'd call it, Kiss My Cactus. Whoa! That were a keeper, an' he didn't need no writer-fella t' help'im. He'd jist done all the writin' by hisself. He were so excited he could hardly wait to see his name on the poster, but then he remembered what he had to do. Get Miss Abigail into his Caddy. How? Then he thought of it. He'd tell her he wanted to show her all them locations they'd be filimin'in. They jist had to take a ride in the Caddy... "Oh, Squint," he said to hisself, "you are so damn smart."

It were mid-afternoon when Squintin' drove up an' parked in front of Library. He sat there an' waited. The movie crew were on break. They was always on break now 'cause of joinin' the union, not like in the old days when folks'd practically pay him to hang around 24/7 just to fetch his cappucino. He sat in the Caddy all day an' waited, an' finally as the sun were goin' down Miss Abigail stepped out, an' Squint felt a rush a' excitement, but then the beanpole stepped out behind her. She locked the door an' looked out into the street.

"Miss Abigail?" Squintin' made his voice sound real polite-like.

She were gazin' at him. He could tell what she were thinkin'. She were happy to see'im.

"Miss Abigail, I'm Squintin' Terroteeny, you know, the notorious part time movie director."

"I am aware of whom you are, Mr.... Ter..."

"Terroteeny."

"Mr. Terroteeny."

"You seed one a' my movies?"

"No, I haven't."

"Then how'd know it were me?"

"I looked you up in a book."

"Ya did?"

"Yes."

"And ya seed my name there?"

“I did.”

“Is you impressed?”

“I don’t think ‘impressed’ is the word I would use.”

“I bet you’d use a bigger word, you being so smart an’ all. What word would you be usin’?”

Abigail paused. “Inculcated.”

“Really? Nobody ever said that ‘bout me. What’s it mean?”

“It means you’re refractory, an’ contumacious.”

“You’re the only person ever seed that. You must be the smartest woman I ever knowed, an’ the purtiest.”

Squintin’ wondered if she were flattered. “Now I have t’ tell ya my business. I been searchin’ for just the right purdy woman to star in my next movie, an’ havin’ met you, I think I found her.” Squintin’ expected Abigail to jump up an’ down an’ shriek with joy like the others, but she didn’t. She stood there as though she didn’t understand what he were talkin’ ‘bout. “You hear what I’m sayin’, Miss Abigail?”

“I do, Mr. Terroteeny.”

“You could be a big star, an’ live in Hollywood, California.”

“I’m sure I’m very flattered, but I’m otherwise engaged.”

She were engaged? To who? The Beanpole? Just like a woman. Here he’d started gettin’ fond a’ her an’ now she were gettin’ married to another guy.

“As you might have noticed, Mr. Terroteeny, I am the Librarian of the Dentonville Library.”

Squintin’ was mystified. “Is you tellin’ me no?”

“Yes, Mr. Terroteeny, I am saying no thank you.”

Squintin’ were pole axed. No woman had ever turned down being made a star in a Squintin’ Terroteeny movie. It made him mad, damn mad. He weren’t gonna stand for that. Who did she think she was? She weren’t no Vicki Seecrat. Then he remembered what Poop were expectin’ him to do. But how could he, if she weren’t willin’? Damn, he’d run outta iders. He were thinkin’ hard, cause he didn’t want ol’ Poop breathin’ down on him, or something worse. An’ he were startin’ to get that thumpin’ in his chest when he heard the beanpole speak up.

“Miss Abigail, where did you say that bicycle shop was?”

“On the edge of town, Mr. Scruples.”

“Are you sure, Miss Abigail, that you want to see the Tequila Cactus after your long day of work? A bicycle ride might be quite tiring.”

“Do you not trouble yourself, Mr. Scruples. It would do me good to fill my lungs with the scented desert air, especially during a beautiful sunset.”

Squintin’ saw his opening. “Can I come witchya?” he asked.

The Beanpole an’ Miss Abigail stared at him.

“I won’t be no trouble,” he said.

“Do you know how to ride a bicycle, Mr. Terroteeny?”

“A’ course.” Squintin’ had never been on a bike in his life. Everybody knows you can’t fire guns from a bike without fallin’ on your ass. Bikes was fer sissies. He were shootin’ guns when he were six an’ drivin’ his first car when he were seven. He’d owned 67 ve-hicles ‘fore bein’ presented wit’ the Squintin’ Terroteeny Shooter, his deluxe, special, jist fer filimin’, movie edition Caddy from the Caddylac Car Company.

He had no intention a'gettin' on a bike, but every intention of getting Miss Abigail into his Caddy.

"Well, I see no reason why you shouldn't join us, do you, Mr. Scruples?"

Squintin' could tell the beanpole weren't too keen.

"No, Miss Abigail," said Nathaniel, "although I would have thought that being a notorious part time movie director was all encompassing. Perhaps Mr. Terroteeny has more important things to do than look at a cactus."

"You kiddin'? I love them cactuses, 'xcept when I gets too close, heh, heh."

Squintin' were laughin' at his own joke cause he didn't see no smiles on the faces of Miss Abigail an' the beanpole. "Get in an' I'll drive us all down to the bike store."

He could see that both Miss Abigail an' the beanpole were hesitatin'. "Come on," he said, "git in. I'm just itchin' t'get myself on a bike." He leaned over an' opened the passenger door.

Miss Abigail made up her mind an' got in.

"Oh, Mr. Scruples," Squintin' says, friendly-like, "would you mind getting' my... ah, bikin' jacket from the trunk?"

Watchin' the mirror, Squintin' saw Nathaniel glance at Miss Abigail then walk to to the rear of the Caddy. Squintin' jammed his foot on the gas an' the Caddy took off like a bat outta hell.

"Mr. Terroteeny," said Abigail, surprised, "what do you think you're doing?! Stop the car this instant."

Squintin' started t'laugh. Gosh, he were smart, it just tickled him to seed how smart he were. "You just sit tight, Miss Abigail, an' I'm gonna show you the best time y'never had before. I'm gonna show you the sights a' Las Vegas."

"Mr. Terroteeny!!"

"I can see we was meant for each other. I like your spirit. You jus' set back an' enjoy the ride."

"Mr. Terroteeny, you are not behavin' like a gentleman. I do not go riding about unchaperoned with strange men."

Squintin' didn't know what she were meanin', so he just laughed an' kept drivin'.

"Mr. Terroteeny, I will jump from this vehicle."

"Well don't you go getting yourself all bruised up. My new leading lady got's to look her best when I goes to filming her."

Anyone travelling on the road west outta Sexy Gulch that day, around sunset, would have heared a very loud, an' angry, scream from the sweetest librarian this side a' Chicagy.

*

Meanwhile, back in Sexy Gulch, Nathaniel was staring at the Caddy's dust cloud disappearin' into the desert, wondering what he were gonna do. He know'd he couldn't catch'em on a bike, he needed an autimobile, the problem were that he didn't know none how to drive. Then he noticed them movie fellers.

"Excuse me," he said to a man wearing them ear-protectors with a wire attached, "Do you know Squintin' Terroteeny?"

"What 'bout him?"

"I need to speak to him."

"You need to contact publicity."

“No, no, I have to contact Mr. Terroteeny in his automobile.”

“He’s gone?”

“Yes, he’s driven off with Miss Abigail.”

“Mort, the Squint’s driv off with some chick.”

A man holdin’ up a clipboard, lookin’ plumb tuckered out, gave hisself a big sigh.

“That means it’s a wrap.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Nathaniel.

“If he’s got a chick with him, we’re wrapped for the day.”

“You’re not going follow him?”

“The light’s gone.”

“I don’t understand.”

“If there was still light, we’d be a filimin’ him, but when the light’s gone, an’ he’s off in the Caddy with a chick, he don’t want no filiming goin’ on, if you know what I mean.”

Nathaniel did know’d what he were meaning, an’ he didn’t like it. He went to the Sheriff’s office to git Sheriff Norman to be chasin’ after him.

“There’s been a kidnapping,” he said.

“Who?” asked Sheriff Norm.

“Miss Abigail.”

The Sheriff commenced to chucklin’ to hisself.

“This is no laughing matter, Sheriff. A woman has been abducted.”

Sheriff Norm put a damper on his mirth. “Course you’re right. This is serious business, heh, heh... sorry. Yes, serious. Who’s the kidnapper?”

“A man called Terroteeny.”

“The notorious gunslingin’ part time movie director?”

“Yes.”

“Well, this is serious. Maybe I could get me a part in his movie.”

“What movie?”

“Whatever one he’s a’ makin’.”

“A woman has been kidnapped. Aren’t you going to pursue them?”

“Can’t. The light’s gone. Won’t be able to see their tracks till morning.”

“We must do something.”

“We will, son, soon’s I git up tomorra... after I have my coffee... an’ eggs... an’ bacon... an’ release my guts... heh, heh... these things take time.”

Nathaniel left the Sheriff’s office with the most desperate feeling. He couldn’t help thinking what that Terroteeny might be doing to Miss Abigail, her being a woman an’ so frail an’ all.

*

Being kidnapped, an’ it getting’ dark, you’d ‘a thought Miss Abigail were frightened, but she weren’t. She were angry, so angry she coulda spit (which she’d a’ never done a’ course cause she were a lady). So she were tryin’ to think a’ how to get the Caddy to stop before they done driv all the way to Las Vegas. If only the car’d get stuck somewheres in the desert.

Sudden-like, though she hadn’t never done nothin’ like it afore, she reached over an’ yanked on the steerin’ wheel which turned the Caddy off the road, bounced her outta

the automobile onto the soft hot sand, an' sent the Caddy smack into a big rock. The radiator blew up, water were gushin' everywhere, an' Squintin's nose bust from the whoosh of the big air bag what inflated on impact.

"Oh, my nose, my nose. Argggh... I'm a bleedin'. Save me. I can't stand blood." Squintin' jumped outta the Caddy an' were rushing around like a chicken with its head cut off, holding his nose an' crying, "I can't stand blood. Save me, save me."

Miss Abigail rose, brushed the sand from her dress an', watchin' Squintin' holdin' his nose an' hoppin' about like a jackrabbit in heat, wondered if she'd ever met a man she had more disrespect for.

*

Now Nathaniel, he weren't no fool. While residing at the Burdoch Hotel, an' being of a curious nature, he'd overheard some mumblin's 'bout Poop wantin' to buy the library, so's he knowed he couldn't go to Poop for help. An' the more he thought 'bout it, the more it seemed to him that Poop mighta had somethin' to do with this Terroteeny makin' off with Miss Abigail. He were wonderin' what he were gonna do when he remembered reading somewheres that "it takes a thief to catch a thief." He considered that. It made sense. That Terroteeny weren't a real thief but he were behavin' like one. So's if Nathaniel could find hisself another bad'un like Terroteeny, maybe he could ask that bad'un to think like Terroteeny so's he could track him down to find out where he'd taken Miss Abigail. Nathaniel were walkin' up the main drag, thinkin' this all out when he found hisself outside the saloon. He'd heard that saloons was full of all kinds of men, some even nefarious. Maybe that's where he'd find a thief.

*

Miss Abigail had given Squintin' her hankiechief to stop the bleedin', but he were still mad.

"You wrecked my Caddy, you gots to pay for it," he said huffy-like.

"The Dentonville Library has two books on the law, Mr. Terroteeny, and I have read them both. I can inform you that by abducting a person, namely me, and holding that person against their will you have committed a crime. It is called kidnapping and it is a federal offence. If your name is to be remembered it will be as a felon."

Squintin' eyes were a' twitchin' somethin' fierce. This weren't turnin' out at all like he'd imagined. He were gonna be a hero an' now he were a criminal. This Abigail chick were one big ball a' pus. But he couldn't let her see he were concerned, so's he decided he'd act kinda disappointed like.

"I's gonna make you a star, an' even let you be my girlfriend, but you are meanest, nastiest an' most angrifyin' person I ever met," he said, tryin' to make his voice sound hurtin'. "I should bust your ass."

"Mr. Terroteeny, if you are going to use such language, you may consider our conversation at a close. You will see me next at your trial."

Then Squintin' remembered his guns. He drew one out. "There ain't gonna be no trial if t'ain't no witnesses."

"Really, Mr. Terroteeny, how juvenile. Surely you do not wish to add murder to the charge of kidnapping. Why that would be approximately 150 years you'd have to serve in a prison cell with other men of ill-repute."

“I won’t be goin’ to no prison if you don’t press no charges,” he suggested, hopefully. He were thinkin’ hard. They couldn’t throw Squintin’ Terroteeny in jail, could they?

“I will not press charges Mr. Terroteeny, if you drive me back to town.”

“My Caddy busted.”

“Well, Mr. Terroteeny, then I expect you will have an excellent opportunity of making precise and knowledgeable observations of our penal system.”

Squintin’ were startin’ to sweat. “Ain’t no good usin’ them big words,” he said defiantly, “I ain’t dumb...’xactly.”

*

Nathanial stepped into the Burdoch saloon. Being from the East, an’ ain’t never seein’ a western movie in his life, he didn’t knowed what to expect. The Saloon were brightly lit, a nasty-looking room, full a’ men who appeared like they’d bite yur nose off as soon as lookatchya. But Nathanial, never havin’ met such individuals, an’ being of a curious nature, due to his studyin’ an’ all, weren’t a’feared. He spent some time lookin’ around the room fer a thief, finally spottin’ a likely group of individuals sittin’ at a table in the corner. They was four of the most feral-lookin’ men you ever saw, grouped around a red-headed woman wearin’ the most embarrassin’ clothin’, an’ Nathanial wondered at her lack a’ modesty.

“Whatchya lookin’ at, duke?” The voice were rough, edgy-like an’ it came from a sinewy man at the table who were starin’ at him with unforgivin’ eyes an’ a mouth full a’ no teeth. When the man stood, he were as tall as Nathanial but twice as wide, sturdy-like, with bulgin’ muscles across his forehead.

“I beg your pardon?” said Nathanial, surprised at being spoken to.

“Don’t ya know it’s rude to be starin’ at men ya ain’t bin interduced to?”

“I beg your pardon. I’m looking for someone.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Yu funnin’ me, Duke?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Yu look like one them real estators.”

“I assure you, I am not.”

“Then whatchya lookin’ fer?”

“If you must know, I’m looking for a thief.”

There were a silence, then the big man started laughin’ fit to bust an’ the rest joined in.

Nathanial were puzzled. This weren’t no laughin’ matter. “May I enquire as to what is so amusing?”

That made everybody laugh all the harder.

“Yu come to the right place, Duke. We got the best thieves in the territory sitting right here at this table.”

“Oh?”

“Ain’t yu never heard of the Hole-in-Dickie-Wall Gang?”

“No,” said Nathanial.

All at once, they looked disappointed like. “Yu ain’t never heard a’us?”

Nathanial were feelin' regretful. He hadn't intended insultin' them. They seemed like nice fellers, a bit rough 'round the edges, but friendly-like. "Nooo..." he mumbled.

"Where yu from?"

"Boston."

"Boston?"

Nathanial hesitated. He didn't want to hurt their feelin's. "You, I take it, are the Hole-in-Dickie-Wall Gang?"

"Ain't no one else called that."

"Where is Dickie Wall?"

"Not where, duke, who. He's a vile real estator. After my daddy died, Dickie Wall an' the sheriff ferclosed on my mama's farm. She died a' a broken heart."

"I am sorry."

"And he done the same thing to the mamas a' all the other fellers here, so we vowed to plug that dog, an' we come right close a couple a' times but we didn't git him yet."

Nathanial were feelin' right sorry fer these men. They'd been sorely tried with evil chicanery but still believed in justice, an' he realized that maybe they could help him find Miss Abigail. "Now that you mention it," he said, lookin' like he were rememberin', "I believe I may have heard of the Hole-in... ah,..."

"Dickie Wall."

"Yes, the Hole-in-Dickie-Wall-Gang."

"Yu heard a'us? In Boston?!" The big man were excited. "Folks know'd us in Boston. We's famous?! Whatyur name, duke?"

"Nathanial Scruples."

"Pleased to meetcha, Nathanial. They call me Rawdeal, an' this here's Snake-eyes, an' that's Biteyur Tongue, an' this is Kickin' Hisheadin. An' this here's the purtiest woman this side a' anywhere, Miss Vickie Seecrat, who is feeoncsayed to that notorious gunslinger an' part time movie director, Squintin' Terroteeny.

Hearin' Squintin's name, Nathanial's eyes now fixed on Miss Vicki. He could see by her clothes (or lack thereof) that she were a poor, helpless girl with little learnin', so he felt right sorry for her, especially as he had taken a natural aversion to Squintin'.

"So, Nathanial, what yu want a thief fer?"

Nathanial glanced at Miss Vicki. He were afear'd a' hurtin' her feelin's if he said that Squintin' were a thief or a bad'un. "There is an old saying that it takes a thief to catch a thief."

Rawdeal looked impressed. "I ain't never heard that. Lookin' for a thief to catch one?"

"Yes."

"That's right smart."

"There is a certain logic..."

"Who?"

Nathanial glanced at Miss Vicki. "It's a delicate matter."

"Yu can tell us, we ain't squeamish, 'cept maybe Biteyur Tongue, who can't stand the sight of blood."

"I'd prefer not to, in the presence of a lady."

At that, Miss Vicki blushed, never havin' bin called a 'lady' before.

“If I,” said Nathaniel, “could speak privately with you, Rawdeal, I would be most grateful.”

Rawdeal were amused by Nathaniel’s way a’ speakin’, an’ allowed him to draw him aside.

“You see,” Nathaniel whispered, “the person I seek is Mr. Terroteeny himself, who has driven off with Miss Abigail DuWright, the town Librarian.”

Rawdeal looked surprised, an’ then pleased. He’d had his eye on Miss Vickie an’ now that her feenocsay was foolin’ around with another woman, well... anything was possible. He winked at Nathaniel, an’ said loudly, “Well, Mr. Scruples, me an’ the boys would be damn proud to help ya find that whelp.”

*

Even though it made his brain hurt, Squintin’ were thinkin’, an’ he were thinkin’ hard, cause he had t’ figure out where he were stood. His Caddy were broke down but he’d got Miss Abigail outta town, so’s Poop couldn’t say he weren’t doin’ his job. He were missin’ his movie crew somethin’ bad. He were just achin’ for a closeup, an’ for the makeup lady to fix his nose. He needed gittin’ some attention to, to make him feel special. But out here in the desert with his Caddy broke down, he wouldn’t be makin’ no movie starrin’ Miss Abigail, an’ then he realized he weren’t gonna be doin’ that anyway, cause it were just a trick to get her outta town. His brain were all muddled. Must’a been cause a’ the Caddy crashin’. He remembered he still had t’ keep this Abigail chick out here for... how many days were it... six? No, t’were more like two. That’s right, Poop said ‘two’.

“I warn you,” said Abigail’s voice from the dark behind the Caddy. “As soon as it is light, I am leaving here.”

“Can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Cause I says so.”

“Oh Mr. Terroteeny, you are so disturbed.”

What were she talkin’ ‘bout? He weren’t disturbed ‘bout nothing. “I ain’t disturbed an’ you ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

“You are disturbed, Mr. Terroteeny.”

“T’ain’t.”

“Then why are your movies so violent?”

“Why? Whatcha mean why?”

“Why can’t you make a nice movie without guns?”

“Whatchyu talkin’ about? You gots’ave guns. T’wouldn’t be a movie with no guns? What’d we be doin’ if we wasn’t firin’ our guns?”

“You see, Mr. Terroteeny, that’s what I’m referring to. Making movies with guns means you’re violent.”

“I ain’t. My friends say I’s a pussycat. ‘Sides, they’s only movies, just pretend.”

“And you don’t think that all that violence in your movies creates real violence?”

“Oh, it makes me mad, damn mad, when folk talk like that. Ain’t nothing wrong with makin’ movies ‘bout killin’ folk. It’s just fun.”

“I suggest Mr. Terroteeny, that making violent movies is what makes you kill people.”

“It’s just a movie.”

“Just a movie? When you walk down the street and fire your gun and kill people?”

“That’s right. When I walks down the street killin’ folk, my movie crew is filiming every minute, so’s it ain’t like real killin’, it’s just makin’ movies.”

This Abigail chick were weird. She oughta have some respect. He weren’t gonna listen to her no more. He didn’t become a big time, part time movie director by makin’ movies with no guns, an’ lettin’ girlies tell him what to do. No girlie ever dared talk to him like that. They was always cheerin’ when he were killin’ folk.

“Are you telling me, Mr. Terroteeny...”

“Why can’t ya call me Squint’, all the other girlies does.” Why didn’t she like him?

“Are you tellin’ me, Mr. Terroteeny, that when you’re filiming yourself killing folks, they don’t die?”

“Course they die, cause I shoot’s’em.”

“I call that real violence, Mr. Terroteeny, and I’d suggest that that the violence in your movies has made you a violent person.”

Squintin’ were thinkin’ hard. If he were filiming it, it weren’t real killin’, were it? But when they died, it were real, t’weren’t it? But how could it be real if he were filiming it? Squintin’ got hissself so confused it were makin’ his head hurt somethin’ fierce. “You got any a’ them headache pills?”

“No, Mr. Terroteeny. I do not tolerate headaches.”

Squintin’ didn’t like the way she were talkin’, preachin’ at him, disrespectful-like. She may not be gittin’ headaches, but she were sure good at givin’em.

*

Nathanial slept ‘bout two hours in his room at the Hotel, an’ just before first light went to searchin’ for the garage in the alley back of the hotel, where Rawhide had told him they’d be residin’. An’ that’s where he found’em, curled up on a pile a’ rags, sleepin’ off their drinkin’.

“Rawdeal,” he said, quietlike, but the gang was dead to the world, a’ snorin’ an’ talkin’ in their sleep, somethin’ fierce, havin’ drunk so much whiskey an’ all. So Nathanial, being careful-like, took refuge behind one of them walls where the stables had been, took a shovel an’ beat on a large washtub while singin’ the National Anthem (he had a right pleasin’ voice an’ it t’were one a’ his favourites). The clamourin’ woke up the Gang who grabbed their guns an’ started firin’ everywhere.

“Cease shooting!” shouted Nathanial.

The shootin’ stopped an’ Nathanial stepped out.

“It’s almost light,” he said. “We have to start searching for Miss Abigail.”

The Gang moaned.

“Only place I’s goin’ is back to sleep,” whined Biteyur Tongue.

“Everybody up,” said Rawdeal. “We told Nat we’d help’em an’ that’s what we’re gonna do.”

*

Miss Abigail were watchin’ Squintin’ snorin’. She had slept in the Caddy, so he were lying on his back on the ground with his head on a rock, holdin’ his two guns cross his chest. For a few seconds, he’d seem peaceful, almost like a little boy, then he’d start to snort somethin’ fierce. Havin’ read a medical book, Miss Abigail knew that a simple

operation could relieve Squintin' a' his condition, but why should she be worryin' 'bout a thing like that? T'weren't no concern a' hers. Sometimes she were jist so tired of being a do-gooder, it made her awful weary.

She rose, wrapped her scarf 'round her neck to keep out the desert chill, an' started walkin' back along the road to town.

*

In the alley off the garage, Nathaniel stared at a beat-up Volkswagen Beetle 'bout 40 years old, painted green an' covered with funny-lookin' paintin's of flowers. "Where are your horses?" he asked.

"Can't afford'em no more. We do our thievin' business in Gertie," said Rawdeal, pointin' at the Beetle. "She runs real good."

Nathaniel squeezed into the backseat between Snake-eyes an' Bityr Tongue who were smellin' somethin' fierce.

"Everybody comfy?" asked Rawdeal.

"It is somewhat tight," said Nathaniel.

"Tight? We call this empty. Why, when we sets our minds to it, we can get nine desperados an' a young heifer in this here vehicle," said Rawdeal proudly, startin' the engine. "Here we go."

He put the car in gear an' off they set. Kickin' Hisheadin sat in the passenger seat. Every hundred yards or so, Rawdeal'd stop the Beetle, Kickin'd get out an' stare down at the road, nod, an' git back in the car an' they'd driv on. To Nathaniel, it seemed like it were takin' forever, an' he prayed they'd find Miss Abigail soon.

*

The sun was over the horizon now an' the dry morning air smelt a' sagebrush. T'were beautiful on the desert even though it t'were cool like, but Miss Abigail, after walkin' a spell, didn't feel the cold so much an' were enjoyin' the light comin' up an' the solitude, which were why she lived way out here in the West, an' hadn't gone back East to fulfil herself. Gazin' at the scenery, she spotted it, off to her right, back up an arroyo leading off the road, one a' them huge Tequila Cactuses, or at least that's what she took it fer from Nathaniel's description. She thought of Nathaniel. He were a nice young man, he'd make some deserving woman a fine husband. Course, she herself weren't interested in gittin' tied down for the rest a' her life. She had her work cut out fer her, things she wanted to be accomplishin' while she were still young, like savin' the Amazon an' buildin' libraries for all the poor children of India, an' ending war, but she could take a look at the cactus close up so's she'd could tell him 'bout it, in case he were interested. Carefully, she stepped off the road an' started climbin'.

*

Squintin' opened his eyes an' tried to figure out where he was an' who he was. Yeah, right, he were Squintin' Terroteeny. Good. Now where was he? He felt the weight of guns on his chest. They was his guns a' course. He always laid with his guns on his chest when he were sleepin' outdoors. Outdoors? What were he doin' outdoors? Lyin' on his back? In the sand? He were in the desert? What were he doin' here? He neck hurt somethin' fierce. Then he remembered Miss Abigail an', at that moment, realized that somethin' were lickin' his ear. "Oh, Miss Abigail," he cooed. It were a ticklish feelin' an' it made him mushy inside. He turned to give her a kiss an' found

hissself lookin' into the eyes of a Horned Lizard. Course, Squintin', who'd never been an outdoorsy person, didn't know it were a horned lizard. He just knew it looked mean an' he were a'scared a' it. "Agggghhh," he shrieked, jumpin' up an' runnin' around, firin' his guns an' yellin'. "Save me, save me."

*

The Beetle'd stopped so's Kickin' Hisheadin could study the road ahead. In the back, squeezed between Bityur Tongue an' Snake-eyes, Nathaniel were feelin' cramped an' hot.

"How does Kickin' Hisheadin know what to look for?"

"Ain't nobody here," said Rawdeal, "can afford a Caddy, so them big tire tracks stick out a mile."

Nathaniel glanced up at the rise beside the road an' could see, just beyond, the tip of a giant Tequila Cactus. But he were so concerned 'bout Miss Abigail that he didn't even make a note to come back to take a look later, nor did he know that right then an' there Miss Abigail herself were lookin' at that very same cactus. Kickin' Hisheadin got hissself back in an' just as they was 'bout to driv on, they was hearing gunshots from up ahead. Rawdeal put the car in gear an' they sped down the road.

*

Havin' clumb all the way up, Miss Abigail was admirin' the Tequila Cactus. It stood 'bout 10 feet tall an' were majestic like. Then she heard gunfire an' looked down the arroyo an' seed a funny coloured Beetle driv by real fast an' on outta sight. She realized if she wanted a ride back to town, she'd have t'stick by the road. She knowed she were in no danger, except for being caught in the sun an' gittin' all dehydrated, so she were hardly concerned as she started down the arroyo to make her way back to town.

*

The Beetle rounded a corner of the butte an' stopped. Ahead they could see the Caddy off a' the road to one side, but t'weren't nobody in sight. Slowly, everybody got out. Rawdeal put his finger to his lips to tell his gang to be makin' no noise, then took his gun from his holster. The others did the same. Slowly they walked on down the road towards the Caddy, lookin' everywhere, an' coverin' theyselves.

*

When Squintin's guns'd ran out a' bullets, he looked around in a panic for a place to reload, an' run behind a big boulder. He didn't know if he'd a kilt that vicious critter, but he didn't think it'd bit him none. He peeked around the boulder to see if it were dead an' seed it lyin' near the front of the Caddy. T'weren't movin'. Maybe he plugged it. He were 'bout to go an' look when he seed, walkin' careful-like down the road, a bunch of men with their guns drawn. He pulled back. Who was they? Was they after him? Was they gonna kill'im? He peeked out again an' saw the beanpole followin' behind. What were he be doin' with'em? As quiet as could be, he set to reloadin' his pistols.

*

Rawdeal stopped an' raised his hand. They all stopped. He cupped his ear. They all cupped they ears an' listened. Comin' from behind the big boulder at the side of road was the sounds a' somebody loadin' their guns.

Now Nathaniel, who'd been worried sick 'bout Miss Abigail, were wondering where she were. Seein' the Caddy, he thought it likely that it were Squintin' who were behind that rock, but were she there to? Did Squintin' know they was there, an' what would he be doin' if they was t'confront him? Nathaniel were aware that he needed a clever way a' trickin' Squintin' into droppin' his guns. He'd been thinkin' 'bout catchin' up to Squintin' an' what he were gonna do. He were not a violent man, but he wanted to see justice done an' to teach Squintin' a lesson. He suspected that the Sheriff weren't gonna be the one to do that, or anybody else, but he were aware, from a brief spell of studyin' the law, that there were provision for a citizen's arrest. Anybody, with due cause, could arrest anybody else who were doin' wrong.

He tapped Rawdeal on the shoulder an' indicated that he, Nathaniel, would do the talkin'. Rawdeal nodded.

"Squintin' Terroteeny," Nathaniel said loudly, "I arrest you in the name of the law, for the abduction an' confinement of Miss Abigail DuWright."

At first, there were silence from behind the big boulder.

"What?" said Squintin'.

"I repeat. I arrest you in the name of the law, for the abduction an' confinement of Miss Abigail DuWright."

"You ain't no lawman," sneered Squintin' from behind the boulder.

"That is correct, but I have been deputized by the state to make a citizen's arrest."

"Whatchayu talkin' 'bout? Where's it say that? Lemme see."

"Before you come out from behind that rock I suggest you put down your guns. My deputies do not want to do you grievous injury."

"No one's gittin' my guns."

"Very well, my deputies will have no alternative but to fire theirs when they see you, an' as there are four of them, an' only one of you, the outcome seems fairly certain."

There were a long silence from behind the boulder an' then they could see a pair a 'hands emergin' in the air from behind the big rock, an' Squintin' hisself steppin' into view. "Don't you shoot me," he said, attemptin' to look defiant' like.

"Where's Miss Abigail?"

"I dunno. She left me out here all by myself. An' I were attacked by a big vicious crocodile, but I gunned it down."

The gang, lookin' around, spotted the Horned Lizard on the ground. Kickin' Hisheadin walked over an' picked it up between his fingers. It were tiny an' puny like. Then he looked at Squintin', an' he were mad. "You shot this poor little Horned Lizard what never done you no harm?"

"He were attackin' me," pouted Squintin'. "It were self defence."

"The Horned Lizard," said Kickin' Hisheadin, "is the gentlest creature in the desert. What you done were murder."

"T'weren't no murder. T'were gonna kill me."

Kickin' Hisheadin walked over to Squintin', held his pistol at Squintin's head an' said, "I oughta plug you right now, but we're gonna give ya what you didn't give this poor critter, a fair trial."

Squintin' felt plumb terrified.

"All those," said Kickin' Hisheadin, "who think he's guilty say 'aye'."

"Aye," said the whole gang in unison.

“You’s guilty as sin, an’ I sentence you...”

“Alright,” said Nathaniel, “first things first. We have to find Miss Abigail. We will take Mr. Terroteeny into town to be incarcerated by the Sheriff an’ processed by due law. But we have to find Miss Abigail first.”

“I ain’t lookin’ fur her,” whined Squintin’.

“Yu’re gonna be the first,” said Rawdeal, aimin’ his gun at Squintin’ an’ cockin’ the hammer.

With all their guns pointin’ at him, Squintin’ started walkin’ up the nearest arroyo. Nathaniel were just getting ready to be suggestin’ that they all fan out when a big shiny black Buick come roarin’ down the road from town an’ zip by.

“They he goes,” shouted Rawdeal, firin’ at the vehicle an’ then jumpin’ into the Beetle, followed by the others who all squeezed theyselves inside.

“Who?” asked Nathaniel.

“Little Dickie Wall. The man we vowed to plug.”

“But Miss Abigail...”

“We’ll be back as soon’s as we put some holes in that cur,” Rawdeal shouted, puttin’ the Beetle in gear an’ roarin’ off in a cloud a’ dust.

Nathaniel were watchin’ it disappear when he realized that Squintin’ were creepin’ back to git his guns. He picked up a rock.

“Mr. Terroteeny, would you like to see another demonstration of my tossing ability?”

“No,” muttered Squintin’.

“Then we best start lookin’ for Miss Abigail.”

*

Now Miss Abigail had just barely got back on the road when a big ol’ black Buick, going a hundred mile an hour, an’ kickin’ up all kinds a’ dust, driv by, almost running her down. She weren’t gonna stay on that road if t’were so unpleasin’, an’ so’s she went trudgin’ up another arroyo. After climbin’ for some time, an’ perspirin’, she seed in the distance some kinda habitation near the top. As she come closer, she seed it t’weren’t no habitation ‘xactly, more like an overcroppin’ a’ rock with some deadwood piled ‘round. Were somebody livin’ there? She seed bits of clothin’ in a pile, a pot on campfire ashes, a bedroll agin’ the rock face, a box of provisions an’, what were puzzlin’, some kind a’ large paintin’ turned agin’ the rock.

Then she heard the sounded a’ somebody mutterin’ to theyself. She were puzzled cause they t’weren’t nobody in sight. She knowed it were a man chantin’ like, but she were havin’ trouble makin’ out the words. She were thinkin’ he were sayin’ somethin’ like, “ready, ready, ready,” over an’ over. What were he talkin’ ‘bout?

She peeked around the edge a’ the overhang. There, at the top of the incline, sittin’ on a large rock, she seed a wizened old man, toothless, loose strands of greasy white hair plastered cross his scalp, his legs crossed funny-like, barely covered by torn dirty trousers held up by a piece a’ twine, an’ his shirt ripped so’s his belly were stickin’ out. Now she could make out them words. It sounded like “I’m ready, I’m ready, I’m ready. Ready, ready, ready... to rock’n’roll,” over an’ over. The man were feelin’ her presence an’ stopped. He were lookin’ down at her, piercin’ her with his steely blue eyes. Abigail thought he had a kinda what folks call a carisma.

“Hello,” she said, tryin’ to be friendly.

He smiled an' bowed his head, then sung out, "You ain't never caught a rabbit, an' you ain't no friend of mine."

"Pardon me?" said Abigail, not sure if she'd were hearing too good.

He gits to his feet. "You ain't nothin' but a hound dog," he said, smiling.

Abigail were perplexed. "My name is Abigail DuWright, the Librarian of Dentonville. an' you are...?"

"I'm ready, ready, ready, Teddy."

"I'm delighted to meet you, Teddy. Do you live alone out here in the desert?"

"I've been travellin' night an' day, I been runnin' all the way, baby trying to git to you."

"What?"

"You can burn my house, steal my car, drink my liquor from an ol' fruit jar."

"Oh," said Abigail, not knowin' what else to say.

"Well, bless my soul. What's wrong with me? I'm buzzin' like a man on a fuzzy tree. My friends say I'm actin' wild as a bug. I'm in love. I'm all shook up."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand." Abigail were feelin' quite strange an' a little frightened, not knowin' what this old man were tryin' to tell her.

The man held up his finger. He walked to the cave an' come back carryin' a paintin' which he turned around to reveal a black velvet portrait a' Elvis. He set it agin the rock an' bowed to it, starin' at it lovin'ly.

"Lord above me knows I love you," he sung. "It was He who brought me through, when my way was dark as night, He would shine His brightest light, when I was tryin' to get to you."

Now Abigail begun to understan', sorta. Her momma an' daddy had been Elvis fans which is why all them words seemed familiar. What she were understandin' were that this man were not only an Elvis fan, it were his religion. She'd read somewheres 'bout a cult a' people who lived by theyselves but were speakin' t'each other by singin' Elvis' songs. She felt like one a' them anthrapoligers what discovers people livin' in the backwoods what nobody ever seed afore. "You love Elvis," she said, impressed.

The man grinned an' nodded. "My tongue gets tied when I try to speak. My insides shakin' like a leaf on a tree. There's only one cure for this body of mine. That's to have that girl that I love so fine."

"You have Elvis in your heart."

The man nodded agin.

"You worship Elvis."

The man bowed low, his almost bald head reflectin' in the sun.

"That is so touching," she said.

A tear come to the man's eye. "Well, since my baby left me. I found a new place to dwell. It's down at the end of lonely street. It's Heartbreak Hotel. O Baby so lonely, baby, O baby so lonely, O baby so lonely, I could die."

"You are such a sweet person, and you sing so pretty," said Abigail. "Just like Elvis."

The man's face took on what they call a kinda rupture.

*

Squintin' were hot, thirsty, an' tired a' being forced to trudge up a rocky incline by a beanpole holdin' a rock. It were embarrassin'. If he could get his hands on his guns,

there wouldn't be nothin' left a' that skinny, poncey-talkin' bag a' pus. Then he remembered how that Abigail chick had bin threatenin' him. He turned an' sneered at Nathaniel. "This here's kidnappin' an' you's gonna git yurself felonized for that."

"For allowing you to help me search for Miss Abigail?"

"You ain't allowin' me. You's forcin' me."

"I hardly think so."

"You's holdin' that rock."

"What rock?" The beanpole held out his hands. They was empty.

"I'm gonna kill you," screamed Squintin', runnin' at'im with his bare hands, an' wantin' so bad to kill'im.

Nathaniel stepped aside an', as Squintin' tripped, tumbled past him, an' rolled down the arroyo, he trotted on. From the top, he could see the desert spread out all around him, his eyes searchin' the entire horizon. He couldn't see no sign of Abigail, but from a rise nearby he spotted a whiff of smoke. It being the only sign a' life in any direction, he set out to see if it t'were somebody who'd seed her.

*

Squintin' were runnin' hard. He were so mad he coulda spit if his mouth weren't so parched. His feet hurt somethin' bad an' his head were poundin' but if were the last thing he done he'd kill that smart aleccy beanpole, which is why he were makin' for his Caddy to find his guns so's he could put ten thousand bullet holes in him. He'd never been so mad. He felt real dramatic like, an' were only sorry his movie crew weren't there filimin' it.

When he finally got hisself down the arroyo, he looked down the road an' seed a man hookin' up a tow truck to his Caddy. He were in luck.

"Hey," he shouted, "wait for me."

The tow truck started up, turned 'bout an' was comin' back in his direction, headin' for town.

Squintin' put hisself in the middle of the road. The truck stopped.

"I gotta git my guns," said Squintin' to the driver.

"What yu talkin' 'bout?" asked the driver, a big mound of meat who Squintin' thought didn't look none too swift.

"That's my Caddy. I just gotta git my guns."

"This ain't your Caddy."

"What?"

The driver pointed to the side a' his door which read 'Desert Salvage'. "It's my Caddy."

"Whatchya talkin' 'bout?" said Squintin'

"The law a' the desert," explained the driver. "Anythin' left in the desert's up for grabs." He put the truck in gear an' started drivin' right at Squint who had to jump outta the way. The truck driv off the down the road, the Caddy trailin' behind.

"You sumbich, you come here!" cried Squintin'. "I'm Squintin' Terroteeeeeeny!" He were so distraught he could hardly breathe. He ran to the big rock, lookin' for his guns, found'em an' started runnin' down the road after the truck. He kept firin' till he'd fired almost every shot he had an' busted the windshield on his Caddy, but the tow truck driv on. He stopped shootin', dropped hisself onto the ground an' started to wail like a baby.

*

When Abigail had asked the nice Elvis man the way back to Sexy Gulch, he pointed down another arroyo that she realized were a shortcut to the road back to town. She thanked him, told him it were a pleasure havin' met him, an' started climbin' down, weavin' her way among the rocks.

T'weren't but a short time later that Nathaniel arrived there an', peekin' inside the overhangin' saw an ol' man sittin' funny like before a fire, pourin' tea outta a teapot into a cup an' singin' them strange words. "It's now or never," the man hummed. "Come hold me tight. Kiss me my darlin'. Be mine tonight. Tomorrow will be too late, it's now or never. My love won't wait."

When the man saw him, he pointed to the black velvet portrait of Elvis, but Nathaniel were pole-axed. You see, his mommy an' daddy had been profesoor types an' he'd lived whatchya call a sheltered life an' even though he'd a' heard a' Elvis he didn't know he were a big singin' an' movie star, so's he didn't understan' why the man were singin' them strange words. He'd never heard anythin' like'em. He'd bin so busy readin' them books all the time he was never havin' the opportunity to be listenin' to the Hit Parade.

But it were fortunate that the man understood Nathaniel when he asked if he'd seed a young woman lookin' like Abigail, an' were able to point him to the arroyo that she were presently climbin' down.

*

In the meantime, Squintin' were trudgin' back along the road to town. He were hot, tired, thirsty an' mad. He were so mad. He checked his guns. He had one bullet in each one. How many people could he kill? He pictured one bullet in a pasture an' then t'other bullet comin' together in the pasture with that first bullet. How many bullets were that... three? No, t'were more like two. Two people? That weren't hardly no fun. 'Sides, he were worried 'bout ol' Burdoch. He'd lost Miss Abigail. Maybe he'd git lucky an' she'd die in the desert so's she wouldn't turn up in Sexy Gulch right away, at least not 'til ol' Burdoch paid him. Course he couldn't tell the old geezer he'd lost Abigail, he'd just pretend he had her stashed away somewheres. Maybe this'd all work out. He were so tired a' being a gunslinger an' wanted to get back to makin' movies. He could hardly wait to have the makeup lady do his face up nice an' purty. He were dreamin' 'bout his next picture, Kiss My Cactus, when he heard an autimobile comin' down the road behind him. He jumped to one side an' held out his thumb, watchin' an old Volkswagen Beetle speedin' at him. The Beetle whipped by an' he were just 'bout to start cussin' when it stopped an' backed up. He could see four men in the autimobile an' they didn't look none too swift.

"Need a ride?" asked the driver, a big, rough, edgy-like man with unforgivin' eyes an' a mouth full a' no teeth.

Squintin' couldn't believe his ears. Were this guy a rockhead or what? "No," he said, with a sneer, "I'm practicin' my walkin'."

"Okay," said the man, put the Beetle in gear an' roared off.

"Wait, wait," cried Squintin'. "Agggggghhhhhhhh! I were funnin' you, you stupid, stupid, ah... axhead. You pig-headed... donkey. You bag a' pus, you... you...you..."

Squintin' wanted so badly to lie down an' die, but because he were Squintin' Terroteeny, he jist knowed he were havin' to fight on, so's he kept trudgin' down the road, an' were just comin' round a bend when he caught his breath. The Beetle were stopped dead ahead. He could hardly believe his luck. Standin' beside it were Miss Abigail talkin' to the driver. He jumped back behind a boulder an' peeked out to see what were happenin'. She hadn't seed him. Good. He took out his guns. Maybe he could plug'er an' blame it on them cow-brains. No, he couldn't plug her. He just knew if he done that, it'd bring'im bad luck. He didn't know how, but he knew it would. But what he could do were fire his guns an' scare them cow brains in the Beetle, then they'd vamoose an' he'd be back with Miss Abigail. He peeked around the boulder again. The Beetle were drivin' off an' t'weren't no sign of Miss Abigail.

"Agggggghhhhhhh!" he cried again, throwin' hissself into the dirt an' beatin' the ground with his paws. Weren't nothin' gonna go right fer him?!

Then he looked up an' seed him. Comin' down the arroyo an' starin' after the Beetle disappearin' down the road. The beanpole. Maybe it were his lucky day. He picked up his guns. He were sorry he only had two shots. He wanted so bad t'put ten thousand bullet holes in that pouncy-talkin' bag a' pus he could taste it. He'd best git close to make them two bullets count, an' started edgin' towards him. He were 'bout 100 feet away when the beanpole turned an' saw him. Squintin' expect'd him to run, but he didn't. What were he doin'? Nothin'. He were just standin' there, lookin' back at him. He weren't even smart enough to run away.

Squintin' wanted to enjoy hissself while killin' the beanpole, so he moseyed up to him slow like, takin' his time. "I expect," said Squintin', all dramatic like, "you know it's your time to die."

"Oh I'm not going to die today."

"Oh yes you are."

"I beg to differ. I'm not."

"How'd you know yer not gonna die?"

"Because you're out of bullets."

"No, I ain't. I gots two left."

"Thank you for telling me."

Damn. Squintin' coulda spit. He'd been tricked. "That's still one too many for you, heh, heh."

"You'll need more than that."

"Why?"

"Because you're such a bad shot."

"What?! Where'd you heared that? I ain't no bad shot. I won me the National Guns For Life Club shootin' match. I killed 37 possums."

"Possums are easy to kill. They don't move."

"Your talkin's makin' me mad."

"I still say you're a bad shot."

"I'm gonna shoot you, then you'll see what a bad shot I am."

"I'm standing right in front of you. A five year old girl who'd never held a firearm in her life could hit me at this range, but you won't."

"You're tryin' to trick me."

"And you're trying to deny what a bad shot you are."

Squintin'd never been this angry afore. After he kilt this beanpole, he'd find that Abigail chick an' kill her, then maybe he'd kill that old fart Burdoch, he didn't care now if he got paid or not. He were tired of being laughed at an' disrepected. He'd kill'em all.

"Go on," said Nathaniel, "shoot me in cold blood. Isn't that your reputation?"

"What you talkin' 'bout my reputation? Folks knowed I's a good guy, they seed it in all my movies, me fightin' for justice."

"Through the barrel of a gun."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Justice is found in a courtroom, not by shooting innocent people."

"Oh I know. I forgot. You's a liberal like that Abigail chick."

"Yes unfortunately, I believe in true justice. I was brought up on the golden rule. But you probably don't know what that is."

"Course I know what it is." Squintin' were thinkin' hard. "What is it?"

"Do unto others..."

"Don't tell me the rest, I knowed it. Ah... 'before they doed unto you."

The beanpole were lookin' at him with the strangest look, like he were laughin' at him an' cryin' at the same time. Squintin' raised one of his pistols an' shot.

"As I thought," said Nathaniel. "You are a bad shot."

Squintin' brought his other gun up an' fired. Nathaniel flinched an' slowly fell, clutchin' his leg. Squintin' walked over an' looked down at him.

"Even if I had more bullets, I wouldn't bother puttin' you outta your misery. I want you to die slow-like out here in desert, rememberin' how you was laughin at me."

He put his guns back in their holsters, took a final look at the beanpole an' continyaed on down the road back to town.

*

Abigail were grateful for the ride, though none to happy with the stench that were comin' off a' Biteyur Tongue.

"I wonder," she said, "if it might be possible to roll the windows down."

"Can't," said Rawdeal. "Snakeeyes is aller'gic to dust, an' the windas is all stuck anyways."

"What," she inquired, "if I may ask, were you gentlemen doing out in the desert?"

"We's desperados. We was chasin' a no good cur. Perhaps yu heard a' us. The Hole-in-Dickie-Wall Gang?"

"I'm sorry, I can't say I have."

"Yu don't live 'round here?"

"I live in Dentonville."

"Where's that?"

"It's now called Sexy Gulch."

"That's our hangout. Yu's from there?"

"Yes?"

"And yu ain't never heard a' us?"

"No, but I spend most of my time in the Library."

"Ain't never been in there. What's it like?"

"It's very pleasant, quiet an' restful an', of course, full of wonderful books to read."

"None a' us can read."

"I can read my name," said Snakeeyes.

"Well, if you were to come to the Library, perhaps I show you some books that would help you to learn to read."

"Yu could?"

"I'm not a teacher, of course."

"What are yu?"

"I'm the librarian."

Rawdeal stomped on the brake, an' the Beetle come to a stop sudden like so's Kickin' Hisheadin bashed his nose on the windshield.

"Yur Miss Abigail?!" shouted Rawdeal.

*

Squintin' were gittin' tired. The sun were hot, too damn hot. His feet were sore, his mouth were sore from being so parched, an' his neck were sore from lying on a rock all night. He wished he were lyin' in his cabana at the Beverly Hills Hotel watching the girlies in they skimpy bikinis splashin' in the water, an' the waiter bringin' him a nice tall cool iced caramel coffee. Ohh, he could almost taste it. Bein' a gunslinger weren't all it were cracked up to be. He'd liked t'give it all up, but everybody were countin' on him to be fightin' for justice an' all, an' filimin' it.

He'd just come round a bend in the road when that Volkswagen Beetle come roarin' down the road away from town, almost runnin' him down an' kickin' up a cloud a' dust which set hisself off a' coughin'. Grabbin' a look inside, he caught a glimpse of that Abigail chick in the back seat. What were goin' on here?

*

Nathanial had bound his leg up usin' his belt as a turnakey, an' were about to git hisself up an' start hobblin' back to town when the Beetle come roarin' up, stops, all doors was flung open an' the Hole-in-Dickie-Wall-Gang piled out alongside Miss Abigail who rushed right to his side. He were right surprised.

"Miss Abigail?"

"Oh Mr. Scruples," she cried. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I think I'm alright."

Examinin' his leg, she said, "We have to get you to a doctor as quickly as we can."

"Yes, I think that's a good idea."

"Who did this? Was it that Mr. Terroteeny?"

"He's not a very good shot."

"He is a wicked, wicked man."

"Miss Abigail, I fear you are consumed by anger."

"I am, Mr. Scruples, at the sheer injustice of it all. You are such a good man." She knelt beside him an' put his head in her lap. "Rawdeal! Come, we have to get Mr. Scruples to a doctor."

They's helped him hobble to Beetle, an' piled inside with Nathanial an' Miss Abigail in the back with Bityur tongue, an' Snakeeyes none too happy at havin' to sit on Kickin' Hisheadin's lap.

*

"You come one step closer," growled Squintin', "and I blows your head off."

He had both guns trained on the snake by the side a' the road. He were sure the snake didn't know that he were bluffin', that his guns t'weren't loaded. He were just a dumb ol' snake. He waited for the snake to make his move, an' just when it decided Squintin' were too dangerous an' were backin' off, the Volkswagen Beetle come roarin' back down t'other way headin' for town, kickin' up a big cloud a' dust, almost runnin' him down again.

"Damn, arrrggghh," he shouted, coughin' somethin' fierce.

*

Inside the Beetle, Miss Abigail were offerin' comfort to Nathaniel by allowin' him to lean his head agin' her... well, agin' her. She could tell he were sufferin' an' wanted to offer what they call bomb an' comfort, to sooth his pain away. Why did she wanna do this, she wondered. What were she a' feelin'? It t'were only the common goodness of folks helpin' each other. That's all it t'were.

When they driv in t'Sexy Gulch, Miss Abigail told Rawdeal to pull up in front a' the doc's house which were 'bout 100 years old an' wooden an' rickety, an' fallin' down in most places, all they windas an' doors was hangin' in the most terrible like state. The gang helped Nathaniel limp inside. Leadin' the way inside, Miss Abigail called out but there t'weren't no answer. She were just about to go out agin' in search a' the doctor when the front door opened an' Doctor Scalapini, who'd just as soon cut ya open as look at ya, come in behind'em, with his arms full a' packages an' bags from the Sexy Gulch Lingerie Emporium. Miss Abigail looked at them packages an' then at him. He seemed a mite embarrassed.

"I didn't know... I... ah, had an appointment this morning," he said. "I was just out shoppin'... for a birthday present... or two... for my niece... ah, nieces."

"We don't have an appointment," said Abigail. "This is an emergency. This man has been shot."

"Oh," said Doc Scalapini. "Take him into the dining room, er, uh, surgery. I'll just put these down."

When they got Nathaniel comfy on the big table, the doc commenced examinin' his wound.

"That leg'll have to come off," he said.

Abigail could see Nathaniel flinch.

"I'm not a doctor," she said, "but it appears to me to be only a flesh wound."

"Course it is. I were just funnin' ya, but if I were to take it off, he wouldn't have t'join the army."

"That seems a bit drastic."

"You never know when them politicians gonna declare war on somebody."

The doctor leaned over Nathaniel an' asked loudly, "What kind a' drugs you like?"

"No need to shout, doctor. He can hear you."

*

The afternoon sun were headin' towards the mountains. It were a scorcher of a day an' Squintin' were so hot, sore an' tired, he could barely walk. His \$10,000 genuine Chincuna cowboy boots had squinched up his feet somethin' bad. As he were despairin', he heard a car comin' an' put his thumb out. It t'were a Buick roarin' down the road an' it weren't slowin' down. Squintin' could tell it weren't gonna stop, an' it made him so

damn mad, he picked up a rock an', as it passed him by, he threw it at the car. The rock clanged against the door. The Buick screeched to a stop. Then it backed up. Squintin' were concerned cause he had no more bullets, but he realized the driver wouldna knowed that. He took out his guns. The Buick stopped backin' up. The door opened an' the most snivellin' lookin' man Squintin' ever seed git out an' were starin' at him.

"I'm sorry, pardon me, I'm sorry, did you happen to throw a rock at my car?" the driver said, most humble like.

"I thought you's somebody else."

"I'm not. I wish I was, but I'm not, an' so I'm sorry, yes I'm sorry, I ain't."

"I seed that."

Careful like, the driver took a few steps forward, peerin' at him. "Ain't you Squintin' Terroteeny?"

"You knowed me?"

"Course I do, Mr. Terroteeny, I'm sorry. If ya don't mind, I seed all your movies. I loves it when you kills folk. Makes me feel good inside. Could I... I hope ya don't take no offence... get your autograph? Fer my wife?"

"Course you can. What's your name?"

"Dickie Wall."

"Well, Dickie, if you's give me a ride back to town, I'll git you a deluxe eight by ten colour glossy photograph with a personal message from myself to your charmin' wife writ right across it."

"You will?"

"Course I will. I ain't Squintin' Terroteeny for nothin'."

*

Once Doc Scalapini finished pastin' the bandage on Nathaniel's leg, he took out his stetho-scope an' begun goin' up an' down his body.

Abigail were watchin' him sharp like. "Doctor, what are you doing?"

"I'm just seein' if there's anything' else I can fix. Hmmm. He seems to got everything... two legs, two feet, two arms, two hands, one torso, one head, one chest... you want me to look at his privates?"

"No, doctor," said Abigail, "that's not necessary."

"It's always good to check. I knowed a feller once, his privates fell off in the middle of the night, he were walkin' around for weeks without'em."

"I believe I am completely intact, Doctor," said Nathaniel, politely.

"This feller didn't knowed nothin' were wrong until he an' his wife was tryin'..."

"I'm fine, Doctor," said Nathaniel quickly.

"What about some drugs? Lemme write ya up some prescriptions."

"I don't need any drugs," said Nathaniel, watchin' him careful like now.

"Is you depressed, or morbid?"

"No."

"What about hyperactive?"

"No."

"Pregnant?"

"No."

"You got headaches?"

"No."

“What conditions you sufferin’ from?”

“None.”

“No artyritis?”

“No.”

“How’s your bowels? Movin’ good?”

“Doctor,” said Abigail, mildly perturbed, “I think it’s clear that Mr. Scruples is in fine health.”

“He looks sickly to me. I’ll prescribe some a’ them antiseptics, or maybe some antipyretics, or some linements, or a sleepin’ pill, or a laxative, or one of them sulfas, or a stimulant, or an anylgesic. Fix ya up right as rain.”

“I’m fine,” said Nathaniel, allowing Abigail to help him off the table.

Doc Scalapini looked right disappointed. “I’d hate fer you to walk outta here an’ drop dead. Wouldn’t be good fer my reputation, an’ it wouldn’t be good fer you.”

“I’m feeling better already. How much do I owe you?”

“As I’m not chargin’ ya for the quart of Sexy Gulch pure drinkin’ water you consumed, or the rental on the operatin’ table you was lyin’ on, four thousand dollars oughta cover it.”

“Four thousand dollars?”

“Well, actually four thousand, one hundred an’ twenty-seven dollars an’ thirty-nine cents, but as you’re friend a’ Miss Abigail’s, we’ll round it off t’ four thousand.”

“Doctor Scalapini,” said Abigail. “I am no doctor, but I have read some medical books, and I would suggest that you have made a miscalculation. As it was only a flesh wound that required cleansing and bandaging, I think the fee to be charged by a reputable medical doctor would be approximately fifty dollars.”

“Fifty-five.”

“Fifty.”

“Sold.”

Nathaniel giv the doc his money an’ hobbled out into street supported by Miss Abigail. The gang followed behind an’ Rawdeal, having seed Nathaniel’s wallet filled with bills, said, “I’m right thirsty, boys, I think we could use a drink. You got some money, Snakeeyes?”

“You know I ain’t got no money.”

“Biteyur Tongue?”

Biteyur Tongue shook his head.

“Kickin’ Hisheadin?”

“Aww, naah...”

Rawdeal looked at Nathaniel kinda sheepish like. Nathaniel understood, pulled out his billfold an’ gave Rawdeal two twenty dollar bills. “I’d like the gang to have some drinks to express my appreciation for all your help.”

“T’weren’t nothin’, Nat,” said Rawdeal, walkin’ him an’ Abigail up the main street. “Yu’s practically our best friend, an’ we’d like to buy yu a drink.” They was now stopped in front of the Saloon.

Nathaniel were about to say he didn’t drink when he noticed a sign on the Saloon door. “I’m afraid you won’t be able to enjoy that drink right now,” said Nathaniel.

The gang were peerin’ at that sign as though it t’were a mirage.

“What’s it say?” asked Rawdeal.

“It says, ‘Emergency Town Council Meeting in Progress. Saloon closed.’”

“Awww... damn,” moaned Kickin Hisheadin.

Nathanial glanced at Miss Abigail. She were starin’ at that sign somethin’ fierce. Then she marched right up to them doors an’ into the Saloon.

Inside, sittin’ at the large gamin’ table in the centre a’ the room, she seed the Town Council, what consisted a’ the only four men in Sexy Gulch who owned businesses ‘sides ol’ Poop. Poop a’ course were always tryin’ to buy’em out but they was still hangin’ on. They was Thaddeus Phineas Jones, a big somber-faced man, whose great-granddaddy were a slave an’ had bin forced to bury the dead in the Civil War which giv him the ider to start a whatchya call a mortuary, which he handed down to Thaddeus. There were Willard Freeze, the local dogcatcher, who were puny like one a’ his dogs, Morgan O’Scally, the local assayer, who were said to be hiding his gold in a hole in the ground, an’, lastly, there were Talbot Tibbet, the local druggist, who played poker with Doc Scalapini on Thursday nights. They was all seated at the table with Mayor Robbie Stank at the head, holdin’ a gavel an’ glancin’ at Poop sittin’ nearby, an’ keeping an eye on the proceedin’s. Mayor Stank were pourin’ out five tall glasses a beer from a pitcher.

“Alright,” said the Mayor, takin’ a big slug of beer, “time to bring this matter to a vote. All those in favour...”

“What,” said Abigail, loudly, by the door, starin’ at the Council, “is going on here?”

Everybody froze, ‘xcept Poop. “Out of order,” he cried. “Mayor Stank...!”

“All those in favour...”

“This meeting is out of order,” said Abigail fiercely. “Proper notification of a scheduled meeting must be made to the citizens of the town two weeks prior to the meeting. I have received no such notification, therefore, this meeting is in violation of the constitution of the Town of Dentonville...”

“...Sexy Gulch,” corrected Poop.

“... an’ any business concluded by this meeting is therefore invalid.”

“Mayor Stank,” said Poop, “Be informin’ Miss Abigail that the constitution says an emergency meetin’ can be called to rectify a special emergency type situation.”

“In the constitution it says...” began Mayor Stank.

“And what would this ‘emergency situation be?’” asked Abigail.

Poop glared at her. “The dangerous state of the library buildin’ bein’ a threat to the safety of the folk of Sexy Gulch.”

“The Library is in fine condition.”

“T’ain’t. It’s a regular fire trap.”

“The state inspector certified its worthiness only a year ago.”

“That were a year ago, an’ it’s been deterioratin’ ever since.”

“Gentlemen,” she said, addressing the four men of the town council who looked a mite sheepish. “Clearly, Mr. Burdoch wants the library gone, for his own ends.”

“Yu’s slanderin’ me,” said Poop.

“The children of Dentonville...” said Miss Abigail.

“...Sexy Gulch.”

“... your children, all of our children, will suffer if Mr. Burdoch has his way.

With no library, there will be no reading. With no reading, there will be no learning, an’

with no learning, your children will not be able to find their way in life. They will be forced to turn to crime an' debauchery, an' the town of Dentonville..."

"...Sexy Gulch."

"... will become a Sodom an' Gomorrah."

"As usual," said old Poop, "Miss Abigail is 'xaggeratin' the situation an' ain't presentin' the true facts. Fact is, Miss Abigail's a liberal an' a socialist. Fact is, she's tryin' to scare ya. Fact is, an extension to the Sexy Gulch Lingerie Emporium'd create about 1,000 jobs."

"The Town of Dentonville..."

"...Sexy Gulch."

"... has a population of only 659 people," said Abigail, lookin' square at them four Councilmen. "How will Mr. Burdoch fill those other 341 jobs?"

"You see, this is what I'm up agin. Lack a' imagination. I'm tryin' to build the biggest, richest town in the West. Why, if we was to have the largest lingerie emporium, Sexy Gulch would be known as the sexiestic town in the world an' folks'd flock here to buy them frilly undergarments. An' if we built some motels an' hotels, we'd make a fortune rentin' they rooms to folks just itchin' to get into them frilly undergarments so's they could all be sexy. All the folks comin' here on their way to Vegas'd be spendin' all their money in Sexy Gulch. Why, I tell ya, it's a gold mine."

"Allow me to reiterate," said Miss Abigail. "With no library, there will be no reading, with no reading, there will be no learning. With no learning, our children will be forced to work in Mr. Burdoch's frilly undergarment factory for less than minimum wage. Others will live in destitution, an' the town of Dentonville..."

"Sexy Gulch."

"Dentonville... as we know it will no longer exist."

"Pig pucky."

Miss Abigail stepped up to the big table. "Mr. Jones," she said, "Mr. Freeze, Mr. O'Scally, Mr. Tibbet, do you want to be remembered for building a quiet, peaceful town, or would you prefer to be thought of as the men who voted to turn Dentonville into a haven for guns, liquor, debauchery, gaming an' frilly undergarments? Such a town, I suggest to you, would be unliveable for decent folk. An' the purpose of such a town would be only to fill Mr. Burdoch's bank. I beg you, the good citizens of Dentonville... to vote for all that is fair and good. The future of Dentonville, an' the civilized world is in your hands."

Mrs. Abigail's eyes went around the table. The four men was havin' trouble lookin' at her, so she were sure it t'were a lost cause.

"Time to bring this matter to a vote," said Poop. Mayor Stank?"

"All those in favour..." said Mayor Stank.

"Excuse me," said Nathaniel.

"Who are you?" asked Poop.

"Who are you?" asked Mayor Stank.

"I apologize for interrupting, but I wonder if you might allow me to say a few words."

"Out a' order," said Poop.

"I'm not a citizen of your fair town, I am from Boston, but I hope you'll consider me an interested observer and a friend of your town. I wonder if you would permit me to

make a comment which might assist you in coming to what is obviously a very important decision.”

“Out a’ order,” said Poop.

“Out a’ order,” said Mayor Stank.

“Cuse me,” said Thaddeus. “I’d like to hear what this feller from Boston has got to say. Sometimes folk in the big city got some good iders. Ain’t that where you got the ider for the Lingerie Emporium, Coup, the big city?”

Ol’ Poop glared at him.

“Willard, Morgan, Talbot, whatchyas say?”

“Yep,” said Talbot, glancing at Poop, “let’s hear him.”

“What’s your name, son?” asked Willard.

“Nathaniel Scruples.”

“Well, Mr. Scruples,” said Morgan, glancing at Poop, “let’s hear whatchya got to say fer yerself.”

“I object,” said Mayor Stank, seeing Poop glarin’ at him.

“Mayor Stank,” said Thaddeus, lookin’ directly at ol’ Poop, “do we need to put this to a vote?”

Ol’ Poop quickly shook his head at Mayor Stank.

“No, ah no, that’s fine, that’s fine,” said Mayor Stank.

“Gentlemen?” asked Thaddeus.

“I agree,” said Morgan.

“Yes,” said Willard.

“Me too,” said Talbot.

“Proceed, Mr. Scruples.”

Nathaniel stepped forward, standing near the table, looking each man in the eye in turn. “What we know in Boston, is that many Americans died to make America free.”

“Amen,” pronounced Talbot.

“You might imagine that our country, at the beginning, having been a wilderness only a short time before, had all the freedom in the world, but no, there was a terrible oppression. Our ancestors were sorely tried. Here in this new rich untamed land, one man cast a net over the people and enslaved them.”

The four Councilmen was now regarding Nathaniel right closely.

“One man, and one man alone, impoverished hundreds of thousands of people, callously disregarding their needs and wants, and acquiring as much of the people’s money as he could.”

“I object,” said Poop.

Everyone looked at him.

Poop looked embarrassed. “I mean, what’s this gotta do with the business of the town.”

The Councilmen looked back at Nathaniel.

“This man, by being so greedy, and so callous to his own people, by taking their money, took away their ability to feed their families, their very livelihoods, and engendered hatred and loathing till all the people rose up against him.”

There were silence in the saloon.

“Who were that varmit?” asked Morgan.

“That ‘varmit’,” said Nathaniel, “was the King of England.”

Nobody spoke. Mayor Stank kept glancing at Poop, but ol' Poop were watchin' the four Councilmen who was watching Nathaniel.

"And how," continued Nathaniel, "do you think they managed to overcome this tyrant?"

The four Councilmen, starin' at Nathaniel, shook they heads.

"Education," said Nathaniel. "The founders of our great country created the Constitution so that the people would know their rights, so they could say 'no' to tyrants like the King of England. What we know in Boston is that to keep the fires of freedom burning, the people need education. Without learning, how can the people read the constitution an' know what a free and civil society is? How can they recognize the true freedoms, not only the freedoms of speech and the press, but freedom from fear, freedom from want, freedom of religion, and the knowledge that all men are created equal? So that, if a man like King George, wants to deprive free men of their right to happiness, they will know, with learning and knowledge, how to rout the tyrant."

When Nathaniel finished, there were a silence while the four Councilmen sat deep in thought. Mayor Stank kept lookin' at Poop who were watchin' them councillors, an' tryin' to figure out his next move. Miss Abigail, a' course, were starin' at Nathaniel, an' if a body had bin lookin' close, they'd a' seed a tear in her eye.

"That's a pretty speech, Gentlemen," said ol' Poop at last, "but it's plain as day that this young man from Boston is a socialist, an' he's tryin' to git us to forgit the most important freedom a' all."

"Which is what?" asked Thaddeus.

"The freedom for a man to make hisself rich. That's the right a' every American, an' that's what's made America great, ain't that right, Mayor Stank?"

"What?" muttered Stank. "Oh. Ah, yeah, that's right. Look at Mr. Burdoch, boys, he's an 'xample of a man who pulled hisself up by his bootstraps an' made a fortune workin' everybody's fingers to the bone. He ain't no socialist."

"Well," said Morgan, slow-like, "I don't know. Mr. Scruples' has spoke right smart. Our great-great granddaddys fought fer them freedoms, an' how is our children gonna know about'em if there ain't no learnin'? I say we gots to keep the library."

"Me too," said Talbot.

"I always enjoy goin' in there," said Willard. "I find it restful an' peaceful. I think Miss Abigail has done a fine job a' runnin' it. Maybe we should give her a raise."

"I agree," said Thaddeus, "we should give her a raise, an' maybe give her some more money to buy more books."

"What?!" cried ol' Poop, who were so surprised he coulda spit. "I can't... er, the town can't afford it."

"Oh, that's no problem. We'll just raise taxes."

"You can't do that! I'm already practically supportin' the entire town by all the taxes I'm payin' now."

"That's cause your stores," said Thaddeus, "takes up most a' the town. Everybody knows that if you was to reduce the size a' your businesses you'd be reducin' the size of your tax bill. You know what happens when one person owns too much."

"What?"

"It makes the town sick. T'ain't healthy."

"That's socialist talk!"

“Gentlemen,” said Thaddeus, “I propose we vote no on tearin’ down the library, an’ yes to givin’ Miss Abigail a raise, say ten percent, an’ another five thousand dollars to buy more books.”

“What?!” said Poop, who were now almost purple in the face.

“I agree,” said Willard.

“That’s got my vote,” said Morgan.

“Me too,” said Talbot.

“Mayor Stank,” said Thaddeus, “it looks like the motion’s carried. What’s the next business?”

Mayor Stank were staring at the councillors an’ then at ol’ Poop like he didn’t know what hit’im. Ol’ Poop looked like he were gonna have hisself a coro-nary.

Morgan were pouring out a glass a beer for the boys. “Gentlemen, I propose a toast to learnin’, an’ to this great country a’ ours.”

“Amen,” said Thaddeus, drinking up.

*

Squintin’ practically catapulted hisself outta the Buick when it pulled up to the Burdoch Hotel just as the last light were fadin’.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Terroteeny, I could drive you into the hotel, if you’d like.”

“What?” God, this Dickie Wall were so snivellin’, he were sick a’ him. “I can walk in myself.”

“I’m sorry, I beg your pardon, yu won’t ferget my picture.”

“What picture?”

“I’m sorry you fergot. The eight by ten colour glossy of yurself. I’m sorry for askin’.”

Squintin’ glowered at the puny twerp.

“I ain’t got time for pictures.” He slammed the door. He were Squintin’ Terroteeny, an’ he didn’t have time for snivellin’ bags a’ pus. He had t’git back to makin’ movies about fightin’ fer justice an’ such. He were yearnin’ fer his movie crew. He wanted to git them filimin’ him while he were so mad. He went right inside the hotel, where he seed Mort, his assistant, chowin’ down in the dinin’ room.

“Get the crew. We got to gets filimin’”

“They’s gone.”

“Whatchya mean ‘gone’?”

“You didn’t come back, an’ we couldn’t afford to buy no more filim, an’ then them not being paid fer weeks, they done gone back home.”

“What?! They can’t do that.”

“That’s what I tol’em.”

“Well, you tell’em they’s fired.”

“They said to tell ya it’s too late, they quit.”

Squintin’ looked at his assistant director who were chewin’ on a piece a’ T’bone. Squint grabbed the rest of the steak off’n his plate an’ shoved it in his mouth. He were mad, but more than that he were hungry. He had to think. He wanted to git plumb away from this one-hick town, but his Caddy were stole an’ his crew were gone. He needed money, an’ he knew there were only one place to git that, which is when he started to choke on the meat.

*

Walking Miss Abigail home, Nathaniel an' her passed Rawdeal an' the rest a' the gang talkin' up a storm as they was comin' out a' the Burdoch Liquor Store carryin' some bags.

"What are you discussing, gentlemen?" asked Nathaniel.

"We was jist talkin' 'bout what got ourselves. Biteyer Tongue likes his sherry an' Snakeeyes likes port, so we gots one a' each a' them an' then a chardonnay an' a claret for Kickin' Hisheadin an' me. We'd like to thank ya, Nathaniel."

"I'm in your debt, gentlemen."

While the Hole-Dickie-Wall-Gang hurried off to the stables to set t'drinkin', Nathaniel walked Miss Abigail to her boardin' house, which were owned by the Wang family, decent folk from China. Mr. an' Mrs. Wang had bought theyselves an old wooden house that were fallin' down, sold to them by Dickie Wall, an' now all eleven a' the Wang children was workin' long hours in Poop's frilly undergarment factory at the edge a' town to pay off the mortgage to the Burdoch First, Second an' Third Bank.

"Mr. Scruples."

"Please call me Nathaniel."

"Nathaniel is such an eloquent name. Do you what it means?"

"I've never thought about it."

"It means gift of God."

"I didn't know that."

They walked on, quiet like.

"Nathaniel?"

"Yes, Miss Abigail?"

"Is your leg healing well?"

"I barely notice the pain." He were lyin'. The Doc hadn't give'im any pain killers an' it were stingin' bad.

"I'm glad. I apologize for not having thanked you for rescuing me."

"Why, I didn't rescue you. You rescued yourself."

"I know that, but you did attempt it."

"It was not a very successful attempt, Miss Abigail."

"It is the thought that counts, Nathaniel."

They was quiet some more.

"Miss Abigail?"

"Yes?"

"I wonder if you would consider joining me for dinner some evening at the Burdoch Hotel dining room."

"Yes, I would consider that, if it would please you."

"It would."

"Very well, Nathaniel. Now I must say 'good night'."

"Good night."

Nathaniel watched her climb the steps a' the porch an' step into the old house. Thinkin' she reminded him of his headstrong mother but in a nice way, he turned an' limped back to the hotel.

*

When Squintin' recovered hisself from chokin' on the steak which Mort had to pull up outta his gullet, he tol' Mort to give that snivellin' real estator, Dickie Wall, a deluxe

eight by ten colour glossy an' to write his name on it. Then, he got hisself cleaned up, an' set off to get hisself paid. He were right sick of Sexy Gulch an' never ever wanted to set foot in it agin. As he were walkin' down the main drag, he seed the beanpole come down the street. He ducked into an alley an' waited till Nathaniel went into the hotel.

Then he seed ol' Poop come outta the saloon, headin' towards his office at the Burdoch Gazette. Squintin' scurried after him, watched him go inside, an' tried to think of how to ask the ol' buzzard fer his money. Knowin' Poop didn't like payin' out, Squintin' practiced sayin', "I wants my money" an' "you'd better give me my money or else", gittin' hisself 'syked up' as they say, an' were still tryin' to come up with the right words when he seed the lights go out in the office. He rushed to the door jist as it were openin' an' ol' Poop were comin' out.

"Mr. Burdoch?"

Ol' Poop stopped. Quickly, he waved at Squintin' to git inside, turned the lights on agin an' shut the door. Then he glared at Squintin' somethin' fierce.

"I'm leavin' now," said Squintin' all bold like. "I've come to settle up."

"Good," said ol' Poop, "you owe me five thousand dollars."

"What?"

"You owe me five thousand dollars."

Squintin' had that awful sinkin' feeling that somethin' had gone plumb wrong but he were the only one who didn't know what. "Whatchaya talkin' about?"

"Your incompetence, your bunglin' an' your stupidity's gonna cost me five thousand dollars. You wanna give me cash or a cheque?"

Were this ol' geezer jokin'? Squintin' wondered if he'd ever had such a bad day afore. Were nothin' gonna go right?

Squintin' looked him in the eye, deliberate like. "You owe me two thousand dollars, Mr. Burdoch, on account I come all the way from Hollywood to take care a' some liberals fer ya. I suggest we settle up like gentlemen, afore I has to do somethin' unpleasant."

"I see. Did we win?"

"What?"

"Did we fight them liberals an' win?"

"Course, I always win."

"What'd we win?"

Squintin' were confused. What were this ol' geezer goin' on about? He'd come into Sexy Gulch, shot up the town an' filimed it, an' showed everybody that they oughta have respect fer him an' Mr. Burdoch... which were what he were always doin'.

"Everybody's got respect for you now, Mr. Burdoch."

"Well, son, that respect just cost me five thousand dollars."

Squintin' couldn't understan' what the ol' buzzard were flappin' his gums about. "Just gimme my money, Mr. Burdoch, an' I'll be on my way."

"Ain't gonna be no money, Mr. Terroteeny. You didn't solve my problems, you created some. You was supposed t'keep that Abigail out there in the desert for two days. An' you didn't. An' cause of that, it's gonna cost me five thousand dollars, so if you'll pay up now, we'll call ourselves quits."

Squintin' imagined maybe he were havin' a bad dream. "You hired me, Mr. Burdoch, an' I driv all the way from Hollywood to help you, an' now you tell me you ain't payin' me. I don't want to have to get the sheriff to ask you for my money."

"Sheriff Norm works for me."

Squintin' were sure now it were a bad dream. "Supposin' I jist happened to take my guns out to show'em to you an' one of'em accidentally went off. One a' us could be kilt."

"An' one a' us could hang for it."

Squintin' were awful tired. "What is it you want, Mr. Burdoch?"

"I want that library gone."

Squintin' caught the gleam of an ider. "Supposin' I was to make that library disappear like. Would I get my money?"

"If I was in the clear."

"I'll be needin' gas money, an' it won't be fer drivin'."

"I ain't givin' ya money, an' I can't be knowin' anythin' 'bout it, but if you was to take some gas from my gas station, an' I found out, I'd be thinkin' I helped ya git back to Hollywood, right?"

Squintin' knowed what he were meanin'. "That's right, Mr. Burdoch."

*

Nathanial were havin' trouble gettin' to sleep. He were tired but his eyes was starin' at the stain on the ceilin'. He didn't know why. He were worried about Miss Abigail an' wonderin' what he were feelin' 'bout her. She were a young woman who knowed her own mind... an' other folks' too. He were impressed that she knowed the meaning a' his name, 'Gift of God'. No one ever knowed that about him afore, even his mommy an' daddy. He were concerned for Miss Abigail. He knew that, 'cause a' the meeting, ol' Poop were most likely even more determined to get hisself up to some mischief. Still tossing an' turnin' an' feelin' the achy pain in his leg, he got hisself up, dressed an' went out to git some night air, hopin' it'd put him to sleep.

*

The Burdoch Gas Outlet were quiet. It were a week night an' the town were still, aside from the ladies paradin' up an' down the main drag in they skimpy lingerie. Squintin' ambled up to the kiosk where a skinny young man with a pimply face were slouched sleepin' on a stool, his face squished against the door frame.

"Hey there," said Squintin'.

The young man jumped off the stool, an' looked around nervous-like. He stared at Squintin' like he'd seed a ghost. "Oh my god, you're... you're Squintin' Terroteeny."

"That's right."

"Really? Squintin' Terroteeny?"

"Yep."

"Wow. I seed all your movies, an' I loves'em, 'specially Kiss My Bullet. I thought I'd die when Wyatt Erp were shootin' up all them Nazis. An' I loves it when you fire all yur guns, killin' folk, an' all they women throwin' theyselves at your body. It must be excitin' being a big time, part time movie director."

"...and gunslinger."

"Yeah, an' gunslinger. Can I touch your gun?"

“What?”

“Can I touch your gun?”

“My gun?”

“Yeah, your gun.”

“No one touches Squintin’ Terroteeny’s guns...”

“Please.”

Squintin’ looked him in the eye. “Alright, if yur careful.”

The young man reached over an’ touched the handle of the right gun sittin’ in its holster. Then he gazed at Squintin’ with big puppy dog eyes. “Can I hold it? I won’t drop it, I promise.”

“I don’ like to...”

“Please.”

“Whatchyur name?”

“Hew.”

“Hew, guns is like women. A professional gunslinger don’t allow his guns to be fondled by another man, if you catch my drift.”

“Pleeeaaasse.”

Squintin’ eyed the pimply face. Hew’s brown eyes was beggin’ him. “Alright, you can hold one, jist fer a minute.”

Careful-like, Squintin’ took one of his guns out a’ the holster an’ handed it ginger-like to Hew, who held it like one a’ them holy relics. Then he started aimin’ it at things, which were makin’ Squintin’ nervous.

“Squint? Can I call you ‘Squint’?” asked Hew, aimin’ the gun at the Burdoch Feed Store across the street.

“Alright.” This pee-brained gas jockey were beginnin’ to irritate him.

“That’s what I like about you, Squint. You ain’t stuck-up like some of them Hollywood types. Can I ask you a question?”

“I suppose.”

“That Vickie Seecrat. Is she as sexy as she looks, if ya knows what I mean.”

“Yep, she’s sexy alright.”

“When you an’ Miss Vickie git it on, does she... does she giv ya complete satisfaction?”

“What?”

“Does she giv ya complete satisfaction?”

Squintin’ were pole-axed. Who’d this bag a’ gas jockey pus think he were, askin’ such a personal type question? Squintin’ had the urge to plug a hole in him, but he know’d that’d raise some questions, an’ he suspected ol’ Poop wouldn’t be too happy.

“Complete satisfaction, Hew,” he said, feelin’ stranger by the minute.

“What does Miss Vicki like you to do, you know, to her, when you’re... when you’re gittin’ it on?” Hew was now aiming the pistol at the Burdoch Liquor Store next to the Bank.

Squintin’ had never heard the like afore. “I need some gas, Hew.”

“Where’s your car?” Hew asked, aimin’ the gun at Squintin’.

“Whoa, Hew, watch where yer pointin’ that.”

“Oh, didn’t mean to scare ya.”

“Can I have my gun back?”

“Where’s your car?”

“My car?... oh yeah, my car. My car ran outta gas just outside a’ town. I jist need a can. Can you gimme my gun back?”

“Lemme jist hold it a mite longer,” said Hew, takin’ up a can from behind the kiosk, puttin’ the pump hose in the spout an’ turnin’ it on. Aimin’ the gun at the cash register in the kiosk, he asked, “Do you think, Squint, that Miss Vicki’d like to git it on with a gas jockey with a big hose, if ya know what I mean?”

“I don’t wanna talk about Miss Vicki,” said Squintin’ grabbin’ his gun. “That’s enough. I’ll pays ya when I driv back.” Snatchin’ up the cap, he screwed it on, an’ lugged the can off into the night.

“Tell Miss Vickie,” Hew shouted. “I like to work the night shift, if ya know what I mean.”

Squintin’ didn’t answer. He were hurryin’ to git hisself away as quick as he could, disappearin’ into the shadda up the back alley behind the Lingerie Emporium, makin’ for the library, an’ wonderin’ if this pimply-faced donkey had his head screwed on right.

He were at the Library in about two minutes, approachin’ the back porch a’ the dark buildin’ careful like, in case somebody were ‘bout. He’d never done a torch job an’ he were havin’ bad feelin’s about it. He knew it were agin the law, but he were desperate. If his daddy were here, he woulda smacked him somethin’ fierce. Even though Squintin’ told hisself that a big time, part time movie director could never be no criminal, it were still makin’ him feel queer. If he done this, he’d be like ol’ Burdoch. He knowed sure as God made little green apples that Poop were like that, that he had whatchya call a ‘bad’ side, an’ that that ‘bad’ side were takin’ over the whole a’ him. Poop reminded Squintin’ a’ all them producer-types in Hollywood, who was always doin’ deals so’d that he’d git nothin’. The question were, were he a ‘bad’un too? Nah, but somethin’ jist didn’t feel right about it. T’weren’t dignified fer a man who were fightin’ fer justice an’ such, an’ filiming it, to go around torchin’ buildin’s. He were thinkin’ ‘bout walkin’ away an’ hitchin’ a ride outta Sexy Gulch, when he remembered that all kinds a’ folk was countin’ on him to be makin’ his movies. An’ fer that he needed money. So’s he had to git his money from Poop. That made his mind up. He’d to have to burn down the Library so’s he could keep fightin’ for justice. He unloosed the cap an’ started splashin’ gas-o-line on the back porch.

He stopped. He heard somebody comin’. He drew hisself back into the shadda an’ waited, an’ who should come limp’in’ down the main drag but the beanpole. What in blazes were he doin’ here, stood in the middle a’ the street in the moonlight, starin’ at the Library. What were he lookin’ at? It were jist a dumb ol’ buildin’. Then Squintin’ heard his voice an’ thought the beanpole were talkin’ to hisself, but no, he were hummin’... no... he weren’t hummin’, he were singin’, soft like. He were singin’?!

“Has there ever been a female
Like Miss Abigail?
I would cross a sorrowed vale,
I would ride the largest whale,
I would tell the tallest tale,
Perhaps even go to jail,
For Miss Abigail.”

What the hell kinda song is that, wondered Squintin'?

“Through all of life’s travail,
My fate I shan’t bewail,
Her foes I will assail
To ensure she will prevail,
Miss Abigail”

Then the beanpole stood silent like, still starin’ at the library. After what seemed like ‘bout an hour an’ a half, though it were only a minute or two, he turned an’ limped back down the main drag. Squintin’ had never heard such a borin’ song. He didn’t understan’ the words, he weren’t able to hum it, an’ it didn’t got no beat. He were thinkin’ a’ tellin’ the beanpole not to be annoyin’ folks, but then he remembered the business he had to be attendin’ to. He took a match from the box, but even though them gas fumes was makin’ him sick, he still couldn’t bring hisself to strike it. It were jist too upsettin’.

“Where’s your car. Mr. Terroteeny, or should I say Mr. Py-ro-man-iac?” said a voice from the shaddas.

Squintin’ recognized the voice, an’, with a pitchin’ in his belly, realized that it were that dumb-assed, pimply-faced gas jockey. “Whatchya talkin’ about?”

“I don’t sees no car anywhere’s an’ you’re standin’ next to the library, splashin’ gasoline on it. So I’s wonderin’ what yu’s up to?”

“Tell you what, Hew, you go back to the gas station an’ mind your own beeswax an’ I won’t plug a hole in ya.”

“Tell yu what, Squintin’... ya don’t mind me callin’ ya Squintin’, do ya?... you let me wear your guns, an’ tell Miss Vickie to git it on with me an’ I won’t tell nobody you was spillin’ gasoline on the Library.”

Squintin’ knew this were the worst day a’ his entire life, an’ suspectin’ it were gonna be the worst day a’ anybody’s life. He didn’t believe in God, but if he’d hadda he woulda thought that God were agin’ him. Then he reminded hisself that he were Squintin’ Terroteeny. Would Squintin’ Terroteeny let a pimply-faced gas jockey git one over on’im? He pulled out his gun an’ aimed it, casual-like, at the brainless bag a’ pus.

“Stand a little more in the moonlight, Hew, so’s I can get a good shot. I don’t want you suffering none.”

“You shoot me, you’ll hang.”

Squintin’ thought the little gas bowser’s squeaky wheel voice sounded a mite nervous.

“Hang?” he said. “What’d they gonna hang me fer? Everybody knowed I were protectin’ the library from a vicious gas jockey who become so de-ranged he were tryin’ to burn it down. Nobody’s gonna tell’em any different, cause you ain’t gonna be here.”

“Okay, how about we forget about Miss Vickie, I’ll jist wear yur guns.”

“How about you takin’ your punishment like a man, Hew, an’ steppin’ into the light?”

“Okay, forget ‘bout me wearin’ your guns. Tell you what, I’ll give you all the gas money.”

“I ain’t no common criminal.”

“I knowed that, Mr. Terroteeny, I knowed that, but...ah, Mr. Burdoch wants you to have it... yeah, that’s right, he said to me, ‘Hew, you give all the money in the till to Mr. Terroteeny.’”

Squintin’ stopped. He knowed that ol’ Poop’d never say that, but it were a good ider. He’d be takin’ from ol’ Poop what were rightfully his. “How much is in the till?”

“I dunno fer sure. Maybe five hundred dollars.”

“Five hundred dollars?”

“I were havin’ big fill’ups all day.”

Five hundred dollars. It t’weren’t what he hopin’ fer but with five hundred dollars he wouldna had to burn down the library. Problem now were he still had this gassy bag a’ pus to keep quiet.

“What I need now, Hew, is a guarantee.”

“Guarantee?”

“Yeah, that you won’t be tellin’ folks tall tales about me.”

“Oh, I promise.”

“Can I trust ya?”

“Course ya can.”

“Let’s get that money, Hew.”

Squintin’ marched the pusy-faced bag a’ gas back to the Station. Hew took the money from the till an’ giv it him. They were almost six hundred dollars.

“You ain’t gonna kill me, is you, Mr. Terroteeny?”

“That depends, Hew.”

“I won’t tell nobody nothin’.”

“Problem is, Hew, how can I trust the word of a common thief what jist robbed his boss a’ six hundred dollars?”

“Ya can, ya can, I promise ya can, I won’t never say nothin’ to nobody about nothin’.”

“Let’s take a walk back to the Library, Hew.”

“Please, don’t kill me, Mr. Terroteeny.”

“Quiet, Hew, I’m doin’ some thinkin’.”

They walked back up the alley, with the Hew leading the way, tremblin’. When they got there, Squintin’ handed Hew the matches. “Go on,” he said. “Strike it.”

“No, no, Mr. Terroteeny, not that. Don’t make me die in the fire.”

“Ya ain’t gonna die in no fire.”

“I ain’t?”

“No, you’s jist gonna set it on fire.”

“I can’t.”

“Whatchya mean ‘yu can’t’?”

“I don’t wanna go t’jail.”

Squintin’ aimed his gun at Hew. “Then I gots no choice, Hew.”

“Wait. Wait,” cried Hew. He struck a match, an’ looked at Squintin’.

“Put it on the porch.”

“I can’t.”

“Course you can,” said Squint, waving his gun a midge to the right.

Nervous like, Hew walked over but jist as he were about to light the porch, the match went out.

“Light another.”

Hew, his hands shakin’, struck another match an’ threw it onto the porch an’ ‘whoosh’, it lit up.

“Run. Hew, run!” yelled Squintin’.

“Where?” screamed Hew, jumpin’ back from the flames.

“Outta town. Go on! Git!”

Hew took off like a jackrabbit, some a’ which can go ‘bout hundred miles an hour, which were almost the speed Hew were travellin’. Squintin’ fired a couple a’ shots in the air, an’ shouted, “Stop, thief!”

Then afore he knowed it, he saw the beanpole run-limpin’ towards the fire, an’ start ringin’ a fire bell.

It being the law, they were a bell an’ a water tank ‘side the library for jist such an emergency, an’ the beanpole grabbed hisself a bucket an’ were throwin’ water on the fire.

When Squintin’ seed this he were so damn mad he wanted to cry an’ spit at the same time an’ he whipped out his gun, but jist as he were takin’ aim, the old fire truck pulled up, the two firemen gits out, rolls out the hose an’ commenced to puttin’ out the fire ‘longside Nathaniel.

Watchin’ em, Squint couldn’t believe how nothin’ he done were goin’ right. As he slunk off into the shaddas down the alley, he wondered jist why God were hatin’ him so bad.

*

Miss Abigail were broodin’ over Nathaniel like a hen on eggs. He were lyin’ on the front porch a’ the library with smell a’ smoke in the air an’ the firemen packin’ up they hose as first light were seeping in. His leg were throbbin’ an’ Miss Abigail were starin’ at his left hand which were burnt. “We must get you to the doctor,” she said.

“I’ll be alright once I return to my room.”

“No, Nathaniel, we can’t risk it becoming infected.”

“Please don’t trouble yourself.”

“Can you stand?”

“Yes, of course.”

Nathaniel stood an’, helping support him, Miss Abigail led him back to Doc Scalapini’s house an’ knocked on the door. There were no answer. She knocked again, an’ the door opened sudden like. Doc Scalapini were standin’ there in one of them frilly undergarments. He looked dumbstruck, like he’d been ‘spectin’ somebody else, then slammed the door shut. Miss Abigail looked at Nathaniel. Then the door opened again sudden like an’ the Doc were wearing a dressing gown. “What is it?” he asked.

Miss Abigail were starin’ at him. The Doc were staring right back.

“Mr. Scruples has burnt his hand an’ his bandage needs changing.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

*

When he looked sideways at Sheriff Norman, Squintin’ were reminded a’ all the big-time Hollywood actors he’d met, always showin’ off, always puffin’ theyselves up an’ lookin’ down they noses at him.

“Tell me again, Mr. Terroteeny.”

“Call me Squint. All my friends do.”

Sherrif Norman peered at him. “Okay... Squint... what happened?”

“Like I told ya afore, I were catchin’ some night air when I seed this young man walkin’ up the alley with a can.”

“Howjuda knowed he were young?”

“Whatchaya mean?”

“You said it were dark.”

“It were dark in the shadda, but he hada step out into the moonlight to gits to the Library. That’s when I seed he were young.”

“What then?”

“He walked right up to the Library an’ starts splashin’ gasoline on it. I couldn’t believe the sight. Then afore I could even say nothin’ he had a match out an’ struck it up. That’s when I shouted, took out my gun an’ tried to stop him, but he were too fast fer me.”

Sheriff Norm were eying him funny-like. “Strange, don’t ya think, Squint, that a gas jockey’d wanna burn the town library down?”

“Sheriff, I seed a lotta strange things in my time. Maybe he don’t like books.”

“I ain’t overly fonda books, but you ain’t gonna catch me burnin’ down the library.”

“That’s cause you’re honest, like me.”

He could tell Sherrif Norm were diggin’ around. “Hew were irritatin’ an’ as thick as a plank but he never struck me as bein’ the criminal type.”

“Maybe somebody were payin’ him an’ he needed the money.”

“What’d he be needin’ money fer?”

“Booze, women... you knowed him better than me... I didn’t knowed him at all. Yu be trackin’ him down?”

“I gots my deputy on it,” said Sheriff Norm. “Tell me ‘bout your next movie.”

“My... next movie?”

“Is there a part in it fer me?”

Squintin’ stared at Sheriff Norm. He didn’t like the way Norm were lookin’ at him, like he knowed somethin’. “Is yu an actor?”

“Course.”

“Is ya good?”

“When yu’s the sherrif, yu gots to be actin’ tough an’ smart all the time.”

“You ever done a movie?”

“No, but all I wants is a chance. When Miss Abigail put on the Dentonville Little Theatre production a’ The King an’ I, I were hopin’ she’d asked me to be the King, but she didn’t. She said it were cause I couldn’t read, but I knowed she liked that Thaddeus Philabuster Jones better, an’ he were terrible. So what kinda part can I play in your movie? I gots my own guns.”

“Well, I might jist be lookin’ fer someone to play the Sherrif.”

“It’s gonna be a western?”

“Yeah, my desert picture.”

“Whatchya gonna call it?”

“Kiss My Cactus.”

“I like that.”

“You do?”

“Yeah.”

“I thunk it up myself.”

“It’s a right fine name.”

Squintin’ almost gasped as Poop burst in the door. “What’s goin’ on?”

The Sheriff held his hand up to calm him. “Everythin’s under control, Mr. Burdoch. Young Hew tried to burn the library down an’ he run off. I got a posse out lookin’ fer him.”

“The till at the Gas Station’s empty,” said Poop, lookin’ at Squintin’ suspicious like.

Sherrif Norm glanced at Squintin’. “Well, we’ll just have to add theft to the charge a’ arson.”

“So the Library’s burned down, is it?” said Poop, almost smilin’.

“No, that young fella from Boston were throwin’ water on it till the fire truck got there, an’ they put it out afore any real damage were done. They gonna have to rebuild that porch though.”

“Oh? Oh. Well... well,” said Poop, lookin at’em stupified, “thank god... for that... I’d hate to see all them books git burned.”

“Yeah,” agreed Sheriff Norm, “that’d be a shame.”

“Well,” said Squintin’, “if you don’t need me, Sheriff, I best be headin’ out.”

“You won’t forgit what we talked about?”

“What we talked about?”

“You know... Kiss My Cactus... you know.”

“Oh, right. I won’t forget.”

“I’ll walk witchya,” said Poop.”

When they got outside, Poop said, “What happened?”

Squintin’ knew that ol’ Poop were suspicious. “Your gas jockey follered me to the Library, so I had to scare’im off.”

“How come my till’s empty?” Poop were lookin’ at him, hard.

“I dunno. You’d best ask Hew.”

“Whatchya gonna do now?”

“Whatchya mean?”

“Bout the Library.”

“The Library, right. I’m workin’ on a plan.”

Poop were lookin’ at him agin like he were dumb. “I think your best plan would be to head on outta town.”

“I ain’t done my job yet, an’ you ain’t paid me.”

“You didn’t do yur job like yu was supposed to, so’s you ain’t gittin’ paid. An’ I wantchya gone from Sexy Gulch.”

“I ain’t got no money to leave.” Squintin’ didn’t like lyin’ but he were angry ‘bout Poop not payin’ him.

“I ain’t gonna tell ya twice. I don’t want no clobber-headed, booby-brained, half-witted killers in Sexy Gulch. They’s bad fer business.”

“But yu hired me.”

“Yu gotta an hour to git outta my hotel, an’ two hours to git outta town or I’ll git Sherrif Norm to lock ya up an’ throw the key off’in the desert somewheres.”

As he walked away, Squintin' took out his gun. He were so tired a' being disrespected he felt like pluggin' Poop in the back, but he knew that wouldn't be no good fer his reputation.

*

Miss Abigail were lettin' Nathaniel lean on her as they walked to the hotel.

"Does your hand feel better?" she asked him.

"Yes, much better," he said, though truth were, his hand were stingin'an' his leg were still throbbing somethin' fierce. "You know, Miss Abigail, there will be no peace in Dentonville so long as Mr. Burdoch wants to remove the library."

"Yes, I know. The Burdochs of the world never stop wanting their own way."

"What will you do?"

"I must keep fighting, Nathaniel. For the children."

"I was wondering, Miss Abigail..."

"Nathaniel?"

"Yes?"

"Call me Abigail."

"Yes... Abigail."

"What was it you wanted to ask, Nathaniel?"

"I thought perhaps, with your permission, that I could spend my nights at the library."

"You are so brave, Nathaniel."

"It's not bravery, Abigail. I want to see those books safe."

"Of course," she said, understandin' his true meaning.

*

Now I expect you's all wonderin' what happened to Miss Vickie Seecrat. Well, while she were waitin' for Squintin' to come back from the desert, she buyed herself bags a' them frilly garments with that gift card what ol' Poop giv to Squintin'. An' she were tryin'em all on in the hotel room, but that weren't no fun cause Squintin'... an' them nice men she'd met in the saloon... was gone somewheres. There t'weren't nobody to admire her fine figure. So she put on one of them frilly outfits an' walked up an' down the main drag a' Sexy Gulch an' had herself a right good time with all menfolk admirin' her. Then she ccme back to the room, changed into another frilly an' revealin' outfit an' done it again. When she'd done this 8 or 9 times she were so tired she just wanted to drop into her big ol' hotel bed, but gittin' back to the room, she found Squintin' lyin' on it, snorin' up the end a' the world.

"Squintin' Terroteeny!"

"Squintin' jumped up, whippin' out his guns. "What?"

"You never pay no attention to me."

"Geez, Vickie, don't surprise me like that. I coulda kilt ya."

"Maybe, if yu was to shoot me, I'd get yur attention. Yu just don't luv me. I don't think yu luv anybody, do yu?"

Squintin', who'd never done this afore, collapsed on the bed an' started to cry, an' Vicki, who were plumb surprised, realized that Squintin', who'd been killin' folk all his life, were jst like a little boy in his heart. She sat on the bed an' held his head tight in her arms. "I'm sorry, Squint. I luvs ya, ya knows I do. It'll be alright."

*

Meanwhile, Rawdeal, Snakeeyes, Biteyer Tongue an' Kickin' Hisheadin, who'd been drinking fine wine all night, missed the fire. They was so polluted they didn't even hear them fire bells ringin', an' the next morning they heads was throbbin' somethin' fierce. They felt right sorrowful. They also felt right sick, like they'd et roadkill, so they was spending their last buck fifty on some cleasenifyin' beer, sittin' in the saloon, when they heared 'bout the fire an' that their friend Nathaniel an' them firemen had put it out all by theyselves, an' they was so ashamed they wasn't there to help'im, they wanted to die... well maybe not die, but they was right remorseful.

"We let him down," said Rawdeal.

"Who?" said Biteyur Tongue.

"Nat."

"Says who?" asked Biteyer Tongue, sharp like.

"I do," said Rawdeal.

"Oh. Yeah? What's he ever done fer us?"

"He giv us money to buy some fine wine, which yu liked."

"I forgot."

"That's what I'm tellin' ya. We bin forgettin' who our friends is."

"Who?"

"Him an' Miss Abigail."

"I like her," said Kickin Hisheadin.

"An' we bin forgettin' our motto," said Rawdeal.

"What's a 'motto'?" asked Biteyer Tongue.

"Some words thatchya live by."

"Whatchya mean 'live by'?"

"Don't you know nothin'? Everybody's got a reason to be livin'."

Biteyur Tongue were tryin' t'understand. "Ain't we's livin' to kill Dickie Wall?"

"No that's our job."

"So what's our... this here 'motto'?" asked Kickin Hisheadin.

"We ain't 'xactly got one, but I seed a movie once about some Frenchies who was in the Mickey Mouse club an' they had a right fine motto, 'one for all an' all for one'."

"What's it mean?" asked Biteyur Tongue.

"It means we gots to stick together through thick an' thin."

"What's thick an' thin?" asked Snakeeyes, who weren't payin' attention.

"Snakeeyes, you gotta open that mind a' yur's up an' learn things. Thick is when times is good, an' thin is when they ain't so good."

"Why don't they jist say that?" Snakeeyes weren't one for gabbin'.

"It's jist a fancier way, that's all."

"I don't like it."

"So the point being..."

"What's a point?" asked Snakeeyes.

"Don't yu knowed nothin'?"

Snakeeyes pulled out his gun. "Don't yu go sayin' I dunno nothin'."

"You see, this is what I'm talkin' about. Ain't we supposed to be 'all for one an' one fer all', an' yur pullin' your gun on me? Save yur bullets for Dickie Wall."

Snakeeyes, when he seed Biteyur Tongue an' Kickin Hisheadin givin'im the hairy eyeball, put his gun back in the holster.

"So what we supposed to do?" asked Biteyur Tongue.

"That's what I'm tryin' to tell ya. We gots to be like them Frenchies, one for all an' all for one. We gots to look out for one another."

"How?"

"You keep an eye on me, I keep an eye on you. Snakeeyes keeps an eye on Kickin Hisheadin, Kickin Hisheadin keeps an on Biteyur Tongue an' me, an' Biteyur Tongue keeps an eye on Snakeeyes."

"My eyes're gonna get sore," said Snakeeyes.

"...an' then we all gonna keep on an eye on Miss Abigail an' Nathaniel, so's we can protect'em."

"From who?"

"Anybody... that Squintin' Teroweeney, or the Sherrif or ol' Poop Burdoch, or the Doc. Anybody who might be tryin' to plug'em." He glanced at the pitcher. The beer were gone. "Am I right?"

Even though they heads was throbbin' an' they was still thirsty, the gang felt better, an' they all nodded.

Snakeeyes raised his eyelids. "Who's keepin' an eye on Dickie Wall?"

*

Alright now, here's where I play my part in the story. I'd better introduce myself. I'm Milton Boswell Shakespeare III an' up to now, I ain't bin in Sexy Gulch for some days, so what I bin tellin' ya 'bout what happened is what folks tol' me.

'Course my real name ain't Milt Boswell Shakespeare III. I made it up cause it sounds a whole lot fancier than Floyd Scruggle. Floyd Scruggle's a dandy name fer a farmer, but t'ain't a name fer a lawyer, an' 'cause I were takin' my law degree by correspondence from the East Nevada College a' Litigation, I changed it, so's I have a proper lawyer type name an' git more respect from the ENCL... an' higher marks. I know what yur gonna say... lawyers? Didn't that other Shakespeare feller write down 'kill all them lawyers'? No sir, he didn't. What he wrote were 'kill all them arkitekts', an' havin' met a few, I can tell ya I agree.

I's the only attorney in Sexy Gulch, t'ain't no others cause ol' Poop won't allow it. Now if you're thinkin' this sounds juicy in the matter a' fees, think agin. Workin' for ol' Poop on whatchya call a retainer, an' not a 'specially big one, ain't in no way lucritive. An' fer that I gots do all his legal work, mostly deeds an' corporation papers an' taxes an' such, trackin' all them companies Poop owns to hide his money from the government, an' keeping an eye on Sherrif Norm, makin' sure he's lookin' out for Poop an' not gittin' into any mischief. As ya can seed this is about two full time jobs together, an' I also gots to make all the applications to the state, which is another ton a' paperwork. I've tried to bill Poop for overtime, but he's an argumentative sumbich, an' he'll wrassle ya to the ground to save a nickel, so I works long hours, an' I ain't getting' rich.

As I tol' ya, I weren't around fer all them doin's up to now, I were takin' a few days off out in the desert. 'Xcept for the gunplay an' killin', Sexy Gulch is a quiet town but even that can get on a body's nerves, an' when that occurs I driv out into the desert an' in about 2 minutes you can't find a soul. I like t'practice my fly fishing. Yeah, I knowed there ain't no water an' no fish in the desert. I know I ain't catchin' nothin'

'cept maybe a clump a' sagebrush, but that ain't why I do it, I likes to git in some practice with my rod, in case I ever gits to a lake, an' I likes the quiet ya git in the desert. Dead quiet. After spendin' 10 minutes with ol' Poop, I'm hankerin' for them desert solitudes.

So when I come back to Sexy Gulch, I didn't know nothin' a' what'd happened, including the fire cause I driv in from the other side a' town. The first thing I done were to check in with Sherrif Norm. I had to do that cause I's also the town prosecutor. Yeah, I knowed what yur thinkin'. If I'm Poop's attorney, how could I git elected town prosecutor? Well, all I can tell ya is that's what Poop wanted, an' in Sexy Gulch what Poop wants, ain't nobody objectin'.

As I walked into the jail, Norm were wearing his usual cigar store indian face.

"How's it goin', Norm?"

"Fine. Catch any fish?"

"Yeah, I caught me a big sea bass."

"Really?"

"Jist kidding. What's bin happenin'?"

"Nothin' much. Squintin' Terroteeny, the notorious big time, part time movie director, driv into town with the luscious Miss Vickie Seecrat an' his filim crew an' shot up half the main street. Miss Abigail DuWright were kidnapped. Nathaniel Scruples were gunned down. The town council pissed off ol' Poop by givin' Miss Abigail a raise an' more money to buy books, an' young Hew tried to burn down the library."

I were right flabbergasted. "Yu funnin' me?"

"Nope. God's truth."

"What'd ya do?"

"Nothin'."

"Nothin'?"

"It's like I always tell ya, Milt. Life's like a desert wind. All the things that folks git all het up 'bout just blows away if ya waits long enough."

"What kinda a' mood's ol' Poop in?"

"Like a rattler stung by a scorpion."

*

I crept over to my office above the Bank, hopin' Poop wouldn't see me. I needed some time to think an' to sip my morning' latté. I were jist wonderin' how I were gonna deal with all these doin's, when there come a knockin' at my door. Now, as I can't afford no secretary on what Poop pays me, I says, 'come in', an' Nathaniel Scruples stepped across the threshold.

"Good morning," I says.

"Good morning," he says.

"I'd offer ya a latté but I'm plumb outta fresh milk."

"Thank you, but I don't partake."

"No?"

"No, I find the caffeine excites the blood."

"That's why I drink it. I like my blood excited."

Nathaniel smiled. He had a nice friendly smile, like a giraffe I seed once in a photograph.

"What can I do fer ya?" I says.

“You are the attorney, Milton Boswell Shakespeare the Third?”

I could see him glancin’ at my walls, lookin’ fer my acredidations, which is why I got my ENCL diploma hangin’ in a prominent place by the winda just under the portrait a’ Millard Fillmore, the 13th president of these United States, an’ a man I deeply admire fer his vision. Did ya know he put the first cast iron stove an’ the first bath with plumbin’ into the White House? Millard were man a’ the future, deeply understandin’ what they tell ya in the bible, “look to thy own house for comfort.”

“I am,” I replied.

“Mister Shakespeare, I have come to enquire if it might be possible for a citizen of the town of Dentonville...”

“...Sexy Gulch.”

“I beg your pardon... Sexy Gulch... to obtain a court injunction to prevent the demolition of a building until a proper assessment of that structure has been conducted to ascertain its value in respect to the well-being of the community.”

Damn, he spoke right fine. I gots to tell ya I were plumb impressed. Being born an’ raised in a small town in Nevada, I ain’t never heard anybody talk as fine as that. An’ even though he were on the thin side, Nathaniel Scruples looked like an upright an’ civilized gentleman, an’ both a’ us havin’ college degrees, I dare say we coulda bin pals an’ maybe even gone fishin’ if I hadn’t been workin’ fer ol’ Poop.

“I’m sorry, sir,” says I, “I didn’t catch yer name.”

“Nathaniel Scruples.”

“Is yu the one who saved the library from the fires a’ hell an’ damnation?”

“I helped put out a small fire, yes.”

“Well, sir, that were the bravest thing I never seed.”

“I assure you, it wer... it was nothing.”

“Don’t go bein’ so modest, Mr. Scruples. As I kin see from your wounds, you risked life an’ limb to save our children from illitr...illita... from bein’ ignorant, an’ I wanna thank ya on behalf a’ the citizens a’ this fair town. It’s an honour to meetchya.”

“Please, it was nothing.”

“It were beyond the call a’ duty.”

“Really. It was nothing.”

“And I want ya to call on me to help ya in any way that I kin.”

“Well, as I said, I am making an inquiry on behalf of one of your citizens.”

“Go right ahead.”

“Would it be possible to obtain a court injunction to prevent the demolition of a building?”

“It would depend on circumstancials. Which building yu talkin’ ‘bout?”

“The library.”

“I see, well, yu sound like a man who likes straight talk, Mr. Scruples, so I’ll be frank with yu.”

“I would appreciate that, Mr. Shakespeare.”

I wanted so badly fer him call me ‘Milt’ but I knew that’d be unprofessional conduct not becomin’ my callin’.

“Mr. Scruples, at the present time, I am taken up with a heavy load of legal conveyances an’ such for one of my clients, an’ so I would not be able to devote myself to pursuin’ the matter a’ which yu’re speakin’.”

His face twisted, an' he look like a man 'bout to be to licked by a puppy dog.
"Pardon me, Mr. Shakespeare..."

"Call me Milt."

"Oh. Yes, thank you. Milt... I seem to be confused. I understood that you were the prosecutor for Dent... Sexy Gulch."

"I am."

Now he looked like a man'd been smacked by one a' them feminists.

"Are you telling me that you are the town prosecutor *and* a private attorney?"

"I am."

I could see he were plumb confused.

"Pardon my bewilderment, Mr. Shakespeare..."

"Milt."

"Yes... Milt. May I ask, if you'll permit me, how is it possible for you to perform both functions?"

"Well, I admit it's a heavy load, but if ya take yur vitamins an' git a good night's sleep, a body can keep up."

"No I don't mean physically, what I'm asking is, might it not be considered a... conflict of interest?"

"Whatchya mean?"

"Well, representing some citizens privately while holding public office, especially a public office that roots out wrong-doing is, I believe, considered illegal in most if not all of these United States."

"You funnin' me?"

"No, not in the least."

Now a' course I knowed it were a 'conflict a' interest' but I couldn't let on, otherwise it might be constrewed that I were somehow breakin' the law. "All I can say is we gots to work hard to uphold the law here in Sexy Gulch."

"I see."

"But I would like to help ya if I can."

"I was hoping you could issue an injunction so that the Dent... Sexy Gulch Public Library would be protected under law against any incursions."

"I'd have to take a look see into the matter. I ain't too sure that my office has whatchya call jurisdiction."

"But the library is public property and you are a public servant."

"Actually, Mr. Scruples..."

"Call me Nat."

"Actually, Nat, only half of me is a public attorney. The other half is private attorney, ya understand?"

"Not really."

"It's simple. Think a' me as two halves, one private, one public."

"Alright."

"Now if the half that is public were to issue an injunction, it could only be half an injunction an' that, I suspect, wouldn't be a' any use to ya." I could see now he were real confused.

"Half an injunction?"

"Which'd only protect half the library."

“Yes?... ”

“And that, Nat, might be construed as a conflict a’ interest. As a private attorney, my biggest client might be affected by any action I might be takin’ as a public attorney, d’ya understand?”

“I’m attempting to...”

“I assure ya, Nat, it’s as plain as a cactus in the middle a’ nowhere.”

“I’m... I have no doubt that it is. I’m just not familiar...”

“You probably don’t have this back East, Nat, what we call ‘shared jurisdiction’. We don’t have much money here in the West, so’s we gots to double up on the work.”

“I see.”

“Otherwise, we’d never git nothin’ done.”

“Of course.”

“Now is there anythin’ else I can help ya with?”

“No... ah, no, I don’t think there is. I’ll have to give the matter further thought. I thank you for your time and for the information.”

“Anytime. It’s been a pleasure meeting ya, Nat. You like fishin’?”

“What?”

“Fishin’, you like fishin’?”

“No, I don’t... I haven’t...”

“Well, never mind. If I can be of any further help, jist gimme a call. Here’s my card.”

I shook his hand an’ he left. I sat at my desk fer the longest time, wishin’ I’d stayed in the desert where it were peaceful. I didn’t wanna come back, cause I knowed there were gonna be trouble. Jist afore I left I could smell it steamin’ off ol’ Poop, who in my opinion is the biggest rebel rouser since Robert E. Lee.

That got me to thinkin’ ‘bout whether I hadn’ outta be givin’ ol’ Poop some advice beyond the usual type legal consultin’. We lawyers is supposed to have whatchya ethics, but we don’t really, we’s mostly concerned with gittin’ by with jist the letter a’ the law an’ winning cases fer our clients, an’ gittin’ our fees in a timely manner, but I liked the town a’ Sexy Gulch an’ I didn’t wanna see ol’ Poop squish it with a gigantic Lingerie Emporium. Yu see, I were beginnin’ to think that ol’ Poop, being a billionaire, had got hisself a kinda money sickness, like all them billionaires, ‘cause if you was to hold one of’em up to the light, you’d see a lack a’ character.

Anyways, I skedaddled on over to Poop’s office at the Gazette an’ found hisself writin’ an editorial on the wicked ways a’ liberals, how they was wreckin’ business an’ disobeyin’ the laws a’ God by holdin’ back fearless entrappaneurs like hisself who was tryin’ to bring prosperity to towns like Sexy Gulch.

When I tol’ him ‘bout Nathaniel droppin’ by my office, I seed ol’ Poop’s eyes narrow. I could see he were filled with hate, an’ I don’t respect a man who hates.

“I want you,” he said, “to squash him like a bug, but legal like.”

I said, “Mr. Burdoch, you’s filled with hate an’ that’s a powerful evil force to be coursin’ through yur body. It’s like to make ya sick.”

“Milt, you gotta diploma on yer wall under that Millard picture. What’s it stand fer?”

“You know what it stands fer. That’s my graduation certificate from ENCL.”

“So you ain’t no medical doctor?”

“You knows I ain’t.”

“That’s right. I pays ya fer legal advice, an’ I sees Doc Scalapini for medical. Now if the Doc finds out you’re givin’ me medical advice, he’s gonna be mad, damn mad, an’ everybody knows what a man like that can do with a scalpel. Ya git my drift?”

“I do.”

“If I was yu, I’d stick to law. I want yu to put that liberal wussy behind bars.”

“Fer what?”

“Yu figure it out. Now git so’s I can meet my deadline.”

You see my problem? Poop was filled with so much hate, that he couldn’t hardly think straight no more, which meant I had to think up a way to hurt my new friend Nat.

*

I trundled on over to see Sherrif Norm. Now Norm ain’t the sharpest arrow in the quiver, but sometimes you can strike a little spark off’en his battery.

“Ol’ Poop’s mad,” I told him.

“When ain’t he mad?”

“He wants me to put Nathaniel Scruples behind bars.”

“Fer what?”

“That’s what I asked him.”

“Whad’d he say?”

“That’s it.”

“Whatchya gonna do?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Got any thoughts?”

“Well, he ain’t done nothing wrong, has he?”

“I didn’t think so.”

“Does he carry a gun?”

“I didn’t see one.”

“Well, you find out. If he ain’t gotta gun, I can arrest him fer not carrying one.”

“We got a law that says you gots to carry a gun?”

“Don’t ya know the by-laws a’ Sexy Gulch?”

“Course I knowed’em. I jist don’t remember that one.”

“Afore your time. Poop wanted a strong gun law agin them liberal do-gooders, but didn’t want’em knowin’ about it, so we hid it in the dog by-law.”

“The dog by-law?”

“Section 3, Clause 9, states that every dog an’ man o’er the age a’ 21 must carry a gun to protect theyselves.”

“That’s right clever.”

“That’s ol’ Poop. So you’s want me to arrest him?”

“Well no, we needs to find out if he’s carryin’ a gun. If he is, we don’t wanna embarrass ourselves.”

“An’ if he ain’t...?”

“Then you can arrest him. What’s the penalty?”

“It’s only a fine, there’s no jail time.”

“That’s no good.”

“I know. I could say he were resistin’ arrest, an’ threatenin’ an officer a’ the law.”

“How’d he be doin’ that without a gun?”

“He got a knife?”

“I doubt it.”

“He don’t wanna make things easy.”

“I dunno, Norm, seems to me Nathaniel ain’t the problem. The problem is that Poop wants that library gone.”

“That’s what I bin thinkin’.”

“Maybe you could suggest t’him that it t’ain’t a good ider.”

“I’d rather be lyin’ dyin’ in the sand an’ facin’ a pack of coyotes than doin’ that.”

“Well, we gots to do somethin’. I suspect if somethin’ were t’happen to the Library, it’d cause you an’ me a whole lotta trouble.”

“That’s what I bin thinkin’.”

“Lemme think on it.”

*

An’ I did. I sat with my feet up on the desk all afternoon thinkin’ when I shoulda been workin’ all the angles on the law to keep the guvernement from gittin’ they hands on Poop’s money. I made a list a’ all the people I knowed was involved. I find when ya make a list an’ stare at it, sometimes yur mind figures stuff out fer ya. On the list there were...

Squintin’ Terroteeny

Miss Vickie Seecrat

Miss Abigail DuWright

Nathaniel Scruples

The Hole-Dickie-Wall-Gang (which I were afeared a’, cause what they didn’t know were that I were the one who were orderin’ the foreclosures on they mommy’s houses, on the orders a’ Poop a’ course), an’ then I put down...

Dickie Wall

Sherrif Norman

Thaddeus Phineas Jones

Willard Freeze,

Morgan O’Sally,

Talbot Tibbet,

Hew

Mayor Stank, an’ a’ course

Ol’ Poop hisself.

I closed my door an’ locked it an’ sat at my desk with a glass a’ bourbon. I knowed that if sumethin’ happened to the library it be like “cutting all them war dogs loose” jist like that first Shakespeare said. So I stared at that list hard, hopin’ to git me an ider. I had a few but whenever I got one an’ thought it through, I knew it’d make ol’ Poop mad. Everythin’ seemed to come around the corner an’ back to makin’ ol’ Poop mad.

An’ that’s when I realized the mistake I were makin’. I were lookin’ fer what they call a ‘win-win’ situation, an’ t’ weren’t no way that were goin’ happen with Poop being the kinda person he were, a wrecker an’ a ruiner, an’ somebody who had to be winnin’ all the time. I realized that ol’ Poop’d have to change hisself or be gone. The question were which an’ how?

*

I don't know why, but I went out fer a walk an' found myself near the library lookin' at the Emporium an' then the library an' the Emporium an' then back at the library an' wonderin' how two such different places could be next door t'each other an' makin' so much trouble. An' then I found myself walkin' into the library.

As soon I gets to the front desk, I says, "Miss Abigail?"

She looked up at me.

"I'm Milton Boswell..."

"I know who you are, Mr. Shakespeare," she says, abrupt like.

"I know it appears we ain't friends, Miss Abigail, but I think we both want the same for Sexy Gulch..."

"Dentonville..."

"Yes... Dentonville."

"What do you propose, Mr. Shakespeare? Or should I ask, what does Mr. Burdoch propose?"

"He don't knowed I'm here."

"Really?" Her tone weren't too trustin' like.

"I swear on a stack a' bibles, Miss Abigail."

"Why are you here?"

"Cause I think there's gonna be trouble an' I'd like to try doin' somethin' t'stop it."

"And what do you suggest?"

"I don't know, Miss Abigail, I been rackin' my brain tryin' t'figure somethin' out."

"As all the aggression seems to be coming from Mr. Burdoch, shouldn't you be talking to him, Mr. Shakespeare?"

"He's a man set in his ways, Miss Abigail."

"I understand, but I really don't know what you think I could do."

"I don't knowed either. I jist wanted to let ya know that not everybody were thinkin' like Mr. Burdoch."

"I appreciate that, Mr. Shakespeare."

"This is a right fine library. It's a credit to yourself an' the town."

"Thank you, Mr. Shakespeare."

"Well, I'd best be gitting back. Thanks for speakin' to me."

I felt like a fool being Poop's hatchet man. This fine woman had built herself a library to be proud a' an' ol' Poop were tryin' to tear it down so's he could make more money. It were a sickness. If only people could tell'im that. An' that's when I had the ider.

*

Squintin' were lyin in bed his eyes closed tryin' to figure out how to get he an' Miss Vicki outta town quick afore Burdoch come gunnin' fer him.

"Which one do ya like best, Squint?"

"What?"

"Which outfit do ya like best?"

Squintin' opened his eyes. She were posin' in one of them frilly garments.

"Whatchya doin'?"

"I'm showin' ya what I bought."

“I tol’ ya we gots to leave right away. Don’t ya ever listen to me?”
“Don’t yu yell at me, Squintin’ Terroteeny. I were doin’ this to cheer ya up.”
“Well, I’m cheered, now get dressed, we gots to leave right away.”
“Right away?”
“Yeah.”

There were a knockin’ at the door. Squintin’ sighed an’ closed his eyes agin. He heard Miss Vickie answer the door an’ say “Can I help you?”

An’ then Squintin’ had a pain in his head, cause he hear’d this voice, an’ it were the one he hated.

“Oh, gosh, yu’s Miss Vicki an’ yur so purdy.”

“Thank you,” said Vicki all sweet like.

“Is my friend Squintin’ here?”

“He is.”

“Can I talk to him, pleaasssse?”

Squintin’ didn’t move. He took out his gun an’ pointed it at Hew as he come in the room. “You’d better have a damn good reason fer bein’ here.”

“Sherrif Norman’s askin’ you to come to the Saloon at 6:00 o’ clock.”

“Why?”

“He didn’t tell me.”

“He didn’t tell ya nothin’?”

“Nothin’.”

“Whatchya think it’s about?”

“Ain’t got the foggiest.”

Squintin’ didn’t know what to do. Hew probably tol’ on him an’ now they was tryin’ to trap’im into admittin’ he’d took the six hundred dollars. He knowed he didn’t have no choice. They was probably layin’ a trap for’im right now. “Alright, you tell him I’ll be there.” Then he remembered Poop’s threat. “But tell’im I’m leavin’ town right after.”

*

Miss Abigail were puttin’ books on they selves when a skinny, pimply-face young man stepped into the library an’ looked about like he’d never seed nothin’ like it.

“Can I help you?” asked Abigail.

“You Miss Abigail?”

“Yes.”

“Sherrif Norman wants yu to come to special meetin’ at the Saloon at six o’clock. Gosh,” he says, lookin’ in wonderment at all the books on they shelves. “Look at all them books.”

“Do you like books?” asked Miss Abigail.

“I dunno, I ain’t never read one.”

“No?”

Hew’s eyes was bugged clear outta his skull he were so impressed. “Oh gosh, you got so many.”

“They’re not my books. They belong to the town.”

“You got any books I can read... that is, any books a person... ah, who don’t how, can read?”

“Yes I think I do,” said Abigail kindly. She went to a shelf in the children’s section an’ took two small books from the shelf, beckonin’ Hew to join her at a table.

“These are two excellent books,” said Abigail, “written by a man named Dr. Seuss.”

“That’s a funny name.”

“It is. This one is called Dr. Seuss’s ABC, and this one is called Green Eggs and Ham.”

“Ugh, if them eggs is green, they’s probably gone bad.”

“I don’t think that’s what Dr. Seuss meant. Would you like me to read it to you?”

“Wouldya?”

“I will.” an’ she did, four times. Hew were so taken by them books an’ by the ideo that he could borrow’em, that he walked outta there with them books under his arm happy as a snake on a hot dry rock.

*

At a little past six, when I stepped into the Saloon, Miss Abigail, Nat, Norm, the Hole-in-Dickie-Wall Gang, Thaddeus, Willard Freeze, Morgan, Talbot, Hew, an’ Mayor Stank an’ a’ course, Squintin’ an’ Miss Vickie was all sittin’ scattered around the saloon, starin’ at me like I were goin’ interrogate’em. A’ course, ol’ Poop, who never does nothin’ that nobody wants, hadn’t got there yet.

Willard, who’s got his head on right, can be awful pushy. “What’s this all about, Milt?” He were starin’ at me like he knowed somethin’ bad.

“All in good time, Will.”

Sittin’ at the table with Willard were Thaddeus, Morgan, Talbot an’ Mayor Stank who were pourin’ out beers from a big pitcher for hisself an’ whoever wanted one, all of’em tryin’ not to stare at Miss Vickie, who were demur like in one a’ them frilly garments, sittin’ with Squintin’ at a table by the winda, where everybody could admire her physical self. Miss Abigail, studying Miss Vicki curious like, were sittin’ upright with Nat near the wall waitin’ patiently, an’ Sherrif Norm had pulled a chair up near the door where’s he could keep an eye on the situation. Hew were sitting near Miss Abigail an’ Nat, starin’ hard at them books what Miss Abigail lent’im. The Hole-in-Dickie-Wall Gang were sat at they usual table in the corner watchin’ everybody else. When Dickie Wall snuck in, sneaky like, the Gang started to draw they guns but Sherrif Norm took two steps towards’em an’ they put’em away right quick.

Finally, ol’ Poop arrived. He come in by the door, stopped an’ looked at all the folks gathered there. He seed that somethin’ were up, an’ saw me standin’ by the bar, an’ I knowed he knowed I were the cause a’ it.

“What’s goin’ on here?”

“I’m goin’ tell a story, Mr. Burdoch,” says I.

“Ain’t got no time for stories.”

“Well, I’m gonna tell this story to everybody anyway, an’ it won’t take long, so’s you might as well take up pew an’ listen.”

Poop looked at me, then at all the folk, Nathaniel especially. “This here’s a saloon, meant for drinkin’, but I can see that only some a’ ya’s partakin’.”

“I expect we could all use a drink,” I said friendly like, knowin’ that Poop weren’t offerin’ to buy.

“I ain’t runnin’ this saloon as a charity. Everybody’s gotta drink up an’ pay up.”

“A’ course. This won’t take long. Take a seat.”

I think ol’ Poop could see that this were some sort a’ bushfire he better be attendin’ to if he didn’t wanna get consumed by the flames, so’s he sat down.

“Sometimes,” I said, “when I driv out into the desert I takes along some books. I find it right peaceful sittin’ in the dead quiet, readin’ a book. When I were out there a few days ago, I bin readin’ a book by a feller named Charlie Dickens who lived ‘bout a hundred years ago.” I glanced over an’ could see Miss Abigail watchin’ me.

“He were one of them English writers, an’ jist ‘bout everybody loved his books, ‘specially us Americans. I read a couple already, an’ I’m jist plumb smacked a’ how he knowed what makes people tick. This time I took along one called The Christmas Carol which ain’t a girl’s name but what them English call a christmas song. It’s the story a’ a man named Scrooge who were a terrible miser.”

I glanced at Poop but he were keepin’ his face inscrutable like.

“An’ cause he were a miser he were a miserable ol’ coot all the time an’ disrespectful to everybody, his nephew an’ his clerk an’ his maid an’ everybody ‘round him. Just plain rude.”

I could see I had ol’ Poop’s attention now. He were watchin’ me closely an’ it weren’t friendly, so’s I knowed I were burnin’ my bridges.

“Well, one Christmas eve, he’s in bed all by hisself asleep when he wakes in a terrible fright an’ he sees a ghost who tells him that he’s Marley, the ghost a’ his partner what died, an’ that he’s come to tell Scrooge to stop being so mean an’ miserable. Well, old Scrooge can’t believe Marley’s a ghost but he’s don’t wanta insult him none, in case he is. An’ Marley, who’s draggin’ a chain a’ sins, tells Scrooge that 3 ghosts is on they way to visit him that very night to show him the error a’ his ways, an’ see if they kin git’im to lighten up. When Marley leaves, ol’ Scrooge is in a right state an’ he thinks maybe he can hide under the bedclothes from them ghosts... if they was ghosts... so they might not find him.

A’ course, they is ghosts, an’ durin’ the night they arrive one by one, but they don’t tell him he’s the most miserable, closefisted, penny-pinchin’, cantankerous sumbich.. pardon my French... that ever lived, no sir, they show him. They take him through his whole life an’ into his future, an’ when he sees hisself puttin’ money ahead a’ his love fer his sweetheart an’ his friends an’ his clerk an’ little Tiny Tim, an’ how he’s gonna die a lonely, disrespected ol’ man, why ol’ Scrooge’s heart is hurtin’ so bad he gits all weepy-eyed an’ is feelin the most powerful kinda contriteness yu could ever imagine. An’ when he wakes on Christmas morning an’ realizes that them ghosts is gone but that he can change his ways an’ become a do-gooder, he is so giddy he runs around like a boy on the end a’ a high-flyin’ kite. An’ after that he gives his money to all the kids an’ folk, an’ everybody was livin’ happily ever after, ‘specially Tiny Tim.”

They were silence in the bar. Nobody were speakin’.

“Pig pucky,” said Poop.

I looked at him. I were gittin’ irritated. Here I were givin’ him the chance to do right by everybody, an’ he were spittin’ on it.

“Do yu know what folks calls you, Mr. Burdoch?”

“Ol’ Poop.”

We was all surprised.

“Do you know why folks is so disrespectful to ya, behind yur back?”

“Course. They’s envious.”

“You don’t think it has somethin’ to do with the way yu treats folks?”

“Course it does.”

“Yu goin’ change that?”

“Nope. What you got to realize,” he said, raisin’ his voice so’s everybody in the saloon could hear him, “is it’s a dog eat dog world, an’ the dog with the most bones wins. Now I suggest ya all pay up an’ git outta my saloon.”

Everybody were shocked, but didn’t know what to say or do.

“Oh, by the way, Milt,” says ol’ Poop with a smile, “yu’s fired.”

There were a sharp intake a’ breath, except for Hew who were starin’ at one them Seus books an’ mutterin’ to hisself.

Poop heard him an’ looked at Hew like he were a reptile. “Hew, yu’s fired too.” Then Poop got up an’ started for the door.

Hew spoke up. “I will not eat green eggs an’ ham,” he said. I don’t think he heard ol’ Poop, cause he weren’t speakin’ to him, he were jist sayin’ them lines from the book he were so happy to be readin’.

Poop turned. “What?” he said, starin’ at him as though he were a brick short of a load.

“No, I will not eat Green Eggs an’ Ham,” Hew said agin, proudly displacin’ his learnin’.

“What yu talkin’ about?”

“He will not eat green eggs an’ ham,” says I, tryin’ not to laugh.

Ol’ Poop looked at me like I were loco too.

“I will not eat green eggs an’ ham,” repeated Hew, grinnin’ at everybody.

“He will not eat green eggs an’ ham,” says Thaddeus, smilin’.

“We will not eat green eggs an’ ham,” says Miss Abigail, loud an’ clear.

Willard, Talbot an’ Morgan joined in. “We will not eat green eggs an’ ham.”

Poop were angry an’ mystified. “What the blazes you all talkin’ ‘bout? You gone loco? Get outta my saloon. Go on, get out.”

“I do not like green eggs an’ ham,” says Hew.

“You may like them,” says Miss Abigail. “You will see. You may like them in a tree. Would you like them here or there?”

Confused, Hew stared at Miss Abigail then quickly down at the book.

“I would not,” whispered Miss Abigail, proudly watchin’ Hew sittin’ at the next table, “like them here or there. I would not like them anywhere. I do not like...”

“... green eggs an’ ham,” grinned Hew. “I do not like them, Sam-I-am.”

“Would you like them in a house?” she said. “Would you like them with a mouse?”

“I do not like them... in a house,” Hew beamed. “I do not like them with a mouse. I do not like them here or there...” Hew paused, starin’ at the page, tryin’ to remember.

“I do not like them anywhere,” whispers Miss Abigail.

“I do not like them... anywhere,” says Hew. “I do not like green eggs an’ ham. I do not like them, Sam-I-am.”

Ol’ Poop were lookin’ like he’d bin smacked cross the head by a two by four.

“Would you eat them in a box?” says Miss Abigail, smilin’ proud. “Would you eat them with a fox?”

Hew paused, uncertain.

“Not in a box,” hinted Miss Abigail. “Not with...”

“...fox,” says Hew, loudly, grinnin’. “I would not like them here or there. I would not like them anywhere. I do not like green eggs an’ ham. I do not like them, Sam-I-am.”

Miss Abigail raised her arms an’ conducted everybody, “He does not like green eggs an’ ham,” we all sang. “He does not like them Sam-I-am.”

“I do not like green eggs an’ ham,” says Hew, gittin’ in the final word.

I’d never seed ol’ Poop so stumped an’ angry at the same time. He were standin’ there as though he’d seed a ghost... the ghost a’ never were. “Get out, get out, go on, get out, get out, get out a’ my saloon! Get out, get out!”

Miss Abigail an’ Nathaniel got up an’ starts to leave, an’ everybody got theyselves up an’ out a’ the door. I were the last one, an’ I turned to see ol’ Poop standin’ all on his own, angry as a brush fire. T’ weren’t nobody left in that saloon ‘cept him, Sherrif Norman, Mayor Stank an’ Dickie Wall.

*

That were the last time we tried to talk sense into ol’ Poop. ‘Course I had to clear outta my office ‘bove the bank, an’ giv up my room at the hotel where Poop had giv me a special rate, but I weren’t goin’ anywhere. I liked livin’ in Sexy Gulch. I liked the desert. So’s I went to board at the Wangs. I had me a little money saved, an’ the Wangs gimme a special rate fer schoolin’ their children after they was workin’ all day in Poop’s factory, so I weren’t desperate. I felt I owed it to the town, after workin’ nefariously for Poop for s’long, to stick around an’ sees if I could ameliarate any adversity he were causin’.

For the next week, things’s pretty quiet in Sexy Gulch. Every evenin’ I got to seed my friend Nathaniel who were now comin’ by the Wangs to sit on the porch with Miss Abigail. Hew were spending his days at the Library, where Miss Abigail were teachin’ him how to put them books away, an’ how to read, an’ he were havin’ more fun than a hound at a barbeque.

Squintin’ were gone. He’d hired Dickie Wall to driv him an’ Miss Vickie to Vegas, an’ the Hole-in-Dickie-Wall gang had just plumb disappeared.

I knowed ol’ Poop would be gittin’ up to somethin’, cause he couldn’t resist hisself, but I didn’t knowed what. Almost every mornin’, I’d run into Sherrif Norman at Talbot’s café, next to the drugstore. Norm’d always sit at the table next to mine, so’s he wouldn’t get any backfire from ol’ Poop, an’ we’d pretend we weren’t talkin’ to each other, but we was so’s we could keep ourselves apprised a’ what were goin’ on. I liked Norm. He didn’t always have all four tires on the road, but he were decent folk.

A few days after the big blowout in the saloon, I were havin’ my breakfast at Talbot’s, when Norm comes in an’ sits down at my table, an’ I knowed somethin’ were up. “What’s goin’ on?”

“The old man’s left town.”

“Fer how long?”

“Don’t know. He tol’ me he’s on a buyin’ trip.”

“Buyin’ what?”

“Don’t know.”

“Frisly garments?”

“Nah, he got folks do that fer him.”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out sooner or later.”

“He’s got hisself a new attorney.”

I give Norm one them quizzical stares. “Who?” I asked. I shouldn’t a’ bin surprised, but I were.

“Dickie Wall.”

“Dickie Wall? He ain’t no attorney. He’s got no accreditation.”

“Has now. He been takin’ one a’ them ENCL courses that ya write away fer. He come to the office to an’ showed me his certificate, an’ apologized.”

“Well he’s snivellin’ enough to be an attorney.” Norm don’t ever laugh, but when I said that I seed him smile a little.

“You think things’re gonna be quiet for a spell?” I asked.

Norm thought. He’s always had hisself a good fix on ol’ Poop. “Nope. I think the old man got somethin’ planned.”

“Like what?”

“Not a clue. But somethin’s goin’ happen to that library.”

“Ain’t there nothin’ we can do ‘bout it?”

“Doubt it. Once the old man gits an ider in his head, it’s awful hard to shake it loose.”

We sat there starin’ at each other

Then Norm kinda looks at me like he knowed somethin’. “Maybe if yu was to git an injunction.”

“How’d I do that?”

“Yur the one supposed know how.”

“I am?”

“Ain’t yu the town prosecutor?”

“Poop fired me.”

“No, he didn’t. He fired his attorney. Yu’s still the prosecutor.”

“I am?”

“Leastwises till the next election,” said Norm.

“That’s right, I am.” I’d plumb forgot. I were always so busy being Poop’s attorney that I’d never done no prosecuting, so’s when he fired me, I jist thought I were quit him altogether. “How’s that gonna help?”

“Well, can’t the prosecutor git an injunction?”

“I dunno.” I weren’t too sure a’ the proceedin’s.

“Yu don’t know yur job? What kind attorney is yu? Yu write it up an’ git Judge Hoagh to sign it.”

Now I ain’t tol ya ‘bout ol’ Judge Hoagh, the circuit court judge who resides in Sexy Gulch. Ol’ Hoagh is a tall, gangly man with a hangin’ Judge face what terrifies everybody comes up in front a’ him. He used to play chess with Doc Scalapini until they had a spat... nobody knowed about what. The Judge likes to stay pretty much to hisself so’s he can strike fear into the hearts a’ criminals an’ such but, like me, he likes to driv out into the desert, ‘xcept ‘stead takin’ a fishin’ rod, he lugs a set a’ them big conga drums, chews on some a’them wild mushrooms (which only me an’ Norm knowed

about), then beats them drums till his hands is raw (everybody 'xcept me it seems wants to walk on the wild side).

“The Judge ain't gonna go up against ol' Poop.”

“Depends how ya approach him.”

I gots to admit, Norm can be pretty shrewd, an' him wantin' save the library showed he were decent folk. He'd figured out that we could likely get the Judge to sign an injunction while he were chewin' on them wild mushrooms. An' as we knowed a full moon were comin' on, which is when the Judge liked to beat on his drums, we gots the injunction ready an' waited.

Sure enough, one evening just after sunset, we seed the Judge put them congas into his old jeep an' driv off. Norm an' me follered in the Sherrif's jeep, at a distance a' course, up into some steep arroyos until the Judge come to one that were all closed in. He got outta his jeep an' walked on, carryin'em drums. Norm an' I got out an' follered, careful like. After a spell we could hear soft drummin'. Then slowly the drummin' got faster an' louder until it sounded like the drummer were havin' a seizure a' some kind, an' that's when we ambled right up the arroyo. The Judge were sittin' crosslegged 'side a campfire, an' a' flailin' away at them drums somethin' fierce, lookin' like he were demonized.

Norm stepped up to him, “Judge, we need ya to sign this injunction.”

It looked to me like the Judge didn't hear him none.

“Juuuudge?”

The Judge were frenzied, like he were punishin' them drums.

Norm suddenly put his hand on the conga an' moved it.

The Judge stopped. His eyes was glazed, an' he were starin' at Norm like he didn't knowed him.

“Judge, you gots to sign this petition to stop'em from firing they guns at the moon,” said Norm pointin' up at the moon.

“What?”

“The moon. The Hole-in-Dickie-Wall Gang's firin' at the moon. Ya gots to stop'em.”

Norm thrust a pen into the Judge's hand an' put the injunction on the drum.

“Sign, Judge.”

The Judge stared at the injunction like he'd never seed one afore.

“At the bottom, Judge.” Norm put the Judge's hand with the pen on the bottom a' the paper. “Sign, Judge.” Judge Hoagh signed. If I hadna seed it, I wouldn't've believed it.

Norm put the Judge's hand back on the drum, which recommenced to flailin', an' we hurried back to the jeep, jumped in an' took off outta there.

*

Bet yur wonderin' what happened to Squintin'. Well, so was Squintin'. He were pole axed, never havin' had such a putrid time in his whole life as he'd had in Sexy Gulch. But sfter he an' Miss Vicki'd spent a coupla days in Vegas, an' him getting' whatchya call a royal reception an' a special celebrity rate from the management a' the Cactus Motel where he an' Miss Vicki were residin', an' lots a' folks in Vegas recognizin' him an' tellin' him how much they 'luded' his movies, why Squintin' were struttin' about like his ol' self again. When he complained to the local Cadillac dealer about his special

Caddy bein stole, that dealer were makin' phone calls right quick an' afore ya knowed it, Squintin' were given a special deluxe model Caddy to use until the company could build him another Squintin' Terroteeny Shooter, his special movie edition Caddy what he used fer filimin' him killin' folk.

But Squintin' weren't waitin' 'round fer the new Caddy an' his filimin' crew, cause he'd got hisself mad, damn mad, thinkin' about how ol' Poop had been so disrespectful to hisself. Ya see, Squintin' suffered from a revenge complex. He had to git revenge all the time, even if nobody'd done him wrong but just said something mildly insultin'. An' ol' Poop had humiliated him so bad that it were now a boilin' inside him like a lava in one them volcanos. So's he'd made up his mind to get back to Sexy Gulch an' show that ol' buzzard what happens when ya disrespect' a big time, part time, gunslingin' movie director like hisself.

"I'm goin' back to Sexy Gulch," Squintin' tol Miss Vickie.

"Oh Squint, why?"

"A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

"What's that?"

"What I jist tol' ya."

"Oh Squintin', what if ya git kilt?"

"When you're a man with a gun, Baby, it comes with the territory."

"Take me with ya, Squint."

"T'ain't no place for a lady, Vicki, yu could get hurt."

"No I won't Squint, I promise. I know what I can do. I can hide in the Lingerie Emporium. Ain't nobody gonna find me there."

"That's right," said Squintin'. He were so proud a' her. She were right smart.

*

For almost a week since Hew had bin green egggin' ol' Poop in the saloon, the town had been quiet, but I knew it couldn't last, that as soon as ol' Poop'd come back, things'd bust loose.

An' he come back that very day. I seed him. He driv into town, parked his Oldsmobile in front a' the Gazette, an' went inside. He didn't come out till late, when he went into Talbot's an' et his usual steak an' fries supper then retired for the night to his room in the hotel.

The next day I seed in the Gazette a big article 'bout the terrible state a' the library an' how sad the Gazette were that it had to be demolished. Poop said how he hisself were moved but promised to donate some money to build a new one. What he didn't say in the article were that, after Dickie Wall'd dropped Squintin' an' Miss Vickie off in Vegas, he joined up with ol' Poop an' they driv to Carson City where they got one a' them state building type inspectors to issue a demolition order by addin' a sizeable contribution to his Christmas fund.

A' course me and Norm didn't knowed that then. We could seed that somethin' snaky were goin' on, but we figured that if one a' us were in the library day an' night with that injunction we could stop'im. A' course that'd mean that ol' Poop'd figure out that Sherrif Norm were tryin' to do right by the town, which'd make him damn mad, but we was determined, so's durin' the day I slept an' Norm kept an eye on the library. Then, jist as Miss Abigail were closin', I'd slip into the library so as to be watchin' it all

night. I took along a flashlight so's I could catch up on my readin'. As I were re-reading all them Charlie Dickens books, I didn't hardy notice the passin' a' time.

Nothin' happened the first night, but late on the second, almost to first light, jist as I were thinkin' how much Dickie Wall reminded me a' Uriah Heep, I hear'd a rumblin' off in the distance. As the noise come closer, I realized it were a big engine a' some kind. I rushed to the front winda an' peeked out, an' comin' down the main drag were this huge catipillar truck with a crane carryin' a big ball on the end a' a chain.

I knowed right away this were the moment a' truth. I slipped out the back door, ran to the fire bell an' were ringin' it like a man in a state a' high alert. Then I run to the front a' the library an' stood blockin' the door. Poop, Dickie Wall an' a man in a helmet was standin' by the vehicle gittin' ready to fling that big ball at the side a' the library, so's I went an' stood in front a' it.

"Get away from there," shouted Poop.

"Whatchya doin'?" says I.

"Yu's fired. Yu got no business being here."

"I'm the town prosecutor. Now yu gonna tell what's goin' on?"

"Alright, Mr. Prosecutor. We gots a court order here to tear down this buildin' what's bin declared unfit for human consumption," said Poop, indicatin' Dickie Wall who were holdin' up the demolition certificate.

"An' I gots here," says I, pullin' out the paper, "an injunction preventin' any demolition a' this here buildin'."

"Oh yeah," says Poop, smug like, "who signed it?"

"Circuit Judge Hoagh."

That stopped Poop. He were certain he'd got the ol' judge in his pocket.

By now, Miss Abigail, Nat, Willard, Thaddeus, Morgan, Talbot, an' Sherrif Norm had turned up, an' were watchin' ol' Poop.

"Sherrif," Poop cries out, "Arrest this man for obstructin' justice."

Sherrif Norm takes a hard look at ol' Poop. "How so?" he says.

"Show'em," says Poop to Dickie Wall.

"I'm sorry," says Dickie Wall, handin' Norm the court order. "I have here a demolition order to tear down this library. I'm sorry."

"An' I gots an injunction," says I, holdin' it up, "to prevent any demolishin' of this proud an' fine building."

Poop were sneerin' at me somethin' fierce. "That's worthless," he said.

I could feel the hatred comin' off a' him like the heat off'en desert sand on a scorchin' day.

Sherrif Norm took the paper from Dickie, an' the injunction from me, an' made a show a' examinin' em.

"Well," he says, lookin' thoughtful, "a demolition order is pretty powerful, but I'm afraid that this here injunction, being signed by a circuit judge, takes whatchya call pressidence." I could seed Norm were havin' difficulty keepin' a smile off'en his face.

"What?!" cried Poop, who were now double damn mad. He were lookin' at us an' I could seed he were beginnin' to git the ider that we was in cahoots.

"That's an order from the state," he says, "that injunction what you gots there is local. Ain't nothin' yu can do 'bout a state order."

"If you'll excuse me," said Nat, steppin' forward, "I believe that the Circuit..."

“Get out, get outta my town, you, you... you... yu pompous-talkin’ arse,” sputtered Poop. “Stay outta this!”

Willard stepped forward. “I think,” he says, “we outta hear all points a’ view on this matter. Go ahead, son.”

“I believe,” said Nat, standin’ his ground, “that the Circuit Court has jurisdiction over the state, but as it seems to be a constitutional matter, you would need to verify that.”

Poop were glarin’ at Sherrif Norm. “Well, Sherrif?”

“That’s my understandin’,” says Norm.

“That library’s comin’ down,” said Poop, cold an’ mean like. “Ev’n if I hafta do it myself.”

Sherrif Norm looked at Poop, stern like. “Ain’t nobody’s breakin’ the law while I’m sherrif.”

“You booby-headed, imbecilic, nincompoop. I got ya’s elected, I can git ya unelected right quick.”

“Like I said,” said Norm, cool like, “ain’t nobody’s breakin’ the law while I’m sherrif.”

Steam was risin’ off a’ Poop something fierce. He were lookin’ at us lookin’ at him with some kind a’ pity, an’ it looked to me like he were havin’ a hemoridge. Finally, he run to that catipillar truck which still had its engine runnin’, an’ clumb up on it, but just as he pushed the driver fella off the seat, a shot rang out. Everybody stopped, an’ looked ‘round, includin’ ol’ Poop.

Walkin’ slow an’ powerful like up the main drag were Squintin’, his gun now back in its holster. “Poop Burdoch,” he said loudly, “Yur a double-dealin’, snakey corporate reptile an’ I’m callin’ you out. It’s showdown time.”

“Get outta my town, you twerp.”

Gosh, we was lookin’ from Poop to Squintin’ an’ back to Poop being real dramatic like, then back to Squintin’ being real dramatic like, an’ thought we was in a Squintin’ Terroteeny movie.

“You git yur gun, Poop,” said Squintin’, all manly like, “cause we’s gonna have it out right here an’ now. You’re gonna die fer yur sins, an’ all the harm yu done to me an’ my kin.”

Poop were standin’ now on them catipillar tracks, shakin’ his fist at Squintin’.

“You actor,” he spat out. “You cheap buffoon. Git outta my town an’ donchya set foot in here agin.”

“Get off’en that contraption.”

Poop clumb into the seat an’ put it in gear.

Squintin’ pulled his gun. “I’m warnin’ you,” he cried over the roar a’ the engine.

Poop didn’t even look at’im, so’s Squintin’ raised his gun an’ fired.

Now here’ the thing. What folks don’t know, an’ what we found out that night were that Squintin’ Terroteeny were a terrible shot. He couldn’t shoot straight to save his life. That’s why his name were Squintin’, cause he couldn’t hardly see straight. All them times he were killin’ folk, he were killin’em by accident. One of them movie folk told me that they had to use a special wide angle lens, called Dead Eye Squint, made jist for filming Squintin’ killin’ folk cause, as he put it, Squintin’ couldn’t hit the broadside of a ten ton truck standin’ next to it.

So when Squintin' fired his gun, a' course he missed ol' Poop but he hit Dickie Wall who fell right down. An' Miss Abigail, as noble a woman as yu'd find anywhere, were rushin' to where he lay, to give'im some ministrations, an' make him comfortable till the doc could git there. An' I seed some blood ouzin' from Dickie's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," moaned Dickie Wall. "Am I dying?"

"Of course not," said Miss Abigail, "you'll be right as rain in no time. You've no need to worry, Doc Scalapini has been sent for."

"I'm sorry," said Dickie Wall again, an' died.

Miss Abigail, who didn't hardly knowed Dickie, were tryin' to hold back her tears, she were so moved by his senseless killin', even though he were snivellin' an' all. Folks say Squintin' didn't never have no feelin's but he were starin' pole axed at Dickie lying on the ground. I could seed he'd upset hisself by killin' a man who'd helped him, or maybe he were jist disappointed fer not pluggin' ol' Poop.

We was all a little moved, 'xcept ol' Poop who had somehow got the catipillar truck in gear which were now creepin' towards the library. Poop found the release lever for the ball an' pulled it, sendin' it hurtlin' toward the buildin'. Smash. It broke through the big winda an' were now swingin' back towards ol' Poop who hadda duck to avoid bein' pulverized. Then it swung back to the library an' smashed into the wall, putting a big hole next to the winda.

Sherrif Norm took out his revolver an' fired over Poop's head. "Turn that machine off an' come down from there."

But Poop were wild now, an' the ball were swangin' back an' forth an' smashed into the wall a second time, carvin' out a big hole the size a' Dickie's Buick.

Then, shots rang out. Everybody looked every which way. Comin' down the main drag were the Hole-in-Dickie-Wall Gang, lit up like a Christmas tree, all waving they guns.

"Ever..body," slurred Rawhide. "We's lookin' fer a snivellin', rat-tailed, snake-assed, vile, lyin' horny-toad."

Nat stepped forward, walkin' to meet them up. "Men," he said, quiet like, "Mr. Wall is no longer with us."

"Don't yu be trying to stop us, Nat, we're gonna git ourselves some justice, so yu'd better tell us where he is."

"He has passed on to his maker," said Nat, sorrowful like.

Rawdeal peered at Nat. "Whachya talkin' 'bout?"

Nat pointed to where Dickie Wall were lyin' on the ground. Rawdeal, holdin' his gun on the prostate figure on the ground, stepped forward slowly, peering cautious-like at the body like he were afeared Dickie'd jump up an' bite'im on the nose. When he were a few feet from where he lay, he said, mean like, "Git up, you whelp, yu cur. Yu can't die yet. Yu ain't had yur justice."

But Dickie's eyes was closed. He didn't move. Rawdeal sighed an' put his gun away an' removed his hat. "Men," he said. "Justice's been done. He were a slimey varmit but we's bigger than he were an' so we gotta's to let'im 'rest in peace'."

"Amen," said Nat.

Suddenly, we heard the engine a' the demolition machine rev up agin. Ol' Poop were swingin' back the crane to let the ball loose agin at the library.

“Mr. Burdoch, yu’s under arrest,” shouts Sherrif Norman, but ol’ Poop weren’t hearin’ nothin’. His face were a mask a’ hatred.

Quick as a wink, Norm turns to Squintin’ an’ says, “Mr. Terroteeny, I am deputizing yu to help me take Mr. Burdoch into custody, but I don’t wantchya yu firin’ yur guns, ya understand?”

Squintin’ nodded. “I’m witchya, Sherrif.”

“Alright, let’s do it.” Norm took out his gun an’ we all watched as Sherrif Norm an’ Squintin’ started for the catipillar truck.

Then we heared Snakeyes cry out, “he’s gettin’ away!”

More shots rang out an’ I turned to seed the Gang firin’ they guns at Dickie Wall who were up now an’ runnin’ down the street, ‘tween some cars, an’ then disappearin’ into the Lingerie Emporium.

There were a big crash an’ we looked back to seed the whole side a’ the library cavin’ in an’ the ball swingin’ right back at Poop who were starin’ terrified at it. Just as we’d thought ol’ Poop had met his maker, he stepped to one side, grabbed the chain an’ were clingin’ to that ball which’d come to the end a’ its arc an’ were now hurtlin’ back towards the library.

*

Folks is always sayin’ that things is always workin’ out fer the best. An’ the folks a’ Sexy Gulch were sayin’ that too, but I ain’t too sure.

Poop rode that demolition ball right into the library, the ball hit one of them pillars what were holdin’ the roof up, knocked Poop off an’ caused part a’ the library to cave right in on itself, swoopin’ up a big cloud a’ dust an’ debris something fierce. Sherrif Norm an’ Nat rushed in, clumbin’ over all that debris to get to Poop, who were lycin’ dead still on the floor. They pulled him out an’ laid him on the library porch while Miss Abigail grabbed her a bucket a’ water from the fire trough to try an’ revive him. That’s when Talbot come back an’ tol’ us there weren’t no answer at the Doc’s house,

Meanwhile, the Hole-in-Dickie-Wall Gang havin’ rushed theyselves into the Emporium after Dickie Wall, stopped cold, like they’d bin smacked by a giant cactus. They stood stupefied, starin’ at the biggest room they’d ever seed, almost the size a’ Sexy Gulch itself, with bright pink lights shinin’ everywhere, an’ piles an’ piles a’ frilly undergarments, an’ big pictures on the walls with almost bare naked women poutin’ in them frilly things an’ saying things like, “Is You Sexy Enough?”

Then, with a growin’ sense a’ horror, they realized they was surrounded by a herd a’ shoppin’ women a’ all shapes an’ sizes, maybe ‘bout 30 or 40, who was starin’ terrifyied back at them... four dispectable, smelly, unshaven varmits, with they pants an’ gunbelts hangin’ ‘round they asses, they faces filthy an’ unshaved. Kickin Hisheadin were gawpin’ at all the frilly garments ‘cause he ain’t never seed nothin’ like it, an’ Biteyur Tongue, who fancied hisself a ladies man, were terrifyin’ Mrs. Dumont, head of the town crem della crems, with his hairy eyeball. Meanwhile, Snakeyes, spooked cause he didn’t knowed it were hisself that he were seein’ in all them mirrors, started shootin’em up, so they was glass smashin’ everywhere and ladies shriekin’, an’ a right shockin’ time it was.

But Rawdeal, his heart an’ mind set on pluggin’ Dickie, followed the trail a’ blood right to back a’ the Emporium, an’ were tryin’ to figure out which way that varmit’d gone, when he heard shrieks comin’ from beyond a door. Since he knowed it

must be Dickie, he went sneakin' through on tippy toes, til he were lookin' down a hallway a' two rows a' them dressin' room doors. Were Dickie in one a' them? Two women come outta one, seed Rawdeal an' went right back in agin. Then, a short stumpy woman come out wearin' a frilly garment, an' even though Rawdeal were still drunk as a skunk... an' smellin' like one... he thought this were the ugliest woman he'd ever seed. The woman were comin' down the hall towards'im, so's he backed up agin' the wall to let her pass, sayin', "excuse me, Ma'am."

"I'm sorry," said a high squealin' voice, as she went by.

Rawdeal thought the voice were familiar, an' when he realized it were Dickie, it were too late, cause a big umbrella come whippin' out one a' them dressin' rooms an' whacked him over the head putting him outta commission.

*

Yu woulda thunk ol' Poop, bein' knocked out by the cavin' in a' the library, would be havin' a Scrooge type whatchya call metamorsis, but he didn't. He hadda different kind a' metamorsis. He become all girly like an' started wearin' them frilly undergarments fulltime, an' paradin' up an' down the Main drag, an' talkin' in a high-pitched squeal.

He'd be stoppin' Mrs. Dumont an' her friends on the street, and sayin' things like, "Hello girls, do you like my negligee? Don't ya think it makes me look sexy?"

Well, folks was so embarrassed they didn't knowed where to look. It were plumb disconcertin', an' there were times when I were wishin' we could git the ol' Poop back. Nat, who went to one a' them ivory universities, tol me he thought that Poop had whatchya a brain confusion, which were changin' whatchya call his personality.

Miss Abigail, 'cause she were lookin' after ol' Poop while he were recoverin' from tryin' to tear down the library, become like a daughter to him, so he were lookin' up to her an' listenin' to what she were tellin'im, an' buyin' her presents an' such. He were still cheap an' stingy to most folk, but there weren' nothin' he wouldn't git fer her.

I think Miss Abigail must be the smartest person in Sexy Gulch... which's back now to being called Dentonville... cause here's what she figured out. She knowed that ol' Poop weren't gonna give up wearin' them frilly garments that he liked to parade up an' down in, but she knowed he didn't need a huge emporium for buyin'em, jist a small whatchya a bow-teek. An' since she could wrap'im round her little finger, she convinced him to make a switch. Yep, she got him to turn the Emporium into the library, an' the library into the Burdoch Lingerie Boo-teek. An' Mrs. Dumont, chairwoman a' the local Society fer the Improvement a' Dentonville, an' yur head crem della crem, convinced her to git Poop to cough up the money to hire the world famous arkitekt, Dieter Liebframilch, to rebuild the part of the library what got torn down. Dieter, a' course, soon's he saw the local whatchya call ambeeants, whipped out a piece a' toilet paper an' sketched hissself a special new addition fer the ol' library to emphasize what he called its desert site (like he didn't knowed we could seed it already... remember what I said about Shakespeare wantin' to kill all the arkitekts?). So's one half a' the library is still a beautiful ol' brick buildin', but the other half's now a giant plastic cactus. A' course, all the crem della crem is gaga over how modern an' up to date the Burdoch Lingerie Boo-Teek is lookin'. Personally, I think it looked like a big pile a' green doggy do, but then I'm jist an ex-attorney who don't knowed nothin' 'bout arkitektur.

I think everybody were sad that Nat took exception to Miss Abigail's attentions to ol' Poop, an' them havin' a spat an' all. I think he still's carryin' some deep feelin's fer her, cause he stayed on in Dentonville. He convinced Miss Abigail to convince ol' Poop to sell him the Gazette so he's now churnin' out them hard-edged editorials about corruption by the town's richest man, which a' course Miss Abigail takes 'ception to.

An' me? Well, they got rid a' the position a' town prosecutor, an' offered to run me as Sherrif in the next election, on account a' Norm goin' off to Hollywood with Squintin' to become his sidekick. You probably seed their new movie, "Kiss My Cactus" which is rakin' the bucks, mostly I think cause a' the tragedy. I ain't seed it yet, cause I'm still thinkin' 'bout Squintin' sufferin'. It plumb took them movie folk by surprise an' they's still tryin' to figure it out. The thinkin' were that Sherrif Norm had invited that Guns For Life Clubber up on the red carpet, but no, apparently, this guy jist loved Squintin' so much he wanted to be up there with him, so's he run outta the crowd an' were firin' his guns to impress Squintin'. Squintin' musta thought hisself in danger which is why he whipped out his gun, an' why that fella shot him where a man ought not to be shot. It were good they saved Squint's life, but his loss a' manhood's pretty much ended his movie career. The good news a' course is that everybody likes Norm who's probably gonna git hisself one a' them Cadamee Wards, an' might even become the new Squintin' Terroteeny.

An' Miss Vickie? Well, Miss Vickie she found religion. When Squintin' went back to Hollywood, he told her he were cuttin' her loose, an' she were right desolate. But she's got gumption an' she stayed on. She joined the Church a' Cactus Redemption an' yep, stopped wearin' them frilly garments. She got herself hitched to Rawdeal an' straightened him out right quick. Workin' hard, Rawdeal bought Burdoch Gas (now called Desert Lube & Oil), hired Kickin Hisheadin as his chief mechanic, an' proceeded to have two daughters (Luby an' Oily) by Miss Vickie who volunteers two days a week to look after ol' Poop so's Miss Abigail can be attendin' to the runnin' a' the biggest library this side a' what they call the Bib-leo-teck in Paree. An' Hew, by the way, got hisself in charge a' all the kid's books, an' is happier than a pig in yu know what.

Here's the funny thing. This new library, what's now called the Burdoch Memorial Library Emporium... course, we all knowed that Poop ain't dead yet, but it were him suggested the name... is attractin' all kinds a' folk who don't wanna be sittin' starin' at their TVs all day, or gamblin' in Vegas, but havin' the joy a' readin' an' lookin' at books. So's with all them book-lovin' types flockin' here, Dentonville's become a whatchya call a tourist attraction, almost as big as Vegas. The only good, or sad thing, dependin' on yur point a' vu, is that the Burdoch Lingerie Boo-teek went outta business after a year cause folks had done bought all the frilly garments they could ever use in a lifetime, so 'sides ol' Poop, Doc Scalapini were its only customer.

Dickie Wall a' course is Mayor now (I could tol' ya he'd go far) an' Robbie Stank is Sherrif. Both a' them is still carryin' on some questionable business an' legal practices, but they gots to walk careful like cause Poop is still the richest man in town an' pays strict attention to what Miss Abigail tells'im. Also cause Nat is whatchya call a muckracker, always writin' in the 'New Gazette' 'bout the alleged corruption a' town officials.

Now yur probably wonderin', who it t'were what smashed the umbrella over Rawdeal's head, preventin' him from pluggin' Dickie Wall. Yep, it were Doc Scalapini,

who were in one them dressing rooms at the time, conductin' a medical experiement with some a' them frilly garments, an' who were appointed Chief Medical Officer a' the Town a' Dentonville an' surroundin' area when Dickie become Mayor.

An' me? Well, I finally found the contentment I bin seekin'. I live out in the desert full time now, an' I luv it here, cause it's dead quiet. I practice my fly fishin' every day, an' I'm doin' some writin'. Besides what yur readin' now, I writ one a' them theater plays at the request a' Miss Abigail. She were set on doing a musical comedy a' The Four Horsemen a' the Apoco-lips fer the Dentonville Little Theatre, starrin' the Hole-in-Dickie-Wall Gang, so I wrote up somethin' up fer her. Course I had to sweeten it up a mite, cause them horsemen's always talkin' 'bout war an' famine an' whatchya call yur pestya-lence, but Miss Abigail had her heart set on it. They's rehearsin' now, an' you wouldn't believe what a sweet voice Biteyur Tongue has, warblin' jist like an angel.

I don't miss the town. It's peaceful here in the desert, 'xcept a' course durin' a full moon like tonight when I can hear, off in the distance, the sound a' hard drummin' on a set a' congas.

The only time I sees people, 'sides Teddy a' course, is when the Cult a' Early Elvis gets together durin' a full moon to sing some a' his songs prior to him bein' a whatchya superstar. An' I can hear'em right now on the other side a' Teddy's cave, loudly wailing Fool Such As I.

An' I gots to tell ya, it sounds so purdy, I wrote me a poem 'bout it.

The Ballad a' Sexy Gulch

by Milt Shakespeare III

The rhythm a' the desert

When the wind is right

On a full moon night

Is jist humongous

Comin' from them distant congas

An' the song a' the desert

Cryin' out a lonely tune

Is waftin' o'er the arid dune

A tribute to our greatest pelvis

The Good an' dearly beloved Elvis

An' that's the End

(fer now)