

The Never-Ending Western Movie  
By Robert Sheckley (c)1976

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The name is Washburn: just plain Washburn to my friends, Mister Washburn to enemies and strangers. Saying that I've said everything, because you've seen me a thousand times, on the big screen in your neighborhood theater or on the little pay-tv screen in your living room, riding through Cholla cactus and short grass, my famous derby pulled down over my eyes, my famous Colt .44 with the 7 1/2-inch barrel strapped down to my right leg. But just now I'm riding in a big air-conditioned Cadillac, sitting between my agent-manager Gordon Simms, and my wife, Consuela. We've turned off State Highway 101 and we're bouncing along a rutted dirt road which will end presently at the Wells Fargo Station that marks one of the entrances to The Set. Simms is talking rapidly and rubbing the back of my neck like I was a fighter about to enter the ring, which is more or less the situation. Consuela is quiet. Her English isn't too good yet. She's the prettiest little thing imaginable, my wife of less than two months, a former Miss Chile, a former actress in various Gaucho dramas filmed in Buenos Aires and Montevideo. This entire scene is supposed to be off-camera. It's the part they never show you: the return of the famous gunfighter, all the way from Bel Air in the jolly jittery year of 2031 to the Old West of the mid-1900's.

Simms is jabbering away about some investment he wants me to come in on, some new seabed mining operation, another of Simms's get-richer-quick schemes, because Simms is already a wealthy man, as who wouldn't be with a thirty-percent bit on my earnings throughout my ten biggest years as a star? Simms is my friend, too, but I can't think about investments now because we're coming to The Set.

Consuela, sitting on my right, shivers as the famous weatherbeaten old station comes into view. She's never really understood The Never-Ending Western Movie. In South America they still make their movies in the old-fashioned way, everything staged, everything faked, and the guns fire only blanks. She can't understand why America's famous Movie has to be done for real when you could contrive all the effects and nobody would get killed. I've tried to explain it to her, but it sounds ridiculous in Spanish.

It's different for me this time, of course: I'm coming out of retirement to make a cameo appearance. I'm on a no-kill contract -- famous gunman to do a comedy bit with Old Jeff Mangles and Natchez Parker. There's no script, of course; there never is in The Movie. We'll improvise around any situation that comes up -- we, the commedia dell'arte players of the Old West. Consuela doesn't understand any of this. She's heard about contracts to kill, but a no-kill contract is something new in her experience.

And now we've arrived. The car stops in front of a low, unpainted pinewood building. Everything on this side of it is 21st-century America in all its recycled and reproduced glory. On the other side is the million-acre expanse of prairie, mountains and desert, with its thousands of concealed cameras and microphones, that is The Set for The Never-Ending Movie.

I'm in costume already -- blue jeans, blue-and-white checked shirt, boots, derby, rawhide jacket, and 3.2 pounds of revolver. A horse is waiting for me at the hitching post of the other side of the station, with all my gear tied aboard in a neat blanket roll. An assistant director checks me over and finds me in order: no wristwatch or other anachronisms for the cameras to find. "All right, Mr. Washburn," he says, "you can go through whenever you're ready."

Simms gives his main-event boy a final rub on the back. He's bouncing up and down on his toes, excited, envying me, wishing he were the one to be riding out into the desert, a tall, slow-moving man

with mild manners and sudden death always near his right hand. But Simms is short and fat and nearly bald and he would never do, certainly not for a heroic gunman's role, so he lives it vicariously. I am Simms's manhood, and he and I have ridden the danger trail many times and our trusty .44 had cleared out all opposition, until we reigned supreme, the absolute best gunslinger in the West, the one who finally retired when all the opposition was dead or lying low. . . . Poor Simms, he always wanted us to play that last big scene, the final definitive walkdown on some dusty Main Street. He wanted us to go out high, wide and handsome, not for the money, we've got too much of that as it is, but just for the glory, retiring from The Movie in a blaze of gunfire at the top of our form. I wanted it that way myself, but the opposition got cautious, and Washburn spent a final ridiculous year in The Movie, riding around looking for something to do, six-shooter ready, but never finding anyone who wanted to shoot it out with him. And even this cameo appearance -- for Simms it is a mockery of all that we have stood for, and I suppose it's that way for me, too. (It is difficult to know where I start and where Simms ends, difficult to separate what I want and what Simms wants, difficult to face this, the end of our great years in The Movie.)

Simms shakes my hand and grips me hard on the shoulder and says nothing in that manly Western style he's picked up through the years of associating with me, being me. Consuela hugs me, there are tears in her eyes, she kisses me, she tells me to come back to her soon. Ah, those incredible first months with a new wife! The splendor of it, before the dreary old reality sets in! Consuela is number four, I've ridden down a lot of trails in my time, most of them the same, and now the director checks me again for lipstick smears, nods okay, and I turn away from Consuela and Simms, throw them the little two-finger salute I'm famous for, and stride across the creaking floor of the Wells Fargo Office and out the other side, into the blazing sunshine and the world of The Never-Ending Western Movie.

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From far away, the camera picks up a lone rider, moving antlike between brilliantly striped canyon walls. We see him in successive shots against an unfolding panorama of desert scenery. Here he is in the evening, silhouetted against a flaming sky, derby cocked jauntily on the back of his head, cooking over a little fire. How he is asleep, rolled in his blanket, as the embers of his fire fade to ash. Before dawn the rider is up again, making coffee, preparing for the day's ride. Sunrise finds him mounted and moving, shielding his eyes from the sun, leaning back long in the stirrups, letting his horse pick its own way over the rocky slopes.

I am also the audience watching me the actor, as well as the actor watching me the audience. It is the dream of childhood come true: to play a part and also watch ourselves play it. I know now that we never stop acting, never stop watching ourselves act. It is merely an irony of fate that the heroic images I see coincide with what you, sitting in front of your little screen, also see.

Now the rider has climbed to a high saddleback between two mountains. It is cold up here, a high wind is blowing, the rider's coat collar is turned up and his derby is tied in place with a bright wool scarf. Looking over the man's shoulder, far below, we see a settlement, tiny and lost in the immensity of the landscape. We follow as the rider clucks to his tired horse and begins the journey down to the settlement.

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The derbied rider is walking his horse through the settlement of Comanche. There is one street -- Main Street -- with its saloon, boarding house, livery stable, blacksmith's, general store, all as quaint and stark as a Civil War daguerreotype. The desert wind blows unceasingly through the town, and a fine dust is settled over everything.

The rider is recognized. Loungers in front of the general store say: "Hey, it's Washburn!"

I dismount stiffly in front of the livery stable -- a tall, travel-stained man, gun belt worn low and strapped down, the cracked horn-faced gun butt standing out easy to reach, easy to see. I turn and rub my face -- the famous, long, sorrowful face, the puckered scar along one cheekbone, the narrow unblinking gray eyes. It is the face of a tough, dangerous, unpredictable man; yet a sympathetic one. It is me watching you watching me.

I come out of the livery stable, and there to greet me is Sheriff Ben Watson, an old friend, hard tanned face and black handlebar mustache, tin star gleaming on his worsted vest.

"Heard you might be coming through," Watson says. "Heard you been to Califormee for a spell."

"Califormee" is our own special code word for retirement.

"That's so," I say. "How's everything around here?"

"So-so," Watson tells me. "I don't suppose you heard about Old Jeff Mangles?"

I wait. The sheriff says, "Happened just yesterday. Old Jeff got thrown, out on the desert. We figure his horse shied at a rattler -- Christ knows that I told him to sell that big skittery wall-eyed brute. But you know Old Jeff--"

"What happened to him?" I ask.

"Well, like I say, he got thrown and dragged. He was dead before Jimmy Connors found him."

Long silence. I push the derby to the back of my head. Finally I say, "Okay, Ben, what else do you want to tell me?"

The sheriff is ill at ease. He fidgets, shifting from one foot to the other. I wait. Jeff Mangles dead; that blows the scene I was hired to play. What other development is coming up?

Watson says, "You must be thirsty. What say we put down a beer--"

"Just tell me the news."

"Well.... You ever hear of a cowpuncher from the Panhandle name of Little Joe Potter?"

I shake my head.

"He came drifting up this way a while ago, bringing with him quite a reputation as a fast gun. Didn't you hear about the shootout down at Twin Peaks?"

Now that he mentions it, I do remember hearing something about it. Bit I've been out to Califormee doing other things, and shootouts just didn't interest me much until right now.

"This Little Joe Potter," Watson goes on, "he went up against four X-Bar riders in a dispute over some woman. The say it was quite a fight. The result was that Little Joe blew them four riders all to hell, and he picked himself up quite a reputation thereby."

"So what?" I ask.

"Well, some time after that, Little Joe was in a poker game with some boys down Gila Bend way..." Watson stops, uncomfortable. "Washburn, maybe you better get the story from Charlie Gibbs, since he spoke to a man who was actually present at that game. Yeah, you better hear it from Charlie. See you later, Washburn."

The sheriff moves away, following The Movie dictum of keeping the talk-scenes short and letting other people have a piece of the action.

I walk to the saloon. There is someone following me, a kid, no more than eighteen or nineteen, a gangling snubnosed freckled kid in too-short overalls and cracked boots. He wears a gun. What does he want of me? What everyone else wants, I suppose.

I enter the saloon, my spurs clattering on the plank floor. Charlie Gibbs is drinking at the bar, a fat sloppy man all grin and crinkle, not wearing a gun because Charlie Gibbs is a comic character and therefore does not kill or get killed. Charlie is also our local Screen Actors' Guild representative.

I buy him a drink and ask him about Little Joe Potter's famous poker game.

"I heard about it from Texas Jim Claire. You remember Texas Jim, don't you Washburn? Good old boy who works for the Donaldson outfit as a wrangler? Well, sir, Texas Jim was in this poker game over by way of the Gila Bend. The action commenced to get hot. There was this one big jackpot at the end, and Doc Dailey bet a thousand dollars Mex on his hand. Little Joe was right fond of the cards he was holding, but he didn't have no more money to back hisself with. Doc said he'd take collateral, if Little Joe could think of any. Little Joe thought about it for a while, and then he said, 'How much would you give me for Mr. Washburn's derby?' There was a silence then, because nobody just walks up and takes away Mr. Washburn's derby, not without first killing the man underneath it. But on the other hand, Little Joe was not known as a braggart, and he'd handled hisself well during that shootout with the X-Bar riders. So Doc, he thought about it a while, then he said, 'Sure, Joe, I'll allow you a thousand for a ringside seat when you got to take it off him.' 'You can have that ringside seat for nothing,' says Little Joe, 'if I lose this hand, which I'm not fixing to do.' So the bet is accepted and they show down. Little Joe's four eights lose to Doc's four Jacks. Little Joe rises and stretches, and says, 'Well, Doc, looks like you're going to get your ringside seat after all.'"

Charlie finishes off his drink and looks at me with bright, malicious eyes. I nod, finish my own drink, and go out back to the outhouse.

\*

The outhouse is a designated off-camera area. We use it for talks which are necessary, but are out of our Western context. Charlie Gibbs comes out a few minutes later. He turns on the hidden air conditioning, takes a pack of cigarettes from behind a beam, lights up, sits down and makes himself comfortable. As SAG representative, Charlie spends a fair amount of time out here listening to gripes and grievances. This is his office, and he's tried to make it pleasant for himself.

Charlie says, "I suppose you want to know what's going on?"

"Damned right I do," I tell him. "What is this crap about Joe Potter coming to take away my derby?"

"Don't get excited," Charlie says, "everything is in order. Potter is a new star on his way up. After Jeff Mangles got killed, it was natural to match up you and him. Potter went along with it. Your agent was approached yesterday and he renegotiated your contract. You're getting a hell of a bonus for this

shootout appearance."

"Simms renegotiated my contract? Without asking me first?"

"You weren't available then. Simms said it would be fine with you. He gave a statement to the newspapers about how you and he had talked about this many times, and that it had always been your desire to leave The Movie big, at the top of your firm, in one last shootout. He said he didn't have to discuss it with you because you and he had talked it over many times and you and he were closer than brothers. He said he was glad this chance had come up, and he knew you would be glad, too."

"Christ! That simple-minded Simms!"

"Was he setting you up?" Charlie asks.

"No, it's not like that at all. We did talk a lot about a final showdown. I did tell him that I'd like to end big--"

"But it was just talk?" Charlie suggests.

"Not exactly." But it's one thing to talk about a shootout when you're retired and safe in your house in Bel Air. It's another to suddenly find yourself involved in a fight without preparation. "Simms didn't set me up; but he did involve me in something that I'd want to make up my own mind about."

"So the situation is," Charlie says, "that you were a fool for shooting off your mouth about wanting a final match, and your agent was a fool for taking you at your word."

"That's the way it looks."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"I'll tell you," I say, "as long as I'm talking to my old buddy Charlie, and not to Gibbs the SAG representative."

"Sure," Charlie says.

"I'm going to waltz on out of here," I say. "I'm thirty-seven years old and I haven't practiced gunplay for a year. I've got a new wife--"

"You don't have to go into all that," Gibbs says. "Life is sweet, that says it all. As your friend, I approve. As your SAG representative, I can't tell you that the Guild won't back you up if you break a valid contract made by your legally appointed representative. If The Company sues you, you're all alone on your lonesome."

"Better all alone than underground with company," I tell him. "How good is this Little Joe?"

"He's good. But not as good as you are, Washburn. You're the best I ever seen. You thinking about meeting him?"

"Nope. Just asking."

"Keep it that way," Charlie says. "As your friend, I advise you to get out and stay out. You've already

taken everything that can be gotten out of The Movie: you're a hero, you're rich, and you've got a pretty young wife. You've won everything in sight. Now don't hand around and wait for someone to take it off you."

"I'm not fixing to," I tell him. But I find that my hand has come to rest on my gun butt.

\*

I go back into the saloon. I sit alone at the table, a shot glass of whiskey in front of me, a thin black Mexican cigar between my teeth. I am thinking about the situation. Little Joe is riding up from the south. He'll probably figure to find me here in Comanche. But I don't figure to be here. Safest way would be for me to ride back the way I came, back to the Wells Fargo Station and out into the world again. But I'm not going to do it that way. I'm going out of The Set by way of Brimstone in the extreme northeastern corner, thus making a complete tour of The Territory. Let them figure that one out...

Suddenly a long shadow falls across the table, a figure has moved between me and the light, and without a thought I roll out of my chair, gun already drawn, hammer back, forefinger tightening on the trigger. A boy's frightened, high-pitched voice says, "Oh! Excuse me, Mr. Washburn!" It's that snubnosed freckle-faced kid I saw watching me earlier, now gaping at the end of my gun, scared, as he damned well should be having just startled me out of a year's growth.

I thumb down the hammer of my .44. I get up, holster the gun, dust myself off, pick up my chair and sit down on it. Curly the bartender brings me another drink. I say to the kid, "Kid, don't you know better than to move up sudden on a man like that? I should have blown you to hell just on the off-chance."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Washburn," he says. "I'm new out here, I didn't realize.... I just wanted to tell you how much I admire you."

He was new, all right; he looked fresh out of The Company's School of Western Skills, which we must all graduate from before we're even allowed on The Set. I had been just as raw as him during my first weeks in The Movie.

"Someday," he tells me, "I'm going to be like you. I thought maybe you could give me a few pointers. I got this old gun here--"

The kid draws, and once again I react without thinking, slap the gun out of his hand, chop him down with a fist to the ear.

"Goddamn you!" I shout, "haven't you got no sense at all? You just don't up and draw like that unless you're meaning to use it."

"I just wanted to show you my gun," he says, not getting up yet.

"If you want someone to look at your gun," I tell him, "take it out of your holster slow and easy, keeping your fingers outside the trigger guard. And first announce what you're going to do."

"Mr. Washburn," he says, "I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything," I tell him. "Just get out of here. You look like bad luck to me. Go show someone else your goddamned gun."

"Shall I show it to Joe Potter?" he asks, getting up and dusting himself off.

He looks at me. I haven't said a word. He gulps, he knows he's put his foot in it again.

I stand up slow. "Would you care to explain that remark?"

"I didn't mean nothing by it."

"You sure of that?"

"Real sure, Mr. Washburn. I'm sorry!"

"Get out of here," I say, and the kid scrams fast.

I go over to the bar. Curly has the whiskey bottle out, but I wave it away and he draws me a beer.

"Curly," I say, "I know they can't help being young, but isn't there something they can do about being so stupid?"

"I reckon not, Mr. Washburn," Curly says.

We are silent for a few moments. Then Curly says, "Natchez Parker sent word he'd like to see you."

"All right," I tell him.

\*

Dissolve to: a ranch on the edge of the desert. In the chuckhouse, the Chinese cook is sharpening his knives. Bud Farrell, one of the hands, is sitting on a crate peeling potatoes. He is singing as he works, his long horse face bent over the spuds. The cook, oblivious to him, looks out the window, says, "Rider comes."

Bud Farrell gets up, looks, scratches his hayseed head, looks again: "That's something more than just a \_rider\_, you heathen Chineese. That's \_Mister Washburn\_, sure as God made little green apples!"

Bud Farrell gets up, walks to the front of the main house, calls, "Hey, Mr. Parker! Mr. Washburn is riding up here!"

\*

Washburn and Parker are sitting together at a small wooden table over steaming mugs of coffee in Natchez Parker's sitting room. Parker is a huge mustachioed man sitting in a straight-back wooden chair, an Indian blanket over his withered legs. He is paralyzed from the waist down because of an old bullet crease in the spine.

"Well, Washburn," says Parker, "I heard about you and Little Joe Potter, just like everyone else in the Territory. Ought to be one hell of a meeting. Wish I could see it."

I say, "I wouldn't mind seeing it myself."

"Where is it going to take place?"

"In hell, I guess."

Parker leans forward. "What does that mean?"

"It means that I'm not meeting Little Joe. I'm riding for Brimstone, and then straight on, away from Little Joe and the whole damned West."

Parker leans forward and vigorously rubs his shock of gray hair. His big face puckers together like he puckers together like he had bitten into a rotten apple.

"You're running?" he asks.

"That's it," Washburn says.

The old man grimaces, hawks, spits on the floor. He says, "I never thought to hear you of all people say a thing like that. I never thought to see you go against the values you've always lived by."

"Natchez, those were never my values. They came ready-made with the role. Now I'm through with the role, and I'm turning in the values too."

The old man chewed that over for a while. The he said, "What in hell is the matter with you? Got too much to live for all of a sudden? Or just gone yellow?"

"Call it what you like," I tell him. "I came by to tell you. I owe you that."

"Well, wasn't that nice of you?" says Parker. "You owed me something and it was on your way anyhow, so you figured the least you could do was come by and tell me you was running away from a jumped-up baby gunslinger with one fight under his belt."

"Get off my back."

"Tom," he says, "listen to me."

I look up. Parker is the only man in the Territory who ever calls me by my first name. He doesn't do it often.

"Now look," he says, "I am not one for fancy speeches. But you simply can't run away like this, Tom. Not on account of anything but yourself. You've got to live with yourself, no matter where you go."

"I'll manage that just fine," I tell him.

Parker shakes his head. "Damn it all, what do you think this think is all about? They let us dress up in fancy clothes and strut our stuff like we owned the whole damned world. They pay us plenty just to be men. Not just when it's easy, like at the beginning. We gotta stay men right straight through to the end, no matter what the end is. We don't just act these parts, Tom; we live them, we stake our lives on them, we are these parts. Christ, anybody can dress up in a cowboy outfit and swagger down Main Street. But not everyone can wear a gun and use it."

I say, "That's a beautiful speech, Parker, and you're such a pro that you've blown this scene. Get back in character and let's get on with it."

"Goddamn you," Parker says, "I don't give a damn for the scene or The Movie or any of it. I'm talking to you straight now, Tom Washburn. We've been closer than kin ever since you came into the Territory, a frightened tanglefoot kid who mad a place for himself on sheer guts. I'm not going to let you run away



now."

"I'm finishing this coffee," I tell him, "and riding on."

Natchez suddenly twists in his chair, grabs a handful of my shirt and pulls my face close to his. In his other hand I see a knife.

"Get out your knife, Tom. I'd rather kill you myself than let you ride away a coward."

Parker's face is close to mine, glaring at me, the old man's breath sour in my face. I brace my left foot on the floor, plant my right foot on the edge of Parker's chair and push hard. Parker's chair topples over and I see the look of shock on the old man's face as he falls to the floor. I draw my gun and take aim between his eyes.

"Christ, Tom," he says.

I thumb back the hammer. "You stupid old bastard," I say, "what do you think this is, some kind of game? You've gotten sorta heavy-handed and long-winded ever since that bullet creased your spine. You think there are special rules, and you know all about them. But there aren't any rules. You don't tell me what to do and I don't tell you. You're a crippled old man, but if you pick a fight with me I'm going to fight my own way, not yours, and I'm going to put you down any way I can."

I take up slack on the trigger. Old Parker's eyes bulge, his mouth starts trembling, he tries to control himself but he can't. He screams, not loud, but high-pitched, like a frightened girl.

I thumb down the hammer and put my gun away. "Okay," I say, "maybe now you can wake up and remember how it really is."

I lift him up and slide the chair under him. "Sorry it's gotta be this way, Natchez. I'm going now."

I stop at the door and look back. Parker is grinning at me. "Glad to see you're feeling better, Tom. I should have remembered that you got nerves. All of the good ones have nerves. But you'll be fine at the showdown."

"You old idiot, there's not going to be any showdown. I told you before, I'm riding out of here."

"Good luck, Tom. Give 'em hell!"

"Idiot!" I get out of there.

\*

A horseman crosses a high ridge and lets his horse pick its own way down the other side to the desert floor. There is a soft hiss of wind, glitter of mica, sand gathered into long wavering windows.

The noon sun beats down as the rider passes through gigantic rock formations carved by the wind into fantastic shapes. At evening, the rider dismounts and inspects his horse's hooves. He whistles tunelessly to himself, pours water from his canteen into his derby, waters his horse, puts the hat back on, and drinks sparingly himself. He hobbles the horse and makes camp on the desert. He sits by a little fire and watches the swollen desert sun go down. He is a tall, lean man, with a battered derby on his head and a horn-handled .44 strapped down on his right leg.

\*

Brimstone: a desolate mining settlement on the northeastern edge of the Territory. Rising above the town is the natural rock formation of Devil's Highway -- a broad, gently sloping rock bridge. The far end, out of sight from here, is firmly anchored just outside The Set, two hundred yards and 150 years away.

I come in on a limping horse. There aren't many people around, but I do spot one familiar face; it's that damned freckle-faced kid. He must have ridden pretty hard to get here before me. I pass him by without a word.

I sit on my horse for a while and admire the Devil's Highway. Five minutes' ride to the other side and I'll be out of the West for good, finished with it all, the good times and the bad, the fear and the laughter, the long slow days and the dull, dangerous nights. In a few hours I'll be with Consuela, I'll be reading the newspapers and watching tv...

Now I'm going to put down one last shot of redeye and then sashay out of here.

I pull up my horse at the saloon. A few more people are on the street now, watching me. I walk into the saloon.

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There is one man drinking alone at the bar. He's short and stocky, wearing a black leather vest and a Mountain Man's buffalo hat. He turns; he carries one unholstered gun high in his belt. I never saw him before, but I know who he is.

"Howdy, Mr. Washburn," he says.

"Howdy, Little Joe," I reply.

He holds the bottle out questioningly. I nod. He reaches behind the bar, finds another shot glass, fills it up for me. We sip quietly.

After a while I say, "Hope you didn't have too much trouble finding me."

"Not too much," Little Joe says. He's older than I had expected, nearly thirty. He's got a tough, craggy face, high cheekbones, a black handlebar mustache. He sips his drink, then says to me, very gently, "Mr. Washburn, I heard a rumor which I don't believe. The rumor said that you was leaving this Territory in sort of a hurry."

"That's right," I tell him.

"The rumor also said that you wasn't planning to stay around long enough to give me the time of day."

"That's also true, Little Joe. I didn't figure I had no time for you. But here you are anyhow."

"Indeed I am," Little Joe says. He rubs down the ends of his mustache and pulls hard at his nose.

"Frankly, Mr. Washburn, I simply can't believe that you're not planning to waltz around with me. I know all about you, Mr. Washburn, and I just can't believe that."

"Better believe it, Joe," I say to him. "I'm finishing this drink, and then I'm walking out this door and getting on my horse and riding over Devil's Highway."

Little Joe tugs at his nose again, frowns, pushes back his hat. "I never thought to hear this."

"I never thought to say it."

"You're really not going to face me?"

I finish my drink and set the shot glass down on the bar. "Take care of yourself, Little Joe." I start toward the door.

Little Joe says, "There's just one last thing."

I turn. Little Joe is standing away from the bar, both hands visible. "I can't force you into a showdown, Mr. Washburn. But I did make a little bet concerning that derby of yours."

"So I heard."

"And so, although it pains me more than you can know, I'll have to have it."

I stand, facing him, not answering.

Little Joe says, "Look, Washburn, no sense you just standing there glaring at me. Give the hat or make your play."

I take off the derby. I smooth it on my sleeve, then sail it to him. He picks it up, never taking his eyes from me. He says, "Well, I'll be."

"Take care of yourself, Little Joe." I walk out of the saloon.

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A crowd has assembled opposite the saloon. They wait and watch, talking in hushed voices. The saloon doors swing and a tall thin bareheaded man comes through. He is beginning to bald. He carries a .44 strapped down on his right leg, and he looks like he knows how to use it. But the fact is, he hasn't used it.

Under the watchful eyes of the crowd, Washburn unties his horse, mounts it, and sets it at a walk toward the bridge.

The saloon doors swing again. A short, stocky hard-faced man comes through, holding a battered derby. He watches the horseman ride away.

Washburn spurs his horse, which hesitates a moment, then mounts the stone bridge. It takes constant urging to keep the horse going, picking its way across the sloping pebble-clad surface, to the center. Here Washburn stops the horse, or allows it to stop. He sits at the highest point of the bridge's curve, astride the joint between two worlds, but looking at neither. He reaches up to tug at his hat's brim and is mildly surprised to find himself bareheaded. He scratches his forehead lazily, a man with all the time in the world. Then he turns his horse around and starts back down the bridge to Brimstone.

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The crowd watches as Washburn rides toward them. They are motionless, silent. Then, realizing what is about to happen, they scatter for the shelter of wagons, duck down behind water troughs, crouch behind grain sacks.

Only Little Joe Potter remains in the dusty street. HE watches while Washburn dismounts, shoos his horse out of the line of fire, walks slowly toward him.

Little Joe calls out, "Hey, Washburn! Come back for your hat?"

Washburn grins, shakes his head. "No, Little Joe, I came back because it's our dance."

They both laugh, it is all some ridiculous joke. Then, suddenly, both men draw. The heavy bark of their .44s crashes through the town. Smoke and dust obscure the fighters.

The smoke blows away. Both men are still standing. Little Joe's gin is pointed down. He twirls it, and watches it fall from his hand. Then he collapses.

Washburn holsters his gun, walks over to Little Joe, kneels, lifts his head out of the dirt.

"Goddamn," Little Joe says, "that was one short dance, huh, Washburn?"

"Too short," Washburn says. "Joe, I'm sorry..."

But Little Joe doesn't hear this. His eyes have gone blank and unfocused, his body is limp. Blood trickles out of two holes in his chest, blood stains the dust from the large exit wounds in his back.

Washburn gets to his feet, finds his derby in the dust, wipes it off, puts it on. HE walks over to his horse. People are coming out now, there is a buzz of conversation. Washburn sets one foot in the stirrup, begins to mount.

At that moment, a wavering, high-pitched voice calls out, "Okay, Washburn, draw!"

Washburn's face contorts as he whirls, trying to get his gun hand clear, trying to spin out of the line of fire. Even in that cramped and impossible posture he manages to get the .44 drawn, spins to see the freckled-faced kid ten yards away with gun drawn and aimed, firing.

Sunlight explodes in Washburn's head, he hears his horse scream, he is falling through the dusty floors of the world, falling as the bullets thud into him with a sound like a butcher's cleaver swung flat against a side of beef. The world is coming apart, the picture-making machine is smashed, his eyes are a broken lens that reflects the sudden destruction of the world. A red light flashes a final warning and the world goes to black.

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The viewer, audience and actor, looks for a while at the darkened screen, stirs in his easy chair, rubs his chin. He seems to be in some distress. Then, at last, he belches, and reaches out and turns off the screen.