

VACANT LOT

The only portion of the old depot, creakingly abandoned now with its dry blistered paint and covered with tatters of dry cobwebs, that stood as unaltered as before was the weathered weed-enshrouded wooden loading platform that had once made it easier to transfer weighty bales of cotton directly onto the freight cars. It, too, was sunbleached and rough, sitting pallid and elevated to freight-car-door height parallel at the rusting tracks, yet was sturdily made of pier-like solid creosoted pilings and thick heavy timber. The depot sign that read "Itt, Texas" was so faded on the western side as to be a mere faint shadow. No passenger trains ran anymore--hadn't since '49. The only scheduled freight trains that still clattered through were the morning 6:42, that dropped a bag of mail on a pole by the rails, and the other that usually passed through without even slowing around eight:forty in the thick dusky evening. The railroad still, of course, owned the building that sat next its right-of-way, but seemed to regard it now as a neglected stepchild. They had left it emptily swept out, eerily, and locked the door behind them. Sometimes now the older children played at their raggedy-tag games on the

weathered old creak of loading platform, their rustic version of a fort on the frontier—the desolate setting for a shoot-out, for signaling Roy or Trigger, or for falling wounded from attack by all those pesky imaginary war-bonneted savages. Further off on the far side of the tracks ran the farm-to-market road that now carried by truck, for those so mightily concerned in these days for speed if not for efficiency, packed bales to the shipping offices of the county seat; and further to the right of that interloping asphalted escape route the sprawled gin yards made up the southwestern edges of Itt. Beyond there the blackland prairie rolled away toward the further western sandy vistas that scattered beyond past Fort Worth in unending fields and pastures. Still, if one so wished, a lingerer could hobble some wasted dreamy time to watch fondly the last lonely train cars when they droned past in the dust and to read like a map the listing of each faintly wistful name there: the Cotton Belt, MKT, the Southern, Chesapeake, Santa Fe, Rocky Mountain, Great Northern, Rock Island, Illinois Central, Pennsylvania, Burlington, Rio Grande and more, more than beyond a child's counting. Those captivating painted names would clatter by and away, back to from where they came, an imagined verdant land a way beyond the prairies, beyond the mountains even, to the very ports of

the lakes and oceans. That farthest terminus, boundary-less, could presuppose a most enticing and eventful journey.

Justin Templand Rawling, four and one-quarter years of age, in his inward imagination had already begun that journey. Enlivened by movement and the colours of each different passing swaying train car clattering through his head he traveled with them past Itt and into far territory coloured like the pages in a picture book. Speed may have quickened an interest, but floating distance was the fascination, distance into unknown realms, leaving the spray of sparks from the iron wheels grinding onto the straight and unending tracks. Imaginary journeys are the easiest to begin, by a mere longing, carrying nothing more heavy than even an handkerchief. Justin was a curious child, prone to quiet and solitude for he was the only child his own age that he knew—with a cinder of wanderlust, an unnamed longing, blown firmly into his eye. Curiosity was that longing that jangled those wide round green eyes that so eagerly hopped onto the painted boxcars and flatcars of unfurling reel of powerful and wandering locomotion.

Journeys from the dusty drowsiness of Itt, Texas with its two main cross-streets of a dozen and half or so storefronts, were, no matter how short or

trivial (to the hatchery in early spring, or to the various fishing thickets where the farmers crept on silent near-by creeks, or Saturdays in the county seat shopping to the Safeway or Kress five-and-ten with its glassy coolly shining candy counter, or merely to a Sunday afternoon drive appraising the mid-summer fields with a final destination stop at the Dairy-Freezette in Hibbid City) nevertheless small events of pleurably anticipated restiveness, routine diversions in an otherwise parched landscape. At infrequent times a hurricane-induced thunderstorm gale from the distant coast or an errant gusty west Texas sandstorm brought fleeting change to the daily monotony of repetitions, but that was not often enough to satisfy a child's notion of time's passing. Days were endless and dust-heavy and fried-hot—mealtimes being the only interesting respites; and each day was like the one before interrupted only by brief dark nights that were also the same of sticky sleep and sky-flung buckshots of white stars. Routine was the day's mainspring. It became as natural, as simple as milk, to fall into the morning's ruts as to gather without thought each day's eggs. Perhaps there was a sense of lulling peace, a ticking metronomic comfort, which soothed existence so land-bound under ever-imminent threat of the vagaries of weather or insect or any bolt from the blue,

and gave adults the comforting stability they sought. Children had no fear of the unknown, if they even knew the unknown was there before them. Justin embraced it. The entire known world was as safe as the rope swing in the chinaberry tree, and one wanted, even longed, to go as high as possibly could, to kick a hole in the distant airy blue, those floating cottony clouds puffed overhead.

Days began, in the drear shadows before even first light, out of tradition-instituted habit—and the necessity of doing as much activity as possible in the cool dewy hours—before the heat of today's sun, when just cleared the treetops, became the intense oven that rippled away stagnant puddles of mirage and drove even the chaparrals and scorpions to splotches of shade. Shade, nurturing the defense and the benevolence, defined those areas that were hospitably habitable in a landscape so heat-cracked dry and withered and hard. Exactly so, as shade was a reviving mauve in a brindled sere landscape, a simple touch of colour splashed on a russet brick wall could balloon boisterous excitement into the brown dusty stranded eternalness of a child's summer doldrum among a never-ending desert of arid days. Like a vagabond gypsy appearing out of a late July night this scrap of itinerant colour,

a paper broadsheet in red and yellow, its tigerish orange and clownish turquoise, found encamped in a newly scraped and glue-washed clearing almost inconspicuously shouting among the painted tin advertising for Dr. Pepper and Garrett's snuff and the bleached posters pleading: " I like Ike", startled the tired eyes, young and old alike—and promised the robustly alive thrill so otherwise neglected and under-fed in the backsides of country roadsides that trudged into the bleak pastures of heartland prairie. The shockingly coloured shiny-new posters trumpeted, within only a few days time from this afternoon, the arrival—mysterious and magical and mesmerizing —“for two nights only”—of the electrifying stupendous fun-for-all traveling amusement, a wandering carnival, a medicine show. The traveling medicine show had become an infrequent visitor even to the disregarded by-ways and this could very well be the last—unable to revive itself with its own elixir. Nevertheless, relic—or not—it sang and hopped across the wide countryside, lightning in drought. In this instance its embodiment was Dr. Devine. Aching and sun-hardened farmers, and weary and stiff and dazedly frazzled homemakers, and hungry and chasing youngsters—and not least of all little Justin Templand Rawling—slowed even more so in their steps and gaped with

lit eyes at this gaudy poster announcement as if it, too, were a shimmering mirage appeared above the horizon. Conversations at the post office or at the supper table, at least among the adults seated beneath a groaning whirr of the ceiling fan, or at the ice cream fountain of Mr. Bardon's drug store concluded that arrival of this traveling transient amusement might be a fine enough idea—if it did not interfere too much with chores, and general suspicions could be overcome about Dr. Devine's potion costing too much, and, perhaps, it would do no harm to look over the curatives of a bit of tonic.

And eventually at very long last the tumultuous day arrived, creeping by gaudy-painted wagonload across the prairie like dawn and inching across the railroad tracks and into the quiet sleeping street still under the grey blanket of first rosy light. The dust-laden caravan of trucks—exotic and foreign as merchants of spices—pulled their wares up through a grassy alley near the old freight yard and settled arced into a brown vacant lot, actually several lots of empty space, at the backend of the old depot yard and behind the Hoffmeier Hardware and its little block of red brick storefronts alongside of which ran an alleyway where refreshment booths would be set from the sidewalk to the back field and would become the entranceway to the happy carnival ground.

In this still cool blue of sunrise, while roosters were only just alerting the sluggish, the roustabouts were already as busy as foxes plucking the covers from trucks and wagons, staking the poles for small tents, rolling bright carts, pulling into place the petite portable ferris-wheel. The lone tiger, still magnificently indolent in his own lonely gilded cage, an attraction of his own special meritoriousness, watched as he did every day; but the ponies for riding helped, doing their necessary part of the work as everyone, save for the illustrious Dr. Devine himself who supervised while undoubtedly thinking about the profit of his next exhilaratingly healthful experiments. By late morning the structure of the layout had taken shape, the animals had been fed, a break announced ready for a mid-day meal, the grimy and sweating company forming into lines with their paper plates at a mess table, the young roustabouts with their browned shoulders bared to the sun and slumped leaning against what shade could be found at the brick walls of the store rears. After resting them in the early afternoon they would resume their activity, tightening the details, banners proclaiming exotic delights unfurled, strands of electric bulbs being strung that would bring to life with their glow of excitement. Earlier curiously meandering passers-by would stop to look on

the harried scene for a gaping minute, then hurry away with their scrap of news and ready for dusk when the whole shebang promised to burst to effervescent life, transforming the formerly barren and forlorn vacant lot into a brilliant electrified clanging dancing carnival.

Melted minutes and hours oozed apart, murkily seeping into an endlessly plodding drip-by-drip hot afternoon to the excited children who with rolling eyes and overly polite cautious breath barely concealing the roiled leap of expectations that was the very prod of anticipation as they waited past immeasurable lunch and an incomprehensible naptime and the dry stretch of dog-idle mid-afternoon and a half-hearted attempt at ball-bouncing or building blocks right up until teatime when relief seemed so imminent and the awaited evening of seismic undulating excitements seemed almost within sight. After each chime the clock itself, teasing, seemed to run back. Justin fidgeted, the afternoon seemingly longer than the rest of all his four years. The effort of patience made him sweat. Justin's mother had promised, after her work, to pick him up from his grandmother's house and, following a light sandwich supper, to take him to town to the medicine show where Justin's father would meet them after dark after the farm work for that day was done.

At long last the languid hour arrived when the blazing unforgiving sun had dropped near the horizon, the supper plates had been rinsed, the faces washed and hair brushed, and fresh clean shirt and short pants wriggled into. Justin counted his nickel coins. He placed them securely, like grandfather, into the little leather coin purse with the snap closure. Justin waited. His mother dawdled, staring into the mirror as she smoothed on the cheery lipstick. "Now you be sure to stay right by me; and you hold my hand. And don't you try to wander away," she said.

Ropes of electric lights hung suspended, shining starry bright and yellow against the translucent blue grey evening, when Justin and his mother arrived at the village center. No need this evening to make the jostled fifteen mile trip to Hibbid City and its Bronco Star movie show, the nearest to here and, to boot, air-cooled for added comfort; this evening bubbling entertainment personified had itself arrived in Itt. Westward, the last bright of turquoise sky flared and slipped away. Darkish winged apparitions fluttered against the vast expanse of a sky gone fiery, which had been each previous day's most potent spectacle until the arrival of Dr. Devine's medicine show. A rosy brilliant glow spread to heaven. Intimate clusters of crowds,—weathered farmers and

families, neighbors, bachelors, worn shopkeepers, young sweethearts and friends, even the un-timid from “coloured” town across the railroad tracks, the home-grown tamale man with his stairsteps of children, kids everywhere, all, but the most ardently fervent and necessarily elderly church-deacons— had clumped about, strolling into the glare of electrified light. Dense shadows along the edge of buildings and fallen across the alleyways obscured the weeds and rough spots and debris, leaving splashy pools of illumination filled with the animation of music and laughing—a sight that to most was from a distant memory (what memories those were), and to Justin was like nothing he had ever before seen. He and his mother crossed the street, bracing, a little timid with the strangeness, and entered into it all.

The buttery hot smell of popcorn was on every breath of air, and the sticky smell of spun sugar. Music twinkled. Men laughed amused and chesty laughs, and women giggled. Rainbows of light reflected off the glass bottles of jewel fruity syrups where the joshing attendant and his intent young apprentice doused the sno-cones of shaved ice in folded paper cornets. Shouting hung in the still warm air. A long line shuffled into the fence at the ferris wheel. Air rifles pinged at the target shoots, or simulated milk bottles clunked under

baseballs. The only breeze was from the whoosh of running children. Transparent insouciant balloons bobbed on strings in front of people's faces. They blew them aside with a breath. At the center of it all Dr. Devine, pale hands aflutter like doves released, crooned to the crowds, performed an array of sleights of hand, exhorted them caressingly to heed the signs of their health and invest in his medicinal remedy for their aches and listlessness. It was all too much to take in all at once. Just could only stare, his eyes darting from one bright spot of clatter to another. His mother fiercely held to his hand, and they wandered in and out amongst the bedazzled din. Those crowds dispersed and then surged, swirling eddies in a swollen river of summery people. The wailing whistle of the eight:forty freight saluted the merriment as it bobbed past the border of farther lights, slithering into the distant fields. It was getting later; and Just's father, never one to be on time anyway anywhere, had not yet appeared. After a circuit of the crowded grounds Just and his mother earnestly began to look for Daddy, for his familiar easy figure, idly sauntering. He was still not to be found.

Just, inundated now in the undertow into the magnetic hot pull of the bedazzlingly illuminated maze, could not any longer imagine at all of how the

little spare village of Itt had existed before without this carnival magical glow, how it could continue on without it. The music twinkled anew. The lights blazed. The sticky glistening juice from the sno-cone grabbed at his fingers. This bursting event, this word called carnival, a hundred times even beyond the thrill of turning the crank when a freezer of snowy ice cream was borne on a still summer evening under the countless glowing stars.

However, at last, Just and his mother, in and out among the flow of the crowds, searched truly high and low, passed all corners, looking past one familiar face and then another, for Papa, left or right, around a corner, staring into opposite directions, into a haze of movement. In time they wandered away from the crowd, out into the alleyway past smokers whose cigar ends glowed softly against the plush darkness; and, as his mother nearly dragging fuddled Just along, they skittered out toward the sidewalk. They emerged from the alleyway into grey shadowy street, quiet and torpid. Still, in the abounding duskiness, storefront lights proffered the crockery, hardware and buckets, tack and motor oil, bananas and saltines of tomorrow's work, the fragments of every day.

There, sitting on the near street, double-parked at the edge of shadow, sat the coupe that belonged to Aunt Philly. She sat, stretched tensely straight as always atop a round pillow, at the driver's wheel. Although Grandfather was still home with one of his wild-western novels, Just's grandmother sat cushioned in the soft back seat, one hand on the passenger strap near the door and the other holding a soaked bottle of Coca-Cola cloaked in a white embroidered handkerchief. With the door slightly ajar, in the front seat but facing toward the back actually sat Just's father, his fedora hat dangled on the seat back. Under the pale candle-like glow of the dome light at their midst they resembled a radiant tableau of ivory hallowed faces in a dim hushed chapel. They were talking, almost whispered. Just's mother, and leading Just carefully by his clutched sweaty hand, came up to the nearest side of the car. "Well you've certainly taken your time again," she began.

"Yes," said Mr. Rawling.

Just's mother looked curiously at the reticent father, searched the tone set in his face, her lips tensed so slightly. "What?" she asked, while Just crawled into the warm backseat at the preferred place by his grandmother who smiled

quietly at him, patted his hair, then rested her swathed cool Coca-Cola gently on his bare leg. “What is it?”

They spoke, glancing at each other above Just’s head in the way of grown-ups when they talked of adult things they felt above a child’s interest, still in quiet voices. “When I left home,” Mr. Rawling explained, “I...I found Brownie...D-E-A-D.” Just’s mother, who wallowed no soft fond spot for animals, again glanced above Just’s round face, his flaxen hair shining halo bright, as one of her hands, nevertheless, rose to her opened mouth trying to suppress a little gasp of breath there. Brownie was a cumbersome pet, merely a lachrymose dog, a bounding and clumsy tan boxer mix hardly a year or two older than Just himself, but his one ready flagrant companion though yet dumb and lumbering. Just stared up—at Aunt Philly’s pearly-silhouetted profile gazing into the night beyond the windshield, at his father pursing his lips against grinding teeth. Recounting: “d-?-e-?”, Just did not understand when grown-ups spoke in letters, unconnected, mysterious, and puzzling, instead of words he knew. He felt they should not do that. For their meaning appeared serious, the words still steady and quiet. “Oh my,” his mother offered, “What happened?”

Just's father moved his heavy head, perspiring now, from side to side. "It looked like it might have been poison."

"Who could do such a thing?" she asked.

"Jake, probably. I don't know." He coughed. "It could have been an accident. I don't know."

Just stared upward, at each of them. He, too, was now awash with perspiring, wet in his seersucker shirt. They looked at each other blankly over his head. He was not sure what they had said, what they had intended to say, those letters. He squirmed in the seat, straining instead to rehear again the tumble of faint distant medicine-show music. "Brownie?" he questioned. "What? What?" His grandmother dabbed at her eye with a tissue. As Just started to stand his father caught his boy's tenuous arm in a pressing grip and looked straight into his eyes. "Justin T.," he said, "Brownie is dead."

Just scowled. Perhaps he, confused, had heard the word before; possibly it wasn't a familiar word. Dead—d-e-a-d?—dead, like brown crumbling flowers, like a tiny bird fallen from a nest, like bugs squashed in the dirt. It had a distant sound. It, too, was mysterious, unrecognized, vacantly meaningless; but the sound it made was serious and breathtaking. He heard that sound

rumble like a slow moving freight through a tunnel in his muddled mind, the distant wail of the air leaving its whistle. He searched the faces around him, returning to his father's face. They, too, looked anxious, as he did; and questioning. "What's that?" Justin frowned, puzzled.

Justin's father wiped the perspiration from his upper lip. "Gone away," he said. "Gone away."

Just slumped down, back into the soft warm padded seat. He could do nothing but frown in stunned wonderment. Beyond them, beyond the dark buildings' corners, and the cluttered alleyway, in the very center of Itt across the lighted field the strands of lampbulbs shone, the music still vibrated. Then the whistle and thunder of rocket fireworks popped, their lightning flashes becoming a rain of sputtering stars. Just ran his hand over the wool flannel of the seat cover conjuring the feel of Brownie's smooth hairy coat and the bouncing warmth of the muscles underneath. They all, each, sat in their own stillness now.

Just's father reached over and closed the door, and the little pale light in the dome blinked out.

--J. F. Lowe

