

Night Wind

The West Texas town of McKenzie knew the wind. It blew in every night from the surrounding hills and whistled through the lonely streets and crooked alleyways. It carried the yips and squeals of coyotes scampering around the arroyos outside of town. And it sent the tall grass in the empty lots rushing and swirling like currents in a miniature ocean. The wind sometimes brought the earthy scent of manure, but most of the time it smelled cool and fresh.

On a Thursday night in the middle of June, before the nightly wind picked up, the air smelled sweet and the sky was dark in its moonlessness. The Big Dipper twinkled in the northern sky and Sagittarius in the south. Summer stars. The streetlights on Main Street hummed along, producing an aged yellow glow. A dog barked twice before letting out a mournful howl. An owl cooed in the distance.

Most of the town was blanketed in a deep quiet. Store windows wore shutters and the town's handful of streets were void of cars. A thundercloud gave a momentary rumble to the north. Other than that, the town was largely soundless, save for the monotone buzzing of the power lines and the low thumping of bass coming from a squat building on the end of Main Street that bore the name "Murph's Poolhall."

The building's twin front doors were bathed in a purple light from neon signs in the window. Six cars were parked out front along with one motorcycle – a brand new 1981 café racer. A pair of hitching posts sat out front – original from when the place was first built. They hadn't been used in years, but they remained regardless. On the low front porch of the bar sat a few wooden benches made from wagon wheels and spokes. Empty beer bottles stood next to them as makeshift ashtrays. The bar's boisterous speakers could be heard from outside, echoing the voice of Waylon Jennings through the thin walls. *If you wanna get to heaven, gotta D-I-E.*

Nobody knew how the truck caught fire, or exactly when, but a man named Clint was the first to see it when he walked out of the bar's double doors. The truck sat in the middle of the street – nobody in it, and not a soul to be seen around it. Little orange flames flickered from underneath the hood. Clint took two looks up and down the street and scratched his head. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes from the breast pocket of his jean jacket. He hung the cigarette on his lip and lit it with a silver lighter. He stood and watched.

The fire spread slowly at first. The flames below the hood flickered larger and larger, and the orange glow began spread into the cab of the old truck. It was a 1966 Ford Highboy painted in a once-glossy black. The chrome fenders had hints of rust and one of the headlights had been busted before the fire began. The fire spread to the carpeted floors of the cab, and the flames began to lap at the aged leather seats. It made a faint crackling sound as the blaze spread.

The bar's double doors swung open again. This time a young bearded man named Wade stepped out for a smoke break. "Holy shit. What the hell is going on out here?" he asked, once he saw a truck. Clint simply shrugged his shoulders without taking his eyes off the truck. "You do this?" Wade asked again. Clint chuckled twice then shook his head of short dark hair. He let out a puff of smoke as he did. Wade had the look of worry in his eyes and he said, "well shit. Shouldn't we call the fire department, at least if you haven't already?"

Clint turned around to face Wade. He plucked the half-smoked cigarette from his lips and held it between his fingers. "I don't exactly see the point," he said. His slight wrinkles looked like deep valleys in the firelight. He then turned around to face the truck again.

Wade stood somewhat dumbstruck for a moment, then he walked over to Clint and stood by his side. He pulled out his own pack and lit a cigarette with a thin hotel match. They watched the smoke gather behind the truck's windows.

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McKenzie was first settled in January 1846 by a man named William P. Easton. He moved to Texas from St. Louis after the U.S. annexation. With a full billfold thanks to a small inheritance, he'd decided to make his way west. He bought himself a piece of land and started raising cattle in the windblown hills of West Texas. He found modest success at first. He was good at raising the beasts, keeping them healthy and fed before sale. He began his life in Texas alone, but within a year and a half, he'd built himself a handsome home which he shared with his pregnant wife, Mary. He'd met her in El Paso, and it didn't take much convincing for her to move out to the ranch with him. A year later, she was pregnant with their first.

They'd lived happily together, William tending to the cattle and Mary building a small garden out front of the house. They took naps in the afternoon and watched the sunset every night from their spacious front porch. William strummed his guitar as the crimson Texas sun dipped below the eastern horizon. They often fell asleep with the windows open, cool air and moonlight flowing through the thin curtains. Coyotes yipped in the distance and they drifted to sleep holding each other in their arms.

In September of 1847, William had grown anxious. Living in Texas meant a constant stream of war stories from battlegrounds such as Emudo Pass and Monterrey. He'd grown intoxicated by the tales of glory from the siege on Veracruz, and, of course, from the story of the

Alamo a decade prior. A month before Mary was due, William enlisted. She begged him not to, but with an iron disposition, he told her that he must, as if he had no choice in the matter himself. He promised to return with spoils and more land, along with the stories and honor that he so longed to have.

On October 7th, 1847, William met his end. After enduring a week of marching for battle under the command of Captain Samuel Walker, the battalion made camp under a crescent moon. They were set to do battle in the small town of Huamantla within the next few days, and the whole camp had an air of eagerness to it. William, like many others, couldn't sleep, so he left his bedroll to take a short walk. As he strolled through the makeshift camp, a startled horse kicked him square in the head. He died instantly. They buried him in a hastily-dug grave with a wooden cross for a headstone. He hadn't even tasted battle, much less glory, before he died. Mary remarried three years after that, and William P. Easton was largely forgotten by most of the world.

His land and cattle were left to his brother, Morgan, who promptly sold it to a man from Tennessee. The new owner was fine. He raised the cattle well, and he built a small trading post. The town grew slowly around it. Its original inhabitants gave it the name McKenzie. They just liked the sound of it.

The town's population grew steadily for a while. In 1947, a century after its most original inhabitant's death, the town had a modest population of three thousand people. They'd planted Oak trees along main street, and rows of houses popped up with quaint front gardens and spacious backyards. The town had a handful of humble stores and a movie theater was slated to

be built. Life in McKenzie had that slow daily rhythm typical of small towns. Neighbors waved good morning and the milkman knew the name on every mailbox.

Things changed on a hot August afternoon on a Sunday of that same year. Mayor Ducote, a friendly man with white hair and a lisp, looked out his office window and saw the post office going up in flames. The single-story building with its simple white wooden siding had become engulfed in inferno. The flames grew so tall that they almost seemed to tickle the American flag waving high on the flagpole out front. The mayor sat there for a second. His office was quiet. The only sound came from the gentle ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner. He glanced at it once, then back at the flames. He picked up the phone on his desk and called the fire department. In his calm and smooth voice, he told them what he saw. He hung up the phone and watched.

As the sun set that night, and as the crickets chirped in unison, thin wisps of smoke rose from the solemn pile of ashes that was once the post office. A police officer in his tan uniform stood and watched, along with a mother and her young daughter. Luckily no one had been inside the building; the postman had the day off. He didn't come to inspect the damage. He stayed home and drank a bottle of wine with his wife. They left town a week later.

Firefighters determined the cause of the blaze to be arson. They found an empty can of kerosene and a pack of matches in the adjacent vacant lot. A pair of boot prints were also found. But they never found who did it. It was the town's first major crime in its history, and the police were eager to solve it. They spent the whole of eight months interviewing just about everyone in the town and working through every lead. It went nowhere. Their enthusiasm burnt out after a year.

The fire signaled the beginning of the end for the small town of McKenzie. After that, things went wrong. In 1950, a biblically-large tornado uprooted half the town, scattering people's entire lives to the wind. 1953. A monsoon came flying down from the hills and brought with it seven inches of rain and floodwaters that lasted for over a week. Electricity didn't return for a month. Six years later, a tanker truck carrying diesel fuel capsized in the high winds outside of town. The punctured tanker leaked 6,000 gallons of fuel into the groundwater below. Misfortune had become as common as the nightly wind, and folks started to leave town in droves. After three decades, the 1980 census put the town's population at a mere 631 souls.

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"If it wasn't you, then who do you think did this?" asked Wade as he looked over at Clint. The fire inside the truck now raged. Brilliant orange and white flames curled out from under the truck's undercarriage. The two men had to squint just to look at it.

"Shit, I don't know. But if I did, would it even matter?" Clint replied. His gaze was set intently on the truck as if it were a slow-blooming mirage in the desert. He hardly blinked.

"It's somebody's truck. If it were mine, I'd sure be pissed. I'd say that matters."

"I've got a feeling whoever owns that truck did this themselves. These are strange times we're living in," Clint paused, "I think we'll be seeing more shit like this in the next couple weeks."

"I guess I hadn't even considered that. I sure as hell would never," Wade said before the truck's driver's side window shattered. The bits of glass twinkled on the pavement twinkled in the light of the flames. Without the window, the sound of the fire could be heard from inside the

truck. It seemed to inhale and exhale with every new source of fuel – a laborious slow breathing that came and went.

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The final blow to McKenzie came with the arrival of a thin man in a dark blue suit. He drove a rental car into town on a Monday. April 3rd, 1981. He checked into a motel on the edge of town, and the receptionist noted his well-groomed dark beard and his fox-like eyes. He went quietly into his room and didn't emerge until the next morning.

Tuesday. He walked into the little building that McKenzie called its town hall and asked to speak with the mayor. The mayor, a warm man with the last name Oliver, obliged. They spoke for a half hour with the door closed. The mayor's receptionist knew something was wrong – the mayor rarely took meetings with his door shut. They emerged after the half-hour. The man in the dark blue suit looked calm, unchanged. The mayor looked like he'd been drafted to war. He had fear in his eyes. He called an emergency town hall meeting for the following night.

The meeting was held in the assembly hall of the local middle school. Most of the town showed up. Word spread quickly, the stories of the two receptionists who'd encountered this mysterious newcomer. He was nowhere to be seen before the start of the meeting. On stage, the mayor and the seven members of the town council fidgeted awkwardly in chairs that were probably meant for children. The crowd chattered lightly in an air of quiet anticipation.

Just as the meeting was scheduled to start, the man in the suit strolled into the assembly hall. The heels of his dress shoes echoed against the tall ceilings as everybody turned to look at him. He carried a briefcase and he held his chin up high. He walked to the front of the room,

climbed the stairs to the stage, and took a seat in the lone empty chair. His eyes momentarily scanned the crowd and then he looked over at the mayor. Taking it as a signal, the mayor got out of his chair and walked to the podium.

He tapped the microphone once, then spoke. “Hello, everyone. Thank you for joining us tonight on such short notice. I called this meeting because I had a visitor yesterday – this man here beside me,” the mayor said, gesturing to the man in the suit. “He came to me with some important news about our town. His name is Mr. Robertson. I’d appreciate it if you heard him out and waited until he’s finished speaking for you to ask questions.” He gestured again to the man in the suit and said, “if you’re ready, Mr. Robertson.”

The man stood up from his chair and walked to the podium. He shook hands with the mayor and then addressed the crowd. “Hello, good people of McKenzie. Like your mayor said, who, by the way, is a very kind man, my name is Lewis Robertson. I’m from the Harrison Hydroelectric Company out of Dallas. I’ve been sent to inform you of a proposal to build a hydroelectric dam three miles south of here.” He paused, surveyed the room with his deep brown eyes. The faces in the crowd changed from merely to curious to the beginnings of rage. They knew what he was about to say. He continued, “you see, for a couple years now, we’ve purchased land in and around your town. We’ve purchased enough that we’ve submitted an application in conjunction with the State of Texas to allow for the creation of a new reservoir. Now, if this proposal goes through, you will unfortunately be forced to move. To put it bluntly, McKenzie will be underwater.”

With that, a woman in the audience stood up and shouted, “you’re an evil man! I see it in your eyes – get out of here and never come back! I’ve lived here my whole entire life and if you expect me to leave, well by God...”

Mr. Robinson interrupted, “Ma’am. Hear me out for just a little longer and then you can ask questions and provide comments.” The woman shouted one more obscenity, then sat down. “As I was saying, the reservoir will flood the entire town and much of the surrounding land, but you’ll all be compensated. Our proposal is very generous in compensation for land, structures, and anything else that might be lost in this project. We’re also planning on naming the reservoir ‘Lake McKenzie.’” With that final remark, a few men and women got up and left. They shook their heads on the way out.

The rest of the night was filled with rage-filled residents hurling questions and comments at the ever-calm Mr. Robinson. He offered clinical rebuttals outlining how McKenzie had already seen a decimation to their population and that the town was on its last legs anyways. He even tried to redeem the project in the eyes of the locals by telling them how the new reservoir would provide cheap electricity for working-class people all over Texas. He almost smiled with that remark. Nobody else did.

Mr. Robertson left the next morning in his sterile rental car wearing the same blue suit that he’d arrived in. For the next few months, locals fought tooth and nail to have the proposal denied. When it passed, they appealed. They traveled to Dallas, told stories of their lives in McKenzie. How they’d raised their kids there. How they, themselves, had been raised there. They told of the town’s history, its resilience. They begged the decision makers to come out and spend a week in McKenzie – to listen to the yips of the coyotes, count the stars in the wide-open night sky, to watch the sun slip below the prairie horizon. They respectfully declined. And on the day before Christmas in the year 1981, each resident of McKenzie received a notice to vacate. It was stamped with the Texas state seal. It told them they had till the 15th of July to move out. Just

over six months. Six months to upend their old lives and begin new ones somewhere else. Christmas day had a stillness that none of them would ever forget.

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The last bit of air hissed out of the truck's back left tire and into the slowly increasing wind of the mid-June night. A pile of embers had formed on the asphalt beneath the truck's cab. They pulsed slowly in a deep red color. A shower of sparks fell from the fire in the bed of the truck.

Clint and Wade still stood side by side watching the truck and listening to the hiss of escaping gasses from the various tanks and tubes within the truck. Wade spoke up, "y'know, I really thought the fire department would've showed up by now," he said.

"Practically nobody here to call 'em, except for us and the drunks inside," Clint replied. "That is, if we even still have a fire department." They both stood with their hands in their pockets, eyes still squinted against the bright light.

"Makes it feel like we're the only ones in town. All alone in the big Texas night," said Wade, before looking up at the blackness above.

"In a way, you're not wrong," Clint paused, then he looked at Wade, "when're you heading out?" he asked.

Wade took a second to collect his thoughts. "Next week, I think. Not much sense in hanging around here. I'm just about packed up anyways."

"Got any plans? Know where you're headed?"

“I’ve got family in El Paso and Albuquerque. One of those two I guess. I figure I’ll just pick one when the day comes,” said Wade. “How about you? Any plans? Know when you’re leaving?”

Clint cleared his throat. “Not sure. To be honest, I thought I was gonna die here.”

“Were you born here?”

“Yep. Born and raised. Tried out college in Austin but it didn’t suit me. Haven’t lived anywhere else. I suppose I’ll have to give it some thought – where I wanna go. I can’t really see myself anywhere but here. But I’ll probably stay till the last day, or maybe until they kick me out. I wanna see this whole thing through.”

“Can’t blame you for that,” said Wade.

They watched the fire in silence for a while longer. The flames began to die out and the roaring of the blaze gave way to a slow crackle like that of a campfire. In some distant arroyo, a lone coyote wailed into the night. The flapping of wings could be heard overhead from an owl or perhaps a raven.

“You know what I’m wondering?” asked Clint.

“What’s that?”

“I always thought gas tanks were supposed to blow up.”

“I was thinking that too,” said Wade.

“We would’ve been pretty much cooked if that happened,” said Clint.

“No doubt about it,” said Wade.

“I think part of me was actually hoping for it.”

Wade looked at him and nodded. “I think I know what you’re talking about. Let’s get a beer.”

The two men watched for a couple minutes longer, and once they were sure there would be no final fireworks, they turned their backs on the blackened hunk of metal and headed back towards the bar. Behind them, a thin column of smoke rose higher into the emptiness of the West Texas sky.