

Dust and Bibles

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"Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this?"

2 Thess 2:5

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The interior of the red pickup he'd hotwired in Cactus Lake picked up an underlying odor like rotten cheese beneath its smell of vinyl and old hair grease. Despite the dry desert air, he was sweating. His damp palms stuck to the black plastic steering wheel and dark stains patterned the crotch of his light-colored jeans and the armpits of his matching jacket. Beneath the band of his cowboy hat, trickles of sweat prickled his brow.

The radio, which had been playing a mix of old country songs and some newer, turn-of-the-century honky tonk, was replaced with hushed static when the truck moved too far away from the tower in Cactus Lake to pick up anything good.

Outside, the sun reflected off everything but the highway -

the white desert sand and the pale rocks and the chrome parts of the truck. It threw everything into a bright and blinding haze, and he was thankful for the sunglasses he'd found tucked up in the truck's sun visor. On the black asphalt, the sun burned the road kill to cinders and it reminded him of dehydration - a nasty way to die. Your guts cooked and your blood evaporated into dust in agonizing slow-motion.

The severed head sat beside him on the passenger seat in a green and stained canvas rucksack. The taste of curdled milk sat on his palette and he'd decided a while back that was what death tasted like. He'd have killed for a cold beer but he'd have killed just for the fun of it too.

Beside the head was a file and an envelope stuffed with \$2,500 in old American dollars. That was only half the money; \$5,000 was a lot of cash for a delivery job. He couldn't even get that much to murder a man anymore. Raping somebody's cheating wife, yeah, sure, still turned a good dime. But outright murder was way out of style. It came cheap. What the head was actually for, he didn't much care. The morbid package on the seat, once dropped off, wouldn't be his business anymore. If the doctors back in Reno wanted it and were willing to pay, that was his only concern.

He fiddled with the radio's tuning knob in hopes of getting the station to come back clear again. When it was apparent that

wasn't going to happen, he turned it off altogether and righted himself. In his rear-view mirror, a truck appeared. It was a big rusty tanker trailer with its chasses sandblasted down to the under-finish, and it was gunning up the highway towards him at a pretty decent clip. Somebody else was looking for the head, maybe. Somebody with a bigger truck.

He turned the wheel hard to the right and took the pickup off-road. Beneath him, he felt the axle buck and the shocks moan as the truck's undercarriage grinded against the lip of the road where it met the ditch. A cloud of grit and sand blew through the vents, filling the truck interior, and the landscape vanished in a blot of yellow-white dust that flew up and clung to the windshield. He turned on the wipers and did his best to keep the truck straight as it rattled over the ditch and strained to make the far side without losing any of its parts. When he cleared the ditch, he parked the truck and shut off its engine.

The .357 was still safely taped to the underside of the driver's seat; he lay down parallel to the dashboard, prying it from its hiding place. He stayed down, but lifted his arm to cock the rear view mirror with his fingertip so he could watch the road in its reflection without having to put his head up.

The tanker's air brakes squealed as the truck slowed its approach and then hissed as it came to a stop near the pickup.

The driver knew as well as he did that nobody, not even Evel Knievel could jump the ditch in a rig that size.

He stayed tight against the vinyl seat and swatted at a fly trying to crawl inside the canvas bag. Eventually, the truck started up again and pulled away from him, continuing down the highway towards Reno.

"Smart fella."

Once the tanker was out of sight, he turned the truck's engine over. They'd meet up again, probably, farther down the road. Whoever was driving the tanker knew it too.

No need to get worked up about it. No hurry to meet one another. One of them would wind up dead sooner or later. Things like that happened all the time out in the desert - buzzards fighting over carcasses and such. It was nothing personal.

The truck turned over just fine, but the gearshift was shot. He fiddled with the stick and it met no resistance. It just rattled about in its slot like it was no longer connected to anything underneath.

"Well, don't that just suck a dog's dick."

He collected his gun, the rucksack, the file, and the money and then abandoned the truck to walk the highway shoulder. The head was going to smell real bad if he had to walk all the way to Reno, but hopefully, he'd be able to hitch a ride or steal another truck farther along.

He hadn't even gone ten feet along the shoulder when he heard the sound of a second vehicle motoring towards him. He turned and stuck his thumb out, and a station wagon with its paneled sides replaced by sheets of aluminum and tagged with graffiti, rolled up beside him. A fat middle-aged guy with a sun-burnt face grinned at him from behind the wheel.

"Where you headed, stranger?"

"Reno."

"I'm headed there too - take you all the way down the line for five bucks."

He grinned and thought about all those dollar bills stuffed inside the envelope.

"Sounds good to me. It's hotter than Saint Mary's pussy out here."

He moved around to the front of the car and opened the passenger-side door, clambering in. He threw the rucksack in the back seat and pulled a five dollar bill from his pocket, placing it on the dashboard.

"Cargo's a little bit ripe, sorry."

"Okay by me. Car doesn't have air conditioning. Whole thing smells like a sewer anyhow."

The driver was right. The interior of the wagon smelled like a slaughterhouse. Maybe the guy transported dead livestock or meat for a living. Maybe he killed people too. It didn't

matter much as long as he was good for a ride.

The man put the car into gear and moved down the highway. He fiddled with the car's radio.

"What'd you say back there to me on the side of the road? About the heat?"

"Can't say I remember."

The driver laughed.

"What's funny?"

"Nothing. You said something about Saint Mary's pussy - that was hilarious."

"Oh, yeah, it's hotter than her quim out there."

"I never heard that figure of speech before. You make that up?"

"Sort of. My daddy used to say all the good curses were in different languages and came from Europe. The real curses - you know, horrible stuff about the Saints involving sex and worse. He said whoever invented English was probably a pretty terrified type of pussy. I always try and get a little bit creative, for my dad."

"Well, never heard that one before. Funny stuff."

He sniffed at the rank air and finally had to ask the driver. "Say, what do you do for a living, if you don't mind me asking?"

The driver cocked a thumb towards the hatch of the station

wagon where piles of cardboard boxes sat.

"I travel around selling bibles. You?"

"Bibles?" He suddenly felt a bit off for speaking such strong and blasphemous language in front of his host. He didn't feel bad about it, but it would be a shame if he had to kill the driver just because the guy took offense and objection to his usage. "You a priest or something?"

"Nope. Just a salesman."

"Folks buy bibles, do they?" It was a suspicious claim that a man could make an honest living selling books so deep in the desert.

"You'd be surprised. Lots of people turning back towards the Lord in these troubled, troubled times. It's funny how quickly misfortune can break a fella - how fast things can go from right to wrong - and how quickly even the heaviest of skeptics can go from loving nobody to loving God overnight."

"Yeah? How much for a bible?"

"Two bucks."

He dug into his pocket again and produced a pair of one dollar bills.

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It cooled off towards evening once the sun began to fall

below the mountains that stretched the horizon, and the driver pulled off at an old rest stop crumbling at the side of the road.

The sand-swept parking lot was empty except for a US mail truck with a washed-out paint job propped up on old cinderblocks. Beyond the lot, on a patchy square of rocky scrubland, five Johnny Potty units with chained and padlocked doors sat in a row in front of a rusting water pump. A sixth Johnny Potty had been reduced to a broken pile of fiberglass and flexi-steel, and it lay in a heap at the end of the line, half-buried in the sand.

His mouth tasted of desert sand and his throat was tight and scratchy. Still, he wasn't sure why the driver would pull over unless maybe he was some sort of homo looking to touch all over his lap.

"Why we stopping, boss?"

"Need to take a leak. They've got a water pump too."

The salesman got out and when he was gone, the man touched the steel butt of the .357 tucked away beneath his jean jacket. He wasn't surprised to find the metal hot to the touch like a tin cup full of boiling water. He didn't like stopping, especially with the tanker truck still out there somewhere, looking for him, and what the fuck was that horrible smell? He was beginning to think his salesman had a whole family of corpses hidden beneath those bible boxes in the hatch.

"Help yourself to a bible," the salesman called to him as he wandered towards one of the Johnny Potty units. The man didn't need to be invited twice and climbed from the foul smelling car.

At the back of the vehicle he popped the hatch. One of the boxes, precariously balanced, tipped over and spilled rectangular black bibles - small enough to fit in a back pocket - across the dusty parking lot at his feet.

When he bent over to pick them up, the snake bit him.

It was a big copperhead and it came uncoiling from the dark between the stacks of boxes. It got him on the side of the neck a bunch of times before retreating to the safety of the station wagon. He shuffled away from the car on his heels, forgetting the bibles, and clasped a palm over his neck as if that would stop the poison from pumping through to his brain and heart.

His body twitched and spasmed. The salesman wandered over from the pump drinking water from an oil-stained plastic ladle he must have found somewhere.

"Oh, that's right. I sell snake venom too," the salesman told him as he dug under his jacket to take the .357 from him. "I milk it myself you know. Used to preach a little too. That skill's long gone rusty, though."

The salesman tucked the gun into his belt and drank a little more from the ladle. He tapped his foot like he was

waiting for the bus.

Eventually, he said, "Well, I figure you're pretty much a goner, then. Keep well."

The salesman drove off with the man's gun, his package, and most importantly, his money as he shook and skittered across the hot asphalt like a man possessed by demons.

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He awoke in a simmering mid-morning heat to the feel of desert gnats crawling across his face. The poison had done its best, and his head felt like the bible salesman had driven over it a few hundred times with his car, but you couldn't really kill him in this day and age. Not anymore. Not since the desert rose up around the sinners like the tides of a flood and their civilizations crumbled like the Tower of Babel.

It was best not to dwell on those things, though. Just thinking about his own personal implications gave him a bigger headache than the poison, mostly.

He got up and walked the highway again. If he was lucky, the bible salesman's car would break down in the heat, or the guy would have to stop somewhere ahead to sleep in the open. Not that it concerned him much. He'd catch him in Reno trying to cash in the head, no doubt. All the information he needed was in

the file folder.

Again, not ten feet along the gravel shoulder, he heard the sound of a vehicle approaching. It wasn't the sound of a car, though. Instead, it was the deep rumble of something much bigger.

He turned and stuck his thumb out and there was the oil rig from the day before - the one with all its paint blasted off like it'd been parked in the middle of a brush fire. There was no place to hide, and his gun was gone.

He waited as the air brakes hissed and the vehicle came to a halt beside him. The driver's side door opened, but the interior of the cab was so dark, he couldn't see who was inside.

"It's gone," he said. "Somebody beat you to it."

"That ain't much of a surprise. You fucking things up as usual." It was a familiar voice. A cowboy boot hung out the open door - threaded gold cross-stitching patterned in the shapes of pentagrams weaved up the side of the boot's black leather.

"Well, hell, Nicholas. Why didn't you say hello back in the ditch?"

"Because you'd have blown my head off."

"It's been a while."

"Sure has. Say, we going to sit around here reminiscing or do you need a lift? Fella who took the package can't be far away, but I'm gonna need you to identify him at least. Otherwise, I'll be knocking shit off the road all day long -

innocent families and such.”

He didn't need to think about it. The package was more important than any running grudge he and Nicholas had going, and since there were mutual bargaining chips on both sides of the table, he jogged around to the passenger-side door and climbed into the cab.

As dark as it was, the dashboard instruments cast a pale yellow glow so he could at least see what he was doing, but Nicholas's face was still shrouded in shadow.

The truck was slow, but its engine was powerful. Once it got moving, they were screaming across the desert. They drove in uncomfortable silence at first and he figured it was because they'd spent the last fifty years or so trying to kill one another. His instincts told him to reach on over and throttle Nicholas with his bare hands, maybe find a tire iron under the seat to wrap around his skull. His father would have approved, at least.

“You ever get all teary about being left behind with the rest of us?” Nicholas asked, goading him like he could read his thoughts.

“I think it's best if you don't start that,” he replied.
“Best for the both of us. Think about the money.”

Nicholas's over-exaggerated, taunting laughter filled the dark cabin interior.

"You ever think you got left behind because all you think about is money and killing folk? You want a cigarette?"

He took one from the offered pack and lit it with the truck's lighter. He felt himself crumbling again. Nicholas knew his urge to make small talk on a long and boring desert ride was too difficult to resist.

"I didn't start killing folk until I realized I was stuck here. There's not much better to do now, is there?"

"Your daddy'd be awfully proud to hear you talk like that."

The mention of his father out of Nicholas's mouth broke the spell.

"Just drive, Nick. You gotta be about the worst shrink I've ever had the displeasure of engaging."

Nicholas laughed.

"Yeah, okay. Just remember - all this is mine now. Can't do nothing with it but cruise around, but it's still all mine. You're nobody anymore, and haven't been for a long, long while."

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They caught up with the bible salesman by mid-afternoon. They saw the sun reflecting off the aluminum sides of his car from about half-a-mile out. Nicholas switched gears and hammered down on the gas to catch up with him. The station wagon was slow

and awkward, and while the bible salesman did his best to avoid the barreling tanker, weaving this way and that across both lanes of the highway, Nicholas had him beat. He crashed the truck into the bible salesman's back bumper and the boxes jumped and tipped in the back hatch. The salesman lost control of the car and it pitched off the highway with its wheels locked. It left a crescent trail of black and scorched tire rubber in its wake. The car hit the lip of the ditch and tipped over on its side, rolling over and over and over, down one side of the ditch and then back up the other. It finally came to rest in the middle of a thatch of giant cacti. Its shattered grill sent clouds of steam into the air and the sand around it was littered with little black bibles marked with gold crosses on their covers.

Nicholas stopped the truck and both men trundled through the clouds of dust and smoke and steam to inspect the damage.

The salesman lay half-hanging from the wreckage. His seatbelt had saved him from pitching clear of the vehicle, but he was fat and it looked like he'd only buckled himself around the waist, forgoing the shoulder strap. As a result, his upper half had been pushed out the open window and tossed around a bit against the edges of the window frame, and by the shape of his skull, it looked like the car might've rolled on his head too, maybe once. Incredibly, he was still conscious and gripped the

stolen .357 in a blood-slicked hand.

Nicholas found the canvas bag hanging from a nearby cactus. He hooked it down and opened the bag.

"Well, if they don't mind things a little bit pulpy, looks like we've got it safe and sound."

The salesman tried to aim the gun at the man, but something in his arm wasn't working properly. Every time he brought the weapon up, his elbow made a popping sound and the arm collapsed again. He watched the salesman repeat the act three or four times, and then finally reached down and plucked the gun from his hand.

The salesman coughed a wad of black blood and snot up from his mouth and struggled to grip a nearby bible in exchange for his absent weapon. His fingers fumbled at the corner of a book and stained its pages red. With a grin, the man kicked the bible from his reach and it skidded across the desert floor in a trail of dust. Clouds of tiny, translucent sand flies fluttered through the air in its wake.

"By Mother Mary's sweet and hairy pussy, you just don't understand things yet, do you?"

Nicholas laughed in the background.

The salesman, clearly not listening, was trying to grab for another bible. The man put the muzzle of the gun to the side of the salesman's head and shot him three times. He turned his head

to avoid taking the splatter directly in the eyes, and then untucked his shirt to clean the side of his face.

When he dropped his shirt, he turned the weapon on Nicholas.

"You're okay to do this now, right, partner?"

Nicholas was ready for him with a .38 of his own. At this range, caliber hardly mattered.

"Is there a point to any of this?" Nicholas asked. "One of us is going to collect, and the other is just going to come after him, and we'll be here again in ... what? About a week or so?"

"Maybe."

"Or if not a week then a month? Time don't even factor anymore. We'll be doing this for centuries."

The man found himself lowering his weapon.

"I gotta admit, it's getting pretty routine. Not like Pops is around anymore, paying us any mind, is it? You bored too?"

Nicholas nodded.

"You got a better idea? 'Least this passes the time. I got a score card in my back pocket. Took a stack of them from an old mini-putt course I found out here."

"We could bring the head in together - split the money; \$2,500 is still a lot."

"Yeah, I gotta admit."

"Let's get to Reno, split the cash, and see how things pan

out. I at least want to get this thing turned in before its complete flymeal."

As they headed back towards the truck, Nicholas kept opening the bag and staring at the head inside. He paused before climbing back into the truck.

"Hey - what are they doing with this anyways?"

He shrugged. "Didn't ask. Don't care. Trying to save themselves in some scientific manner, I imagine."

"Ain't nothing left to save," Nicholas replied and then nodded his head, motioning towards the desert where they'd ruined the bible salesman and his station wagon. He slipped into the cab and sat behind the wheel: "Come on."

The station wagon had caught fire and flames licked at the bibles, sending their burning pages curling across the open sand and high into the clear skies.

The man stared at the wreckage.

"He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment ... "

Nicholas didn't hear him over the truck's engine, but the words carried across the wasteland like burning bible pages before atomizing with the rest of it far, far away, long after they'd hit the road.

And the only witness to the words this time was a desolate, punishing, and unforgiving desert sun.