

JOSHUA DEDORA

## Storekeeper (A Romance)

HE STANDS BEHIND THE COUNTER, his girth pulling down throughout the day stressing his feet. He put a stool behind the counter to sit on, but this just hurt his back so he continues to stand. It is a simple building with shelves attached to the interior of the exterior walls and lower shelves run in aisles down the middle of the square building, carrying everything a settler would need; a thin wall breaks the squareness of the interior to create a storage area and living quarters, with the bed he reads and sleeps on at night. Only one book has ever caught his interest, his dog-eared Bible with the cheap coarse pages worn smooth from years of following the good word with his finger; he needs to read it. He cannot remember and quote passages with the priest, but he does enjoy to talk with him about it.

The false front of his store draws in the customers from miles around; every summer he hires a local boy to paint it white, protecting the wood while he replaces the boards on the roof when they rot away and the rain begins to drip on his bed and merchandise. He couldn't find a wife to move out with him from the east and this western land is barren of the single female sex, and so he has no one to keep a good kitchen, forcing him to live off of the canned preserves that he peddles to his customers and to keep his sleep with the whisky he promised the priest he wouldn't sell.

He stands behind the counter when a banker and his family comes in to buy a year's provisions and seed, and when he returns two months later to sell back the seriously depleted supplies in order to buy tickets for the train back east. He stands there as already starving families come in and buy the cheapest seed and a few cans of food; he stands there when they come back to trade family heirlooms of little value, which he takes, knowing that he won't be able to get money for them.

He lives here on the edge; he is an isolated outpost, as no other man dares to build in such a place. A man came in once with rotten clothes and absent eyes—he held a knife to the storekeeper's throat, asking for money

and food. He didn't want to shoot him but he had to or else everyone in the country would be trying to rob him. The NWMP arrived weeks later following his letter; they looked at the grave the storekeeper had dug and said they wouldn't press charges.

Then she arrives in a flurry of dust and curls. The beast she drives is long, lean, and creamy white with two staring eyes carried forward on large spoked wheels; it comes to a growling rest after emerging from the broken prairie trails. She arrives carried forward on a mechanical wind created in the giant eastern machines propelling her this far and then loosing their reach so she comes rolling to a halt outside the store.

Jazzy horns and the sporadic rhythm of drums follow every movement of blond curls and sharp cheeks. The dust bred of time and earth that was at permanent rest within the store rises up when she enters; it is sucked into a tremendous tornado that whirls the dust around the store so that it shines the surfaces of cans and sands the wood smooth only to rush out the door blowing her dress and curls up to reveal a silky thigh and blushing cheek, but it leaves her clean in its wake. On seeing her he wanted to run, to exercise, to become strong. He wanted to work off the age he had gathered standing behind the counter trying to help the destitute and lost. He wanted to be rid of the aching pain in his flattened feet and to be able to dance to that jazzy music that follows her: to dance with her.

Well, that was quite the windstorm, she says, touching her already perfect curls. She moves about the store inquisitively looking at the preserves on the shelves, at the farming implements, and at the books on husbandry that the banker brought from the east and the storekeeper bought for next to nothing. I don't suppose I should need these, she says laughing, touching the dead books, stirring the pages within, as her voice dances across their edges. The storekeeper simply stands behind his counter, looking on quietly, unsure what to do; he is not a rude man but is now in a strange land, wary to move and scare off such a strange animal. Well stranger, my name is Molly Fetcherson, and, well, I'm looking for a job, she says, coming forward with an outstretched slender bleach-white arm. I don't suppose you're looking for help. It isn't like you're busy, I guess. He wants to hire her with all his dusty soul—he searches his mind for a way to say this, to reach out to this breath of curls and life, to bring her into his hell of dispensing the means to survive in this unforgiving land. These are his thoughts and desires when she casually touches a shelf—it was only a light touch, she barely brushed it, but it falls toppling over into another shelf and then another, until every shelf is crashing into the side ones attached to the sturdy walls. Without a hesitant twitch they flee before being crushed. The building falls down with a sigh and a you're welcome emanating from the fallen boards. I guess

you'll have to help me rebuild, is all he says. She pulls back her curls into a ponytail using a black elastic she keeps on her wrist, then grabs the first board she comes to and starts a pile on the ground.

He does not help her that first day but instead breaks ground behind the fallen structure; he starts a garden—not so much for food but the work. He does not know much about exercise, but he doesn't want to be obvious because he doesn't want her to know that he is exercising, and so he starts the garden. She focuses on the store, pulling boards apart and stacking them neatly while putting the nails in separate piles. Her lean figure deceived him as she works long past the sunset while he was exhausted by supper. He rests on his retrieved blanket under a well-made structure constructed by her using the boards of the store and nailing them together at a peak. She sleeps in the cream-coloured car with the windows open to let a fresh breeze in, but it carries her scent of sweet perfume and sweat to his aroused nose.

In the early morning his whisky headache pounds as she works a nail squeakingly out of a board; the wood has shrunk, drying on windy prairies, tightening on the nails. Soon he is in the garden planting seeds and lugging water from the creek that runs at the bottom of a coulee behind the store. The garden watered, he helps her stack the wood of the old store while finding preserves along the way that he places off to the side under a hastily built shelter meant to keep the sun off of them. He watches her work up a healthy flush that resides in her cheeks; the sun tans her skin when he thought she would burn under its rays. He watches the beads of sweat form on the exposed skin high on her back until they run down to the dress tied tight around her strong form and the sweat makes it cling to a body exposed more and more by the sweaty day.

Soon all the boards are collected at the sides of the former structure; two hammers are found and all the nails are straight and ready. Again his whisky headache is pierced by her early-morning labours. He goes to the garden and hauls the needed garden water from the creek. His body begins to show signs of his labour—it is still fat but he is able to haul the water without much effort and his arms begin to show the hint of muscle beneath the hanging flab.

They work silently together, standing posts and pounding planks, with each movement in tune with the other. He begins to follow the jazz in her step: to follow the improvisation that makes it so great and beautiful. Each board brings them closer together, but each board in his mind brings them closer to inevitable separation. He thinks at night in his alcoholic stupor that he should rip the building down—as she brought it down in one fleeting touch of her finger, in one movement of her fine figure—to

the ground, building during the day and unravelling at night, but he can't bring himself to rend apart what those delicate hands had constructed in this inhospitable place.

His garden had prospered under his caring and watchful gaze; it had grown taller than him and was plump, showing the fruits of hard labour. I should have to help you harvest that perfect garden when autumn comes, she says one day, hauling a pile of ten boards up to the roof of the store. His fat had all but melted away by now and he works without a shirt in the sweltering August heat; his whisky-induced sleeps have been less frequent and common, and he feels a sense of pride as he lets the verbally different immigrants pick some of his vegetables for their hard winter.

The summer melts away in a rainless dusty blur. The store is almost built with only a day's worth of labour left. By now he rises at the same time as her and gets the water from the stream in one trip, being able to carry ten, no twenty, full buckets strung across his muscled shoulders when before he could only carry one with effort. The store is finished with the shelves stood and stocked as they were before, and she is painting the front white like it was before. Night falls; the moon rises as a large orange fire on the horizon; he goes to go to bed in the tiny peaked shelter when she touches his hand and leads him inside. The newly built room is full of the wildest flowers coloured growling gold and urgent red as they die in an old can on the windowsill; the bed is made with the covers pulled tightly over the pillows. She pulls a string somewhere on her body, releasing the teasing layer of worn cotton to the floor, which leaves the strong naked form before him tanned and firm from the summer's work. He takes off his clothes leaving piles of dust on the floor spilled from old crevices. She lays him down on the bed and rests upon his work-formed body. In the still sweltering heat of late summer they grind together, crushing what had formed during the summer into something more.

Before morning dawns they awake together, but neither rises except to embrace again before the day starts. Outside they see that summer is gone and the clouds of winter are moving in; the trees, formerly blossoming with the buds of spring, have dropped their leaves in an instant. Snow will come in a moment. They move through the garden with tanned hands pulling down peas and up carrots, placing them in baskets to carry into the root cellar dug deep to keep them cool but protect them from frost. It grows late as they work by the burnt-orange light of the last harvest moon. Both emerge from the cellar when the first flake falls.

They keep out the chilling air of the encroaching winter with a warm embrace and passionate movement. A cold air enters the glassless window where the sun should rise but all remains dark. The snow has fallen heavy

and deeply covers the land past the height of the store that is buried more than six feet under. They lie in bed warming each other and the store till the snow melts all around to a thin dusting on the ground.

Together they lie, and together they sell the goods; each night they embrace, melting more and more of the snow to let the settlers leave their homes and come to the store. Yet seasons are fleeting changeable things, letting the rightfully dominant autumn emerge one day for spirits to roam. Formerly on this day the storekeeper had locked up, tightly boarding the windows to keep out the ghosts while sitting in a corner with a bottle, trying to drum out their horrible wails and efforts to enter his home as he clutched his Bible, closely reading passage after passage, but he could never remember the right ones the priest told him to read in times of walking spirits. But he heedlessly read on, reading Job and Jesus as the same, cursing on crucifixion, blasphemously likening himself to the suffering Job, seeing himself as Jesus. He held the Bible up to the walls and shouted out to the pounding demons, off you damn vile spirits, the Lord is my shepherd, crying out alcohol tears that burned his eyes he would fall against the wall; what was it that put him against the spirits: what in his lonesome reckoning was he fighting against? The two of them went out this night—the snow is entirely melted and they walk on the dead grass. They do not go far out into the wilds but rest on the edge of the coulee with her curls glowing in the wind and him with a firm face unsure of this new place she was taking him. They watch as the witches fly over on brooms like horses; the demons break the earth and come forth freely once in a year. I love you, as I love you, is the music of their embrace, she no longer carries the jazzy music of her arrival but something simpler with a long melody that hangs on the air like her presence hangs on him. The spirits move to their music, never touching them.

In the winter there is rest and the continued embrace in bed that keeps the path clear to the store. They talk while painting the inside of the store to make it more homey, while two small stoves warm the room and emanate the rustic smell of burnt wood. A girl comes to the store in winter, the type of girl the storekeeper had seen before, nervous and twitchy, she comes in looking as if to ask for something, but instead leaves without fulfilling the mother's list. This time Molly is there. The storekeeper looks on as Molly takes the girl into the back—time passes as the storekeeper makes an effort to go over the books. The girl comes out of the back wrapped up in her coat to leave into a blizzard. Molly comes out and wraps her lean strong arms around him, crying big tears for a moment then goes back to painting the shelves.

Spring comes with its sprouting grass and newborns. The garden seeds are planted early and he begins to build a machine to bring water up to the store through piping and pumps. His mind grows and their conversation blossoms with the world; she gives no intentions of leaving. Together they carve out a life amongst this isolated store, providing as much as they can for the failing farms. Then the priest stops for the first time since Molly has arrived—he looks worn and beat. The priest sees Molly working in the spring heat, washing clothes, stripped down to unprotected skin. He pulls the storekeeper aside and starts condemning his actions as clouds of damnation form around his words indicating their righteousness. He quotes biblical passage after biblical passage bringing the wrath of over a thousand years of theology down on the poor storekeeper's head. She comes up with her pioneer-hardened body, modesty gone with the western wind, we're in the land God gave to Cain, so your Bible holds no sway, she firmly states while doing a dance into the blowing wind taking her up into the air and down into the creek behind. The storekeeper stands up bull-chested and hard; the priest backs away and turns, having to bend over to walk against the hard western wind, holding close his collar that keeps himself and his modesty if not upright, at least at an angle.

The summer comes and the garden grows higher than before, twice the height of the storekeeper, and he begins digging another root cellar deep into the ground to protect it from the coming frost. Their little shop has cut a piece of beautiful life out of this wilderness, breaking through the wildness to a world that Molly and the storekeeper can both live in. The sun travels across the summer sky emerging early and high upon the eastern horizon until it moves up to its noontime peak. Molly and the storekeeper grow tall and strong from the sun and soon they catch up to the garden; Molly has to re-cut the door of the store to accommodate their new height. They sleep under the stars as their room no longer holds them, and this saves it from collapsing from the throes of their love that would have brought it down. The sun sets every night as is expected. People come from miles around to ask them for help as word of the couple's size and strength travels far. They break many fields for drunken farmers broken down by the land; they build many houses out of that broken land.

And then it is fall again. The harvest is immense as much is placed aside to share and the rest is put into the new root cellar that smells of the moist earth carved away to perfectly straight walls and a flat floor that no dust stirs from. The wind changes and comes from the East with the rising sun. At the peak of the day the sun is blotted out from the sky—a solar eclipse. Yet, it gets closer and closer as the instrument of the blockage descends from its lofty heights to the ground beside the car that has not moved since Molly

first arrived. A giant machine stretching over a hundred yards longly shaped like the zucchini in the storekeeper's garden; it blinds in the sunlight as its silvery metallic surface focuses the rays that ignite half of the unharvested garden that quickly burns down to a shrivelled nothing. The base is a long square structure that could hold twenty of the dwarfed stores; giant propellers whirled in the rear stirring up the root-free soil. The storekeeper should have moved, he knew that after, he should have grabbed this pompously bloated machine by the tail and hurled it out into the sand dunes where it could only, with its silvery reflecting surface, concentrate the sun into the sand forming a land of glass. He should have taken his sharpened scythe and sliced down the side, collapsing the hideous thing, but he did nothing. He watches as a corrugated metal door is cranked open while a ramp is laid down from the inside for the handsome man with sharp hair, cool face, and well-cut suit who walks down. The man goes straight to Molly, not even casting a glance in the storekeeper's direction, and beckons her to lean over so he can talk to her and she does so without hesitating; he whispers no more than three words, maybe less, and she shrinks a little. She goes over to the storekeeper and reaches up on her toes to kiss him softly on the lips and then walks behind the man onto the bloated airship but she does not have to crouch because she is shrunk already. The airship wobbles up into the air while lowering a magnet that snatches up the car that it hurls off in the same direction as the ship.

He goes back behind the counter and leans on the stool or stands upright, but both irritate his back and feet. Soon nobody asks him to help with their fields as he lost all the size he had gained. He is shrivelling up all over. Every year that passes, he gets smaller and weaker; every year fewer people come into the store and he shrinks more when there is nothing to do and nobody to help. People did not stop coming because of him, but because where he was and what he had finally caught up with him. He withers away and the store follows suit. The paint chips away till it no longer hides the rottenness within; the roof begins to leak and he can no longer patch it; the shelves begin to warp under the weight of products that he can no longer sell; the two front windows are broken one night by hurled stones and so he takes some boards and nails them over where the light comes into the store; soon the bell over the door ceases to ring and the door can no longer be opened, being swollen with years of weather. Soon the boards begin to fall off the walls and roof; more rain, more snow, and more wind enters the store to speed along its demise; for a moment the storekeeper can be seen from the speeding highway as he stands behind the counter, a living skeleton. The shell of the building is left, and from the false front a person would say, I bet that was a store, I wonder what happened, and then

the front falls down to reveal nothing as the preserves have disappeared along with the storekeeper. Molly Fetcherson was at the store once, she built it up from the rubble, and then she left and the building is gone. The storekeeper was in love once, but what is left for people to remember that?