

Hitching Devils

The old man was going to get him fired or worse. Jesse fingered the coin in his pocket again and pondered the going rate for gold. He had figured the old man would produce a couple Sacagawea head dollar pieces minted in 2000, his enthusiasm real, the gold not. This the way of old people, fantasy tripping into reality—past joining present. But the coin he presented was real. Jesse did not know what it was, but it was minted in Latin. Had weight. Was old. He stood close to him, ready to grab one of the handles on the back of the wheelchair: not comfortable with how close to the edge of the arroyo they were, the old man's real intentions.

“There one goes,” the near deaf old man shouted.

He lifted his hand as if lead and pointed, though it impossible to miss it in the barren desert fifty feet below. It gathered dust and momentum as it spun, but lasted just twenty yards.

“That the danger right there. Hitch the wrong one an it'll leave ya flat.”

“We wouldn't want that.”

“Hell no we wouldn't,” the old man shouted.

Jesse smiled. At times he enjoyed the old man's crazy stories, listened more than the other caregivers.

“Gotta get down there. Never hitch from up here.”

Jesse looked at the road down. It was steep, rutted, packed red dirt and rocks: a path created through use by four wheel drives, motorcycles and dune-buggies. Not a road for a Toyota hatchback.

“Not sure my car can make it.”

“It'll make it. Can't pussy out now.”

Jesse smiled again. It was this piss and vinegar that reminded Jesse of his grandfather, who faded away in a home similar to the one he now worked. And Jesse carried the weight of not visiting as often as he should have.

The car bottomed out a couple of places, but they made it down. Jesse removed the wheelchair,

unfolded it and helped the old man. The wheels were already caked with red dirt. He would have to clean it before returning it to the home.

“This a good spot. One sure to come right through here.”

The area was flat two-hundred yards all around and they were in a slight dip. It was hot, but there was a breeze. Jesse wondered how much of this would be enough for the old man. Did one have to pass right through them, dusting them both, before he would give up and be willing to return to the home? Of course the old man might not see the dusting as defeat, might claim they had both ridden a dirt devil and be all smiles and stories every time Jesse came in to check on him: fantasy tripping into reality—past joining present.

Jesse's thoughts and fingers returned to the coin in his pocket. He doubted there were chests full of them like the old man claimed, but there could be a small coin purse somewhere and if the old man got what he wanted . . .

“Use to live on my own. Bought one of them mobile homes,” the old man began another one of his stories. “Could had afforded a mansion, but it ain’t easy havin more money than you ought—tryin to explain it. Nobody questions a single-wide mobile home, paid for with cash or not.”

The old man broke his story off and lifted his head, the goggles dangling from his neck, his eyes wide.

“You smell it?”

The air smelled of dirt.

“She's comin. When she does I may need a little help gettin to the edge. You'll want to get the hell back then. Never try to double hitch. How I lost her—broke my back.”

The old man often spoke of how he lost the love of his life and ended up in a wheelchair. Jesse had seen enough spinal injuries to know he was not born this way, but the old man's story of how it happened defied all logic.

Just like bringing him out here, Jesse thought.

The smell of dust increased and the breeze died.

“She's pullin energy. Could be a good one.”

“Going to roll up the windows on my car.”

“Forget that shit, no time.”

The old man pointed at the large dirt devil heading in their direction.

“Forward, push me forward till I say stop.”

Jesse shook his head but if the old man wanted to be covered in dirt and this the only thing to put this craziness to a rest, he would hold up his end. He took hold of the handles and pushed, looking down at the ground to avoid ruts and rocks.

“That place still belongs to me. No one lives there. You listenin?”

“Sure, what place?”

“The single wide—my home.”

“Oh, yes.”

“It's on number 7 Desert Drive. You got it?”

“Sure.”

“Say it back.”

“What?”

“Say the address back.”

“Number 7, Desert Drive.”

“The key is in the porch light. The gold is in the walls. Just sheet rock. No problem for a young man like you. Just make sure to spend a little on my funeral. Don't let em burn me. I don't wanna burn. You understand?”

“Sure, no burning.”

“Stop right here.”

The old man twisted back in his wheelchair to look at Jesse. Jesse was on one knee locking the

wheels of the chair.

“Thank you for this. Know ya think I'm full of shit, but when you find out I'm not—just do what ya said you'd do.”

The old man smiled and Jesse realized they had left his dentures back at the home. Jesse stood. The devil was upon them. Its base was approximately twenty feet wide and the dirt it contained sparse, giving the spinning shape a shadow of an outline rising fifteen feet off the ground. Jesse could see right through it, but there was potency in the sound it made. The dirt particles scrubbed over the ground and collided with each other in the whirling air.

The old man grinned toothless again, put on his dark tinted goggles and waived Jesse back.

“Stay the hell back.”

The old man reached down and unlocked the chair, put both hands to the wheels and pushed forward. Jesse reached out to stop him, but why do that? It was just dirt and wind and the whole reason they were here. The old man moved forward a few feet to reach the outer edge of the dirt devil. Dust slammed into the side of his face, tinked off the metal of the chair; his sparse hair a toy for the wind.

Jesse was thinking about how much work it was going to be to get both the old man and the chair clean enough to get away with this when the old man lifted his arms like a child to its mother then thrust them out to his sides like wings and lifted out of the chair, spinning full circle with the devil. The chair did not move. Jesse stared at it. And when Jesse looked up from the empty wheelchair the old man was ten feet off the ground and spinning with the ease of a particle of dirt. His arms were stretched out and each hand clutched one of his lifeless legs at the ankle. Jesse could see the strain on the old man's face, hear dirt particles tinkering off his goggles, but could not see his eyes because of the dark tint. In this splits position the old man's arms and legs acted as blades, cutting the air as he spun. And the sound they made drowned out all others. Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh . . .

Jesse blinked and squinted, but it was just a dirt devil. Not near large enough to be more than that, the stillness of the wheelchair testament to this fact, and yet the old man rode its twisting as if on a

carousel.

The old man climbed to twenty feet, his arms and legs still cutting air. Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh . . . And now Jesse could hear something else. The old man laughing with devious delight. He climbed higher. Fifty feet. Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh . . . One-hundred feet. Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh . . .

And in the custom of men who witness a miracle, Jesse watched with downright delight. He did not think about getting the old man clean, losing his job at the home or even about the gold in the walls. He delighted in the miracle before him. All other thoughts stayed away until the devil gave out and the old man, now two-hundred feet in the air, spilled to the earth—laughing the entire way.