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A DESERT INCIDENT

By WILL WORTHINGTON

Perhaps we wrong them when we call them dust-devils. Perhaps we are the devils. . . .

AFTER Juanita had succeeded in getting the recalcitrant old rams across the highway, with a few nudges under their fat tails with the toe of her boot and much shouting of "hee-yah," the mindless, gentle ewes trotted after them almost without further persuasion, and the sound of all their hooves on the flat concrete made the girl laugh in spite of her weariness. Almost anything made her laugh these days.

"How fortunate I am!" she said to herself aloud, and with her long, brown hands she felt of her own girth. Juanita was in her eighth month and not all of her fine skirts could conceal the fact any longer—not the black woolen, not the calico certainly, not even the fine purple velvet one the

Husband had brought from Yuma one good year when the sheep had fetched a more than usually generous price. Since then sheep had fallen off, and this unhappy fact was reflected now in the face of the Husband—even seemed to darken the sky above their hogan. But there were good years and bad; one had to live with it.

"Only, Mother of God," the girl beseeched the shimmering air, ". . . please, not another daughter! It is bad enough with the Husband brooding there in the house like a pile of manure, what with the too little money for last year's sheep. He needs a son to make him smile again; if his frown becomes deeper, his face will surely split open like a chestnut!"

Then and there, as Juanita stood on the edge of the concrete, the unborn lashed out petulantly with one tiny limb—not a painful, rib-cracking jab but merely a fitful nudge—and Juanita knew then and there that she bore a son.

“Ah-yeeee!” she cried, and she threw back her head and laughed. After all, there were no men and no old women within hearing to scold her for laughing, for singing, for any womanly foolishness she might wish to share with the unseen spirits of the desert. “Oh how fortunate! Ah-yeee!”

Na-ah-shee busied himself tormenting a Joshua tree. He tore up great gulps of sand from around its roots and hurled them among its anguished branches with all his strength.

“It is my ill fortune to be sibling to a fool!” he whined. “It is not enough that you allow yourself to be smitten by a stonefooted mortal creature—such that you moon and sob and otherwise behave like an error of nature. This is not bad enough. No. Now you come to me with this tale of impending calamity—of a dragon bearing down upon your stonefooted beloved one!”

But Yoon-ah-shee stood al-

most firm, swaying slightly on his feet, refusing to partake of the coarse sand that lay about them in that place.

“But she is beautiful, Na-ah-shee. They are not so unlike ourselves. I believe as our great-parent said that they are merely crossbreeds—that long, long ago there was a mating between the towering mesas and one of our own kind, and the stonefooted mortals are the lost, unwanted children . . .”

“You may believe this as you wish,” said Na-ah-shee, moving back from the sand-choked bush to survey his work, “. . . but why should the toils and woes of these creatures—dismal though they are, to be sure—concern you or me?”

“She is about to divide—to become two,” wailed Yoon-ah-shee urgently, “. . . and at this very moment she is in grave peril. An evil thing bears down upon her—a dragon . . .” Yoon-ah-shee tried to move closer to his brother, but Na-ah-shee side-stepped the smaller one.

“And before this calamity occurs,” snarled Na-ah-shee, “you and I will have merged with another, or we shall have divided into many and our children and our children’s children shall have merged or

divided, as the case may be. In any event, there will be no memory of you or of me—except the songs we sing—and the sands will have covered our handiwork.

“Tall like a mesa she stands,” continued Yoon-ah-shee, ignoring the voice of his brother. “. . . and her hair so black that even the dust I raised as I passed did not hide its luster altogether . . .”

There was silence for a moment, then Na-ah-shee waltzed over the sand a little ways and leaned closer to his brother.

“Since when do we embroil ourselves in the squalid affairs of stonefeet? They are bound by the laws of a lower order of existence than ours. Their time is not as our time. Our moments of selfhood are brief compared to theirs, I know, but we never die; only our names die while we live on, merged with another or divided into many. When a mortal finally dies there is nothing left but a terrible stench in the earth.”

“All the more reason to pity them,” insisted Yoon-ah-shee. “. . . and besides, do not forget that they are kin to us in ways which are more important than the ways in which we differ.”

“How so?” growled Na-ah-shee.

“If you could see the dancing feet beneath the skirts of the black-haired one-who-is-about-to-divide, you would not need to ask this question,” said Yoon-ah-shee sharply. “And how does it happen that they speak our language sometimes? They laugh as we do; they sing our songs; they intone our very words in their rituals.”

There was silence for another moment before Yoon-ah-shee continued.

“And not a moment ago she spoke to me.”

“This is not surprising,” said Na-ah-shee in a somewhat pedantic whine, “. . . considering that the stonefeet learned the art of speech and song from us. But words are one thing and meaning another. How can you suppose that the stonefoot, appealing as she is to your childish nature, had words for *you*?”

“I know because I can feel,” insisted Yoon-ah-shee. “There are, as you know, many truths which are so great that no words can embrace them completely and, therefore, one word is as good as another.”

“Heaven spare me the toils of your thinking,” said Na-ah-shee, but there was conciliation in his tone. “But couldn’t

you find some cause less demanding to occupy your fleeting moments of selfhood?" he asked, by way of a final, half-hearted effort to dissuade Yoon-ah-shee from his cause. "Couldn't you find a Joshua tree to bedevil? Couldn't you find yourself a nest of scorpions and amuse yourself by flicking their tails? Or how about driving sand into the nostrils of a coyote; there is a pastime to delight the heart!"

Yoon-ah-shee wailed in real anguish, and as he did so he gobbled up the harsh sand about his feet and he towered and swelled above his brother.

"What matters is that the black-haired mortal carries something of our spirit in her bosom, and something of us dwells in the body of her unborn child. But when she is destroyed by the dragon—as she will surely be if we do not bestir ourselves—she cannot merge or divide as we might do; she will simply die. There will be no splitlings to carry on her laughter or her singing . . ."

Yoon-ah-shee became a mere sound of keening. His form wavered and shrank and the sand he had sucked up from the ground a moment before settled about him in a

pathetic circle on the ground. Na-ah-shee was moved at last and spoke:

"Stay, little brother! Your logic shrivels my spirit, but I cannot abide the sound of your weeping. Besides, it has been a long time since I engaged in a worthwhile battle. It does not matter what we do, after all. It is our law that one thing is as good as another; our will is our will, and there is no 'because' or 'therefore.' So if this stonefoot means so much to you—if it will make you strong and happy again—what am I to deny you? Come little brother!"

And so Na-ah-shee and Yoon-ah-shee merged and became Neen-kee-ah—the Angry One—and Neen-kee-ah swept across the desert to summon his kinsmen:

"Come Kah-ah-nee, little dancing one, and all your brothers! Come Oon-ah-hee, frivolous tormenter of gophers! We've battle to do with a dragon!"

And Noon-ai-kee, who had been teasing a pillar of red stone by imitating its shape and pirouetting and posturing thus before it, turned and joined them;

And Kee-noo-ee, who had been busy persecuting a tarantula by driving sand into

a hole she had been digging for an hour;

And Ee-nah-ah, who had just been dodging in and out of the rocks and mesas looking for mischief anyway . . .

They came spinning and leaning and swaying, and as they came they drew more and more of the earth into themselves for strength.

They all became Neen-kee-ah, the angry one, and Neen-kee-ah became both mightier and angrier.

The bright red, low-slung car with the shop-built motor and the Italian name came roaring up out of the road-dip in second, shot past a sign saying "We Love Our Children" in third, and after having attained an anguished seventy-eight miles-per-hour in that range, was tooled into fourth. And then she began to reach for the horizon—flat out.

"Make with the soup, Daddy-o. Let's hear them pipes!"
"Gimme a drink first."

The bottle was upended in a blind moment and the last of the vodka drained off.

"Better watch the sauce, Daddy-o. Could be cops along here."

"Keep cool, Cat. This stuff don't give ya a breath. All the ads say so."

Past a string of roadsigns the little car streaked; past other signs which specified a speed limit for those who cared to observe; past a herd of sheep, who were not impressed but who were being tended by a long-legged man who was . . .

"Dam' fools!"

. . . past the austere gas station of Joe Peasely, who had come out to this country twenty years ago for his lungs . . .

"Stupid kids!"

Ahead of the racing car loomed the diesel semi of Rollo Smith—"Smitty"—who was, at that moment, composing verse one hundred and thirty-seven of "Roll Me Over in the Clover."

The driver of the racing car was not altogether incompetent. Drunk, perhaps—a little irresponsible even, but such wisdom as he had was dedicated to the handling of cars. Not everyone can negotiate even a minor change of direction at ninety miles an hour without leaving a little of themselves scattered from hell to breakfast. Zooo-um!

"Cheeesse!" said Smitty in the cab of the semi. He forgot how that last verse had gone.

The little car swayed only slightly. It could take it. Individual suspension. Balance. Real fine balance. It was built

for the tortuous Alpine roads—the challenging European courses. This highway stuff was a mere bagatelle. The salesman had said so. The advertisements said so too, and they also said that this was a car for the Sporting Gentleman—the man who appreciates the finest. Besides, it took more than a squeak of tires and a moment of queasy instability to faze Booboo and Wilma, the occupants of the little car. By assiduous and almost systematic effort—a discipline almost—they had managed to wear out so many novel sensations in their short lives that they could now contrive to be bored in almost any imaginable situation.

“Break out that bulb of tequila, Cat.”

“Watch that lunkhead ahead of us, Daddy-o. Seems like every square in the country is out to clog the road today.”

Up ahead moved the sedate, medium-priced sedan of W. D. Smedley of Muncey, Indiana. Mr. Smedley was, after about five years of careful planning, taking his family out to see the West Coast. Mrs. Smedley, straight-backed and tight-lipped, sat tensely in the front seat next to Mr. Smedley. Neither her expression nor her bodily position had

changed in the slightest degree since having left Muncey. In the back seat two, or perhaps three small children in ropy sunsuits carried on an interminable laocoön struggle. One of them made a querulous sound.

“Well now gah-dammit, you should of thought of that at the last gas station,” he said, and he kept on driving, one eye on the speedometer, the other on the road. A man with a family develops certain careful habits.

“Willard! Cussing at children!” rebuked Mrs. Smedley.

The racing car shot past.

“Good Gawd!” said Smedley, genuinely startled.

“Land sakes! You’d think there’d be a *law*!” said Mrs. Smedley.

“There is,” said her husband.

In the racing car Booboo and Wilma were convulsed with glee. “D’ja see the look on that character’s face when we went by? Like they was walkin’ . . .”

Booboo could not notice at that moment that Wilma was shouting at him, not over the whine of the shop-built motor. He talked to hear himself.

“Hey! Lookout! That Indian woman in the road! Hey!”

There was a dull thud—not

a sharp sound, not a sound of tearing or of crushing as you might expect. Just a single, final, deadly thud.

"Ya hit her Ya hit her!" shrieked the girl, but Booboo knew this all too well. He made no answer but to stamp even harder on the accelerator. The shop built motor whined an octave higher, and perhaps it is just as well for Booboo and Wilma that it did, for there are worse sounds.

From the shadow of the great mesa off to their left, for example, where a huge mass of suspended dust and sand hovered and trembled, there was an outraged moan that shook the earth.

Smedley was the first to stop. He swerved to the shoulder and pulled up his emergency with a sound like a belch between clenched teeth.

"Keep the kids here," he said. Then he set off at a heavy run which soon slowed to a reluctant walk.

Smitty saw trouble ahead with his far-seeing trucker's eyes, and began reclutching down more than three hundred yards back. He saw Mrs. Smedley, grim-faced and sitting just as tautly as ever in their car with the two—or was it three kids standing up and clamoring in the seat be-

hind her. He was running towards the scene with a fire extinguisher and a first-aid kit in his arms almost the moment his big semi ground to a stop. He was a road-wise veteran.

Mr. Smedley kept saying "Oh Lordy, Lordy!" over and over, and his voice was the voice of a man who sees something he knew was inevitable but wishes he could have stopped anyway. Smitty didn't have to examine the body of the Indian woman. She must have been knocked fully sixty feet. The racing car looked as though it had started disintegrating slowly and had kept on for about a hundred yards. There was a shapeless heap of metallic rubble at the end of the furrow of junk, and small flames played around it. There were smears of dark redness scattered everywhere like the spots on an old-fashioned quilt.

The trucker offered a cigarette to Smedley, who took it and said "Thanks, neighbor."

"See it happen?" Smitty asked very quietly.

Smedley's voice shook, but he kept his tone even with an effort.

"Everything happened at once. First the sports car came by me. Like to blew our windows in. Then they hit the

squaw over there and she must never a known . . .”

“Best that way, I guess. That is, if ya have to die at all . . .”

It sounded sort of silly, but at such a time everything did.

“Yes, that’s the truth,” observed Smedley. “That’s the Lord’s truth, I guess. Anyway, I seen this here now twister—this williwaw—biggest damn thing I ever saw, and coming fast from behind that big mushroom-shaped rock over there.”

“Dust-devils, they call ’em out here,” said Smitty.

“Oh, Yeah. Well I seen it move across the road spang in front of the sports car, and—well you know. Solid as a barn it must a been. Car went to pieces like a box a matches thrown into the wind.”

The two men stood for a long time, not pondering what

to do—it was too clear that there was *nothing* to do, now or ever. The desert was so quiet and the air so completely clear that they could hear the tink-tink of Smitty’s engine-block cooling and the sound of each other’s breathing. And then, without knowing why exactly, Smedley turned this way and that and finally asked the trucker:

“Do you hear something?”

“What like?” asked Smitty, his eyes narrowing a little.

“Well now I just couldn’t say. I don’t know.” He felt sort of foolish, but he needn’t have.

“I’ve been driving this stretch for more years than I care to count,” said Smitty in what he hoped was an earthy, reassuring tone, “. . . and believe me, you always hear strange things out here. Always . . .”

THE END