

THE LAST TOURIST

A STORY BY

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Origins

It seems to me that there must always have been a last person to do a particular thing. For example, there must have been a last person to receive a prophecy from the oracle at Delphi. One day there will be a last person who visits your town. But who will be there to see it?

The Last Tourist

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It was just another small town. He had seen many like them. Nothing special, a town square of sorts, a town hall, a collection of shops, with offices over, nothing out of the ordinary. The tourist drove around the town square slowly, checking the shops, watching the buildings, glancing at windows. He could never tell what sort of reception a small town like this would give.

Satisfied at the quiet air of this town he drove around the streets for a while, watching, gauging, judging. He saw some dogs, noted their small size, drove around to check the shops, found a small supermarket with a fuel stop, the only one he had seen this week, a pharmacy to renew some items in his first aid kit, a working man's clothing store which should have some heavy walking boots, and an auto depot where

he might get some spare parts for his camper van. It was just another small town, but it had enough for his needs. He drove back to the town square.

The tourist parked the van right outside the hotel door. He looked around the street, checked his rear mirrors, but the street was as quiet behind as it was in front. He shrugged. It was just another small town. Not much trouble here. He pushed open the door of the camper, stepped out, and checked the pistol in his belt. He shouldered a semi-automatic rifle. No sense in leaving those in the camper, even if the town was safe.

The hotel doorway was only twenty feet away, but he could see that it was unlocked, even though it was closed. He debated whether to lock

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the door of the camper, but decided that this was the sort of town where you could leave the door of a safe open and the money would still be there at Christmas. He left the door unlocked. The windows of the hotel lobby were dirty, there was nobody at the desk. The tourist stepped across to the hotel door and pushed it open. A window blind somewhere upstairs clattered against an open window as a draught swept through the open front door.

“Shop,” he called out, but there was no answer.

These hotels usually catered for commercial travellers, but they would not be seeking hotels just now. The tourist pushed through the door to the bar. The tables needed a good cleaning, they usually did these days. It was small and cosy, the sort of bar he liked. There was a door at the back of the bar, but it was locked, or jammed. It didn't matter, he wouldn't be going through there anyway. The only window looked out at the town square.

He could see a small dog sniffing curiously at the front door of the hotel. The dog pushed the door open and poked its head through. The tourist

crept to the door to the hotel lobby, and peeped through. They regarded each other for a few heart beats, then the tourist pulled his rifle down and pulled the trigger. The dog's head exploded and the body fell out of the front door from the impact. The small dogs were worse, he could never tell whether they would be friendly, neutral, or vicious. The big ones were more open. They had no reason to hide. He could tell at a glance whether a big dog was going to be a nuisance.

“Sorry about that,” he said to the deceased dog, “but you just can't be sure these days. Better safe than sorry.”

He crept to the front door and locked it. He sighed and walked back to the bar. It was only a small bar, the hotel only had nine bedrooms anyway. The tourist checked the small stock of half empty bottles. Nothing very interesting, some looked spoiled.

“Not much custom hereabouts,” the tourist chuckled.

He held out one bottle in disbelief.

“Tequila,” he said. “God, I haven't had tequila for

years. This calls for a party.”

He searched for a glass but they were all dirty.

“What kind of a hotel is this?” he shouted at the hotel in general.

He went back into the lobby, leaned across the desk and took some keys. All the keys were hanging there, nobody had checked in today.

“Not surprised,” said the tourist, climbing the stairs.

He found a room at the front, on the first floor, overlooking the town square. The noise below his window told him that some other dogs were busy with the body of the one he had shot.

“That’ll distract them for a while,” he muttered.

The bed was made and not damp like the last one had been. He lay back, unscrewed the top of the tequila bottle, and took one large gulp. He coughed and cheered.

“God, that was perfect. Here’s another one.”

He took another large gulp of the fiery fluid, then another and another. He remembered getting to the bottom of the bottle, but he remembered

nothing else until he woke. It might have been the same day or the next. The last time he drank tequila it was the same. First the blackout, then waking into a head thudding like the drum of a slave galley. The tourist groaned and reached for the empty bottle. He upended the bottle for the last few drops of precious tequila, then heard a snuffling noise in the corridor outside his room. His head cleared in a second, and he jumped up to the window. The town square was clear and quiet. He checked the clip of bullets in his pistol, slammed the clip into the gun and slipped the safety catch off. He picked up his rifle, checked it ready for action and slid the catch to semi-automatic fire. He put his ear to the door. He could hear a snuffling at the bottom of his door, and something padding along the corridor. He knelt down and put his head on the floor to see the gap between the door and the floor. There was just enough of a gap to see a shadow sniffing at the air coming under the door. The tourist blew gently at the shadow, to catch its attention. He brought the pistol to the door, pointed it down to where the thing that made the shadow would be on the other side, and fired.

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The bang and yelp came together. He opened the door carefully to confirm that the snuffling thing was dead. It was. The one that had yelped had run for its life. The tourist looked out into the corridor. No other doors were open, the intruders must have come in through a back door or window.

He went back to the window, the town square was still quiet. His camper stood below him, just as he had left it. A new padding followed by snuffling came carefully along the corridor. The tourist holstered his pistol and drew his rifle up ready. He crept to the door and looked through. The dog looked at him quizzically from half way down the corridor. It had no time to ask what was happening before a burst of semi-automatic fire blew its body apart. The tourist crept into the corridor and stepped through the mess of dog that splattered the walls and floor.

“Sorry dog,” said the tourist, “but it was either me or you, and I’m the one with the gun.”

The floor creaked but that was the only sound in the hotel. He crept down the stairs, his back to the wall, looking alternately up the stairs to the

corridor, and down to the hotel lobby. From somewhere downstairs a growl came but turned to yelping after a burst from the semi-automatic. He continued carefully down the stairs then across the lobby to the door. He jolted against the door and remembered he had locked it. He turned round to face the lobby then slid down the door, his free hand feeling down for the floor bolt. He pulled it up, pushed against the door, and edged carefully out into the street, slamming the door shut behind him.

The camper van stood waiting just twenty feet away, but it was still twenty feet too far. The tourist scanned the town square for movement but it was as dead as when he had arrived. He moved out from the doorway of the hotel, turning round several times to check for any movement, and had just reached the door of his camper when it came. From under nearby parked cars, from open shop doors, from everywhere came a snarling pack of dogs. The tourist fired several more bursts before his gun ran out, leaving him to kick at snarling little balls of teeth that were totally undeterred by the fire and the death of the

others. He tore open the door of his camper and kicked at dogs that tried to get through after him. His long boots had stopped any bites, but the lower legs of his jeans were ripped apart. Once inside he laughed to break the tension. He pressed a button on the dashboard and unleashed a combination of wails, siren warbles, and car horn blasts. The dogs turned and ran, whining and yelping as they fled the noise.

“Bye bye, doggies,” said the tourist with a smile.

He had a small dog once. When the animals turned on humankind he had to kill it before it tore out his throat. People went to bed one night with the faithful family pet sound asleep in its basket. The next morning, only those without pets or with animals safely out in the yard were left alive. Those with guns or other weapons survived the week. Only those ruthless and unsentimental enough survived the month.

The warning signs had been there. Dogs howling deep into the night, cats turning vicious on their owners, mothers and their babies driven from the parks and open spaces by rats. The restlessness had spread from continent to continent in a few

weeks. Scientists, animal behaviourists, and all manner of pundits discussed the matter on television but could find no explanation. One night the dogs stopped howling, and fed for weeks on the remains of their former owners.

The tourist had been away on a long vacation in the mountains when it finally happened. He heard the howling from across the forests. The night it stopped his terrier became more than usually restive. He'd put it out of the camper van so he could get some sleep. The next morning he was woken by the sound of the terrier throwing itself against the camper van in a frenzy. Thinking it had developed rabies, he shot it after opening the driver's door a fraction. Animals in the forest began to venture closer. A stag came out of the forest and attacked the rear of the camper van. A bear lumbered into the clearing and threw itself at the passenger door, ignoring the stag. The animals hadn't simply gone wild, they had developed a hatred of anything human, and had lost their fear at the same time. The tourist drove as fast as he could manage down the rough forest track to the main

road, a bizarre mob of assorted wild creatures in full pursuit.

The first town he encountered greeted him with packs of frenzied dogs, and the city beyond had become almost impassible as packs of hundreds of blood-crazed animals attacked him from all sides. He'd had enough fuel to get back to a country village where he despatched the few dogs that pestered him, and set about fortifying his camper van. In the first month he encountered less than ten humans, all of whom tried to kill him for his mobile fortress. The radio waves were mostly dead. Humanity had been cut down as if the worst plague in history had swept through in just weeks.

He started the engine of the camper van, put it into reverse, drove back a few yards, then put the camper into first gear. He drove up to the hotel door, leaned out of his camper, and put the butt of his rifle through the window. He threw some gold coins through the broken window, slipped the camper into gear, and drove out of the town. He made a point of always paying for his stopovers, though nobody was left to collect.