

Vultures
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(an excerpt)

“Jesus Christ, you’d think a guy smart as you’d remember to put oil in his car before he drives out into the middle of the desert!”

The metallic clash of the hood slamming down echoed over the cracked, shimmering landscape on either side of the highway and sent a pair of distant vultures scrambling into the air. The sound startled Andy, too, who had been staring at the birds.

Walt came around the front of the car to where Andy stood polishing his glasses with a handkerchief.

“Friends of yours?” Walt asked, nodding towards the vultures, now gently gliding specks in the clean sky. They seemed to face each other as they circled, like fencers delicately planning their next move.

“What?”

“Those birds, you know ‘em? You got the same haircut.” He laughed. “You said you were a - what you call it?”

“I’m an ornithologist.”

“That’s it.”

Walt ran his hands, coated in engine grease, through his stringy hair. He took a pack of Marlboros from his shirt pocket and lit one.

“I asked you not to do that,” Andy said. He never took his eyes off the circling scavengers. They were getting closer to the ground, flying faster.

“That’s when we were in your car. We ain’t in your car anymore.” He sighed, sending a cloud of smoke rushing from his mouth and nose. Walt leaned against the car, almost too hot to touch in the afternoon sun. Andy stood straight, hands in his pockets, eyes on the sky.

“So what should we do?” he asked.

“You got a cell phone?” Walt said.

“Yes. There’s no signal, though.”

“Shit.” Walt dropped the butt and crushed it with the toe of his boot. “Never thought I’d die like this. Thought maybe someone would knife me in Chuckawalla, now I get out of the pen and I’m going to be eaten by buzzards all

‘cause of some moron professor and his broke down car.’”

“Now’s as good a time to die as any,” Andy said.

“I was joking.”

Andy licked his lips. “You never told me you were in prison.”

“Well, it ain’t a very good way to hitch a ride, is it? Tellin’ everybody you’re a felon.”

“What did you do?”

“None of your damn business is what I did.” Walt kicked at the crushed cigarette on the pavement. “What’d you do, Mister Wizard? Why you wanna die out here?”

The vultures, circling close above their meal, passed too close to one another. The larger one let out an angry grunt, more like a snorting pig than a sound any bird should make.

“I don’t want to die.” Andy blinked.

“Yeah, you do. You ain’t taken your eyes off those nasty birds this whole time and then you’re all ‘now’s a good time to die’ and everything. What, your wife leave you?”

Andy stared at Walt for a moment, and then looked away. The birds drifted calmly to the ground. The larger bird came down on top of the carrion and began to pull it apart. The smaller one landed a few feet away. It seemed distracted by something on the ground. Andy watched it dance around the strange object.

“Did you know that a group of vultures is called a ‘kettle’ when they’re in the air, but on the ground they’re called a ‘venue?’” he said. “And the Parsis in India, when they die they leave their bodies outside for the vultures to pick clean.” He smiled. “It’s called a ‘sky burial.’”

Walt raised an eyebrow. “Right. Again with the death stuff. It’s a good thing we didn’t break down near a rope factory.”

The object of the small bird’s attention leapt at its bald head. A snake. The little vulture let out a crackling yelp. The larger one dropped a shred of meat from its beak as both birds took to the air again.

“She said I was too distant.” Andy said.

“Who did?”

“My wife.”

Walt took out another cigarette. “Can’t imagine why.”

Andy took a deep breath. “You know, the great thing about vultures is—” His voice was strained. “You see, they—”

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Andy sobbed. He stepped backwards against the car, slid down to the searing asphalt. He put his hands over his eyes and his knees to his chest.

Walt sighed. "God's sake," he said, "Get up. She's just a woman, right? You don't need her."

"She was the only person I knew."

"How long were you together?"

"Since high school."

"How long's that?"

"Thirty years. She left me for another guy in my department."

"I'd kick his ass."

"What would that solve?"

"Shit if I know. It'd make me feel better, though, and it has, let me tell you." Walt dug his hand through his hair again and sat down next to Andy, his legs splayed strait out ahead of him. "Tell you what I do. I don't know anybody. And it don't bother me one bit. I get to a place and feel like stayin' there, I do. If I get tired of it, I go. Never need nobody's permission. And look how I am."

"You're a felon."

"I'm free! I do what I want because all I got to worry about is me. Hell, if I were you, I'd thank God I was free of that old ball and chain. Think of everything you missed out on all those years. College? I never been, but I've heard stories. And you with just her. Damn."