

Where All Is Emptiness There Is Room to Move, Ray Bradbury

Where All Is Emptiness There Is Room to Move

The Jeep came down an empty road into an empty town beside a shoreline that was empty and a vast bay dotted with half-sunken ships stretched as far as one could see.

Along the shore was a dockyard in which stood silent buildings with broken windows and huge prehistoric-looking lifters and movers, frozen somewhere back in time.

For now the iron limbs and pincers and chains shook in the wind and dropped rust on the empty dock timbers where no rats ran and no cats pursued.

There was an emptiness to the entire scene that caused the young driver to slow his Jeep and gaze about at the motionless machinery and the shoreline on which not one wave arrived nor another followed.

The sky was empty, too, for with no surf or creatures within the surf to be seized, the gulls had long since sailed north of this silence, the tombstone buildings, and the dead ironworks.

The very silence of the place braked the Jeep still more so that it seemed underwater, drifting across a plaza where a population had left at dawn without disturbing the air or promising return.

“My God,” the young man in the Jeep whispered. “It’s really dead.”

The Jeep stopped at last in front of a building on which a sign read GOMEZ/BAR. Some flags, with the colors of Mexico, rippled softly, the only motion.

The young driver got out of the Jeep slowly and was moving toward the bar when a tall man of some few years stepped forth, his hair a great white bush over his black scowl, the huge bulk of his body clad in the

all-white of a bartender, a clean white towel draped over his left arm, a wineglass in the other hand.

He stood scowling at the Jeep as if it were an affront and then lifted his scowl to the young man and slowly held out the glass.

“No one ever comes here,” he said, in a deep guttural tone.

“So it seems,” said the young man uneasily.

“No one has come here in sixty years.”

“I can see that.” The young man directed his gaze to the shoreline, the docks, the sea, and the air with no gulls.

“You did not expect to find anyone.” It was a statement, not a question.

“No one,” said the younger man. “But here you are.”

“Why not? Since 1932 the town is my town, the harbor my harbor. This plaza mine. This, this is my place. Why? Out there in the harbor, it happened, years ago.”

“The sandbar?”

“It came. It settled. Some ships did not escape. You see? They are rusting.”

“Couldn’t they clear the sandbar away?”

“They tried. This was Mexico’s biggest port, with great dreams. They had an opera house. See the shops, the gilt and the tile. They all departed.”

“So sand has more value than gold,” said the young man.

“Yes. A little sand makes a great mountain.”

“Does no one live here?”

“This one.” The big man shrugged. “Gomez.”

“Señor Gomez.” The young man nodded.

“James Clayton.”

“James Clayton.”

He motioned with the wineglass.

James Clayton turned silently to scan the plaza, the town, the flat sea.

“This then is Santo Domingo?”

“Call it what you will.”

“El Silencio says more. Abandonado, the world’s largest tomb. A place of ghosts.”

“All of those.”

“The Lonely Place. I have rarely known such loneliness. At the edge of town tears filled my eyes. I remembered an American graveyard in France years ago. I doubt ghosts, but I felt crushed. The air above the tombs took my breath. My heart almost stopped. I got out. This,” he nodded, “is the same. Except, none are buried here.”

“Only the Past,” said Gomez.

“And the Past can’t hurt you.”

“It is always trying. Well.”

Gomez looked as if he might empty the wineglass. James Clayton took the glass and said, “Tequila?”

“What else would a man offer?”

“No man that I know. Gracias.”

“Let it shoot you. Put your head back—now!”

The young man did this, blushed and gasped. “I’m shot!”

“Let us kill you again.”

Gomez backed into the bar. James Clayton stepped out of the sun.

Inside was a long bar, not the longest bar in the world like that one in Tijuana where ninety men could share murders, bark laughs, order fusillades, and die but to wake, eyeing their strange selves in the flyspecked mirrors.

No, it was merely a bar of some seventy feet, well polished, and laid out with long stacks of newspapers from other years. Above these, glass chimes of crystal hung upside down, and against the mirrors stood squadrons of liquor, of all colors, waiting like soldiers, while beyond,

filling the room, stood two dozen white-clothed tables on which lay bright cutlery and a few candles, lit though it was noon.

Behind the bar now, Gomez set out another assassin's tequila, a slow or abrupt suicide, if the young man wished. The young man wished, staring at the empty tables and chairs, the shining silverware, the lit candles.

"You were expecting someone?"

"I do expect," said Gomez. "Someday they will come. God says. He has never lied."

"When was your last meal served? Excuse me," said James Clayton.

"The menu will say."

Sipping his tequila, Clayton picked up a menu and read:

"Cinco de Mayo, my God, May 1932! That was the last dinner?"

"Just so," said Gomez. "After the funeral for this dead town, the last woman left. The women had waited for the last man to leave. With the men gone there was no profit in staying. The hotel rooms across the way are full of butterfly wings, dresses for late dinners or the opera.

Do you see that place across the plaza with golden gods and goddesses on top? Gilt, of course, or they would have been taken. In that opera the night before departure, Carmen sang, rolling cigars on her knee. When the music died, the town followed."

"No one left by sea?"

"Ah, no. The sandbar. There is a rail track behind the opera house. The last train left there in the night, with the singers singing on the porch of the observation car. I ran down the track after them, throwing confetti.

I ran long after the porchful of half-fat beautiful ladies were lost in the jungle, then I sat on the rail and listened to the train vibrating the iron, my ear pressed down, tears running off my nose, estúpido, but I stayed on. Late nights I still go to place my ear on the rail, shut my eyes, and

listen, but the track is dumb. Just as stupid as ever, I come back to sit and drink and say to myself, mañana: yes. The arrival! And now, you.”

“A poor arrival.”

“You will do for now.” Gomez leaned to touch one old, yellowed newspaper. “Señor, can you really know the year?” Clayton smiled at the newspaper. “1932!”

“1932! A better year. How can we know that other years exist? Do planes fill the sky? Do the roads fill with tourists? Do warships stand in the harbor? I see none. Does Hitler live? His name is not yet here. Is Mussolini evil? Here he seems good. Does the Depression stay? Look! It will die by Christmas! Mr. Hoover says! So each day I unfold another paper and reread 1932. Who says otherwise?”

“Not I, Señor Gomez.”

“Let us drink to that.”

They drank the tequila and Clayton wiped his mouth.

“Don’t you want me to tell you what’s happening out beyond today?”

“No, no. My newspapers stand ready. One a day. In ten years I will arrive in 1942. In sixteen years I will reach 1948, by then it cannot wound me. Friends bring these papers twice a year, I simply stack them on the bar, pour more tequila and read your Mr. Hoover.”

“Is he still alive?” Clayton smiled.

“Today he did something about foreign imports.”

“Shall I tell you what happened to him?”

“I will not listen!”

“I was joking.”

“Let us drink to that.”

They quietly drank their drinks.

“I suppose you wonder why I came?” said Clayton at last.

Gomez shrugged. “I slept well last night.”

“I like lonely places. They tell you more about life than cities. You can lift things and look under and no one watching so you feel self-conscious.”

“We have a saying,” said Gomez. “Where all is emptiness, there is room to move. Let us move.”

And before Clayton could speak, Gomez strode quietly with his long thick legs and his great body out to the Jeep, where he stared down at the great litter of bags and their labels.

His lips spelled out the words:

“Life.” He glanced at Clayton. “Even I have heard of that. In town I do not look left or right or listen to those radios in shops or the bar I know before my trip back with supplies. But I have seen that name on the big magazine. Life?”

Clayton nodded sheepishly.

Gomez scowled as he stared hard down at many black shiny metal objects.

“Cameras?”

Clayton nodded.

“Just lying there, open. You did not drive with them so, surely?”

“I opened them outside town,” said Clayton. “To take pictures.”

“Of what?” said Gomez. “Why would a young man leave all things to come where there is nothing, nada, to take pictures of a graveyard? You’re here to see more than this place,” said Gomez.

“Why do you say that?”

“The way you slap at flies that are not there. You cannot stand quietly. You watch the sky. Señor, the sun will go down without your help. Do you have an appointment? You have a camera but have not used it. Are you waiting for something better than my tequila?”

“I ...” said Clayton

And then it happened.

Gomez froze. He listened and turned his head toward the hills. "What's that?"

Clayton said nothing.

"Do you hear? Something?" said Gomez, and leaped to the bottom of an outside staircase that rose to the top of a low building, where he scowled off at the hills, shielding his eyes.

"On the road, there, where no cars have been in years. What?"

Clayton's face colored. He hesitated.

Gomez yelled down at him. "Your friends?"

Clayton shook his head.

"Your enemies?" said Gomez.

Clayton nodded.

"With cameras?" Gomez exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Speak up!"

"Yes!" Clayton said.

"Coming for the same reason you have come, yet have not told me why?" Gomez cried, staring at the hills and hearing the sound of motors that rose and fell in the wind.

"I got a head start on them," said Clayton. "I—"

At which moment with a great razor of sound that cut the sky in half, a squadron of jets shrieked over Santo Domingo. From them, great clouds of white paper fell in blizzards. Gomez, with a maniac stare, swayed at the bottom of the steps.

"Wait!" he cried. "What the hell!"

Like a white dove, one of the pamphlets fell into his hands, which he dropped, repelled. Clayton stared at the litter at his feet.

"Read!" said Gomez.

Clayton hesitated. "It's in both languages," he said.

“Read!” Gomez ordered.

Clayton retrieved one of the pamphlets. And the words were these:

SECOND NOTICE

THE TOWN OF SANTO DOMINGO WILL BE PHOTO-
ATTACKED SHORTLY AFTER NOON JULY 13TH. WE
HAVE GOVERNMENT ASSURANCE THAT THE TOWN IS
EVACUATED. THAT BEING SO, AT ONE FORTY-FIVE
PROMPTLY, THE FILMING OF PANCHO! BEGINS.

STERLING HUNT

DIRECTOR

“Attacked?” said Gomez, stunned. “Pancho? A director of films? California, a Hispanic state, dares bomb Santo Domingo? Gah!” Gomez ripped the pamphlet in half and then quarters. “There will be no attack! Manuel Ortiz Gonzales Gomez tells you this. Come back and see.”

Gomez shook long after the thunders left the sky. Then he struck a glare at Clayton and lurched into action. He lumbered across the plaza with Clayton in pursuit. Inside, in the sudden midnight darkness at noon, he floundered along to the top of the bar, feeling rather than seeing, the newspapers in neat piles riffling under his clutch. He reached the far end of the bar.

“This should be it? Yes, yes?”

Clayton looked down at the stack of newspapers and bent close.

“What, what?” said Gomez.

“A month ago,” said Clayton. “The first notice. If you had bothered to read the papers as they came, maybe—”

“Read, read!” cried Gomez.

“It says ...” Clayton squinted, took the paper, held it up to the light.

“July first, 1998. The government of Mexico has sold ...”

“Sold? Sold what?”

“The town of Santo Domingo.” Clayton’s eyes roved along the line.
“Sold the town of Santo Domingo to—”

“To who, what?”

“To Crossroads Films, Hollywood, California.”

“Films!” Gomez shouted. “California?”

“Jesus.” Clayton held the paper higher. “For the sum ...”

“Name the sum!”

“Christ!” Clayton shut his eyes. “One million two hundred thousand pesos.”

“One million two hundred thousand pesos? Food for chickens!”

“Chicken shit, yes.”

Gomez blinked at the newspapers “Once I bought glasses in Mexico City, but they were broken. I did not buy them again. What for? With only one paper a day to read. So I stayed in my empty place, my country, free to walk that way to this, across and back, meeting no one, making it mine. And now this, this.” He rattled the paper. “More words? What?”

Clayton translated. “A Hollywood film company, Crossroads, it says. They are remaking Viva Villa, the life of your rebel or whatever he was, this time titled just Pancho! Pamphlets have been dropped on Santo Domingo, making sure of what has been promised, that the town has been in the grave during the term of six American and two Mexican presidents. Rumor has it—”

“Rumor, what rumor?”

“Rumor has it,” Clayton continued, his eyes moving along the stories in each paper, each day, “that Santo Domingo, long ago abandoned, is the hiding place of thieves, murderers, and escaped criminals. Drug trafficking is suspected. The government of Mexico will send an official party to investigate.”

“Thieves, murderers, escaped criminals!” said Gomez, with a great laugh, raising his arms up and then out to embrace himself. “Do I look

like one who steals, kills, escapes, traffics in drugs? Where? From this plaza to the port where we throw cocaine to the fish? Where are my fields of marijuana? Lies!" Gomez crumpled one paper in his fist. "Bury this! Within a week it will grow more lies! The next paper! Read!"

Clayton read:

"Notices have been delivered. Warnings were dropped on the town on May ninth from the air. There was no life to be seen. The film company indicates that when Pancho! is finished they will use Santo Domingo for another film, Earthquake, to appear in ruins."

"I saw no papers in the air," said Gomez. "If they were dropped they fell into the sea to be read by sharks. Mexican aviators, yes. That is it!"

Sweeping the newspapers off the bar in one grand sweep, Gomez lurched out into the hot sun. Along the way he seized a rifle off the wall, found a sling of bullets. He loaded the weapon and sighted it at the plaza.

"Your camera, gringo," he said. "¡Andale!"

Clayton, at his Jeep, brought forth the best Leica, snapping it once at Gomez, who looked at Clayton and the Leica, laughed, and held the rifle across his chest.

"How do I look?"

"Like the dictator of a village, no, a country!"

"And now?" Gomez stood at attention and stiffened his neck. "Yes?"

"Yes!" Clayton snapped the Leica, laughing.

"Now." Gomez aimed at the sky. "Do you see the enemy arriving at, how do they say? Four o'clock?"

"Five." said Clayton, and snap!

"Now lower! Now higher!" Gomez aimed the rifle. This time he fired. The shot knocked birds off the trees in bright explosions. A family of

parrots protested. Gomez fired again, commenting, "This gives you many fine shots, liar with the camera? It is all lies, yes? Those California people, liars with cameras? They could not get war to stand still. Dead, they could photograph it. Here, now, let me aim this way."

"Hold it, that's good!" said Clayton. "Don't make me laugh, I can't hold still."

"The only way to kill a man is to laugh. Now you, señor." He aimed the rifle at Clayton.

"Hey!" said Clayton.

Click. The rifle fell on emptiness. "No ammunition," said Gomez. "Have you enough pictures for your magazine? GENERAL GOMEZ IN ACTION. GOMEZ RETAKES SANTO DOMINGO. GOMEZ A MAN OF PEACE LOVES WAR!"

Click went the camera with a dull sound.

"Out of ammunition, that is, film," Clayton said.

They both reloaded, bullets and film, film and bullets, laughing.

"Why are you doing this?" said the young man.

"Soon those sons of whores will fly back so fast you will not be able to trap me, I will move as quickly. We take the fine pictures now so you can put the lies together later. Besides, I might die before they return. The heart at this moment is saying bad things, like lie down, be quiet. But I will neither sit, die, nor be quiet. Thank God the plaza is empty. It is easy to run and fire, fire and run with the jets. How much ahead of them do I fire to kill one?"

"It can't be done."

Gomez swore and spat. "How much lead? Thirty feet? Forty out in front? Fifty?"

"Fifty, maybe," said Clayton.

"Good. Watch! I will kill one."

"If you do you will get two ears and a tail!" said Clayton.

“One thing must be certain,” said Gomez. “That I will never surrender and that I fought well and won the last battle even though I died. I should be buried in the middle of the ruins when the ruins come.”

“Agreed,” said Clayton.

“Now a final time, I will move more quickly, run, stop, aim, fire, run, stop, fire. Ready?”

“Ready.”

Gomez did all this and stopped, gasping.

“Bring the tequila,” he said, and Clayton brought it and they drank.

“Well,” he said, “that was a good war, yes, plenty of lies, but no one will know and you, the best liar, will be sure I appear in at least three editions about the Santo Domingo War and Gomez, the great! Do you swear?”

“It is sworn. But—”

“What of you now? Do you stay? Will you wait for your enemies?”

“No,” said Clayton. “I have my story. They will not see what I have seen. Gomez triumphant in the noon plaza. Gomez the hero of Santo Domingo.”

“You lie in your teeth, but you have fine teeth,” Gomez said. “Now, a pose with dignity.” He dressed his rifle to one side and tucked his right hand within his blouse solemnly.

“Hold it.” Clayton snapped his Leica.

“Now.” Gomez eyed a shining path beyond the plaza. “Take me there.” He slung himself into the Jeep, his rifle across his knees, and Clayton drove across the plaza. Gomez jumped out to kneel by the iron rail tracks.

“Christ!” Clayton cried. “What’re you doing?”

Gomez smiled, head down to the rail. "I knew they would come this way. Not the sky, not the road, those are diversions. Here. Listen!" Gomez smiled and pressed his ear to the burning-hot rail. "They did not fool me. Not jets or cars. The train as before! Sí! I can hear them!"

Clayton did not move.

"I order you, listen!" said Gomez, eyes shut.

Clayton glanced at the sky, and knelt in the dust.

"Good," Gomez murmured, and motioned with his free hand. "Do you hear?"

Clayton, his ear burnt by the noon iron, said nothing.

"Now," said Gomez quietly. "Far off, yes? But near."

Clayton heard something or nothing, he could not say.

"There. Closer now," murmured Gomez, greatly satisfied. "On time.

After sixty years, sí. What year is that coming? What time is it, at last?"

Clayton's face agonized.

"Speak," said Gomez.

"July ..."

He stopped.

"July what?"

"Thirteenth!"

"So it is the thirteenth. And ...?"

Clayton forced himself. "Nineteen ..."

"Nineteen what, señor?"

"Ninety-eight!"

"July thirteenth, 1998. It has already arrived. It is already over. This I hear in the rail. Yes?"

Clayton's whole weight forced him to the track. It hammered, and if the blows came from the earth or sky, his heart could not tell. For it was hurrying, rushing, hurling itself in great thunders that racked his body or his chest. Eyes shut, he whispered: "July thirteenth, 1998."

“Now,” said Gomez, head down, eyes tight, smiling. “Now I know what year I live in. Brave Gomez. Go, señor.”

“I can’t leave you here.”

“I am not here,” said Gomez. “Your year arrives this day in July, I cannot stop it. But Gomez is where? Cinco de Mayo, 1932, a good year! They may come, but I am hidden where they will never think to look. Go. ¡Andale!”

Clayton stood up and looked at Gomez, whose head lay hard on the rail.

“Señor Gomez ...”

“He has long departed. Go with God,” came the voice at his feet.

“I beg you,” said Clayton.

“Where all is emptiness,” said Gomez’s voice, “there is room to move. When you are gone, I will move swiftly.”

Clayton got in his Jeep and gunned the motor and began to drift away.

“Gomez,” he called quietly.

But there was just a body on the rail and much room. Seeking to hide in other years, Gomez had simply ... moved.

Clayton drove out of town ahead of the thunders.

The end