

## An Idea of Things at Large

"I was speaking of men at large," speaks Deputy Poore.

"Which ones?"

"All of them."

"Me too."

"You too what?"

"I despise them too."

Poore kicks his boot against the jamb of the post office door as he looks at the bounty posters.

"God damn."

"Let's haul 'em in."

"Shaddup."

The boy knocks the dust from his pants, arches his back as if he were starting a race.

"One at a time. One at a time."

Waiting for some kind of eye contact from Poore, then: "Who first?"

"Him first." The finger that he has placed upon the billing, once withdrawn, leaves an egg-shaped smudge between the portrait's eyes. Blumquist's portrait.

"Blumquist?"

"It's pronounced, Blumquist," Poore already off the promenade and in the saddle. "I know where to find him."

Blumquist, man that he is, is over at Large Slim's Barbershop two towns over, he and his men getting neat and trimmed. Turns out, they've been shackled up there for weeks, running through their last few coins in a small but amenable room on the second floor above the shop. Large Slim, an old rustler, has taken a shine to the boys, brings them the evening posts and keeps them up on the movement of the law around town. The men themselves are catching up on some letter writing, some toothpicking, and some genuine city-life ennui.

When Poore and his boy cruise into the barbershop, there's three filled chairs and one empty. Except for the bell above the door and the sound of running water, the room is quiet. Poore stalks up the row of men, each of whose faces is, to Poore, suspiciously wrapped in a towel. Large Slim sits stirring the lather in his cup without saying a word and lets the faucet run.

A muffled "Who's there?" arises from beneath one of the towels.

"Shaddup."

A moment's silence, then a raspberry spurts beneath the towel, briefly levitates it above the man's sequestered maw. Poore flicks an eye at his boy and draws his pistol. Large Slim bites his lower lip. The towel flies across the room at the boy's once-does-it tug.

"Goddammit, Poore." The seated man grabs the deputy's pistol out of his hand and reproachingly waves it at his chest — the Mayor, in for his regular morning shave.

"I had no idea —"

A door slams shut in the back alley.

The boy whistles and windmills his arm like a true sportsman.

Poore's about to leap towards the backdoor, but frantically positions the towel back on his

honor's pugnacious face. The Mayor swats at him, whinnying like a spooked and pissed horse.

"Goddammit, Poore!" But the deputy is already gone, his boy hardly a step behind, only lingering to look the scene over, confirm it is all as close to what it was as when they had entered. He makes a rush toward the sink to turn the tap back on. Large Slim gives a smile as the boy runs past and out the door.

"You're grooming quite a replacement for yourself, your honor."

"Aw shaddup and give me a shave."

In the back alley, Poore and his boy find a trail of snipped, wet hair that they follow around a few corners. Poore pinches a clump off the ground and runs it under his nose, nostrils yawning.

"Blumquist's?"

"Hard to say." Lowering his hand towards the boy. "Here."

The boy rolls the hair between his fingers, hesitantly sniffs at it, gives it a jangle near his ear. "Not sure. Evidence of something, right?"

"It all is."

The boy's eyes grow wide, learning. He tucks the tuft of hair into his hatband. When the deputy turns to look around the next corner, the boy starts to surreptitiously pick up various stones from the scene to put them into his pockets. "Oh," he shapes the word from an exhaled breath. "Oh, evidence."

The boy puts another stone in his pocket.

He and Poore return to the trail of hair and follow it between a maze of back alleys and buildings. When there appears to be no lock left to follow, they draw their guns and brace themselves tight against the side of the closest building.

"It could be a trap."

As they make the corner, they were in no position to say where they'd land, and yet, it seems, they have brought themselves, guns drawn, making quite a strange collection of noises, merely back to the front window of Large Slim's. The Mayor catches sight of them in the mirror and leaps out of his chair, cutting himself on Slim's razor. Blood sweeping down his one wet cheek, the other still thick with lather, the Mayor marches out the door, leaving it to swing interminably behind him.

"Goddammit, Poore!" Round after round is unloaded at the air above the deputy, driving he and the boy into a routine of unintelligible dodges, sweat and stones littering the ground around them. "Rid yourself of these goddamned notions of yours. Me and the men at Large Slim's, we've had enough."

As the mayorial discharges ring across the valley, back at the post office Postmaster Weber drags a straw broom from out behind his desk and begins to sweep the promenade clean of the caked mud and sundry particulates that had precipitated below the wanted signs during Poore's perusal. He leans on the long pole of the broom and glances over the crudely etched faces, studying one in particular. The face appears to him to have a smear of ashes upon the brow, so, sponging some spit onto his handkerchief, he wipes at the portrait's eyes. He hadn't thought it through. The smear doesn't so much go away as the rest of the face just gets blurred and dark.

"This won't do," he says. "I should have thought it through."

He gazes at the featureless poster, wonders how to make it right again. More of a lost memory at this point than a true man's image, he thinks. He thinks for a minute or two, considering

different views on what he's done here, then fetches a pen and a pot of ink from inside. He returns to the billing and adds two single apostrophes to each side of the name below the portrait, "BLUMQUIST", and steps back to consider the work.

"They'll get the idea."

As Postmaster Weber wanders back inside to close up shop for the day, he fingers the pocket of his waistcoat and wonders if Mrs. Weber will be able to get the splotch out of his hanky. Maybe he'll just have to waste a dime on a new one. Just bite the bullet and do it, he says to himself. You're not poor.

Blumquist, now, comfortably stationed with his men at their second floor window, watching the deputy's being served his desserts, runs the backs of his fingers along the flush shaved skin of his cheeks and throat. He takes time to enjoy it. It feels like somebody else's, some other's idea of a face more suitable than his own. The face of a man who is his own imagination of man as is.