

# William

*by* Dirk Eshleman

The brightly glinting late-day light seared my eyes to a tearless squint. Away across the desert's hardpan horizon the waves of heat rippled, taunting me with a mirage of hope. Phantom waters receded forever beyond reach, as our dreams do upon waking, until a log slowly surfaced and floated sideways to the shimmering edge of the mirage's false shore. The log--no, it was a body--remained still as I labored toward it over the glittering hot earth. A body? Yes.

Despite the distance, it was easily recognizable, once you've seen enough of them. I bowed my head. The sun browbeat me relentlessly, like a one-eyed judge with an unforgiving heart. Even if I had desired or deserved mercy, I couldn't have prayed for it, not with a tongue as dry as stale bread. With my ragged shadow dragging at my heels, I longed for the cool comfort of darkness and the anonymity it offers. Oh. My name is Caesar, by the way. Caesar Nix.

I urged one foot in front of the other. Ever since the summer of great sickness, that's how I put impossible distances behind me, and grew impossibly old, never resting on twice-traveled ground. Nor had I considered my fate's fraying end until that late day, when I found the desiccated husk of a man on what was once known as the Bonneville Salt Flats. The flats are called the Bitter Plain now, a name that fits our post-apocalyptic generation's desire for truth without varnish. Because we know that swallowing varnish leads to a bad end. As for what finished the dead man, I could only speculate. The way I saw it, a person had to be deranged, dumb, or driven to try crossing the bed of an empty sea, alone, on foot. Like me.

But then I've done and seen many far stranger things.

The man's prone body was aligned on a magnetic north/south axis, according to the Brunton compass opened like a clam shell on his chest. A pair of sock-stuffed hiking boots stood next to his bare feet. His hands were folded over his stomach, and on his left wrist a mechanical watch with an immobile second hand and day-and-date window read 2:12 on April 21st. Since it was late summer, I guessed that he had been dead at least four months, perhaps longer, depending on whether the watch satisfied a lifetime warranty.

There was no way of knowing for sure. Long before our encounter, most clockworks had corroded, the batteries of travel alarms had lost their juice, and calendars had become, well, things of the past, the past before 2040, the year of the plague. Oh, yes, sundials functioned, if you could find one on a sunny day. Some timepieces worked but were stilled by neglect. I wondered if the dead man had kept a scheduled appointment.

The sun and high desert aridity preserved him well if not handsomely. His skin was browned, blistered, parchment thin, stretched tight to his bones. His shrunken lips exposed white teeth, blackened gums, and a grimace, which, at a respectful distance, could have been mistaken for a smile at the watercolor sky. The man's condition, while surprising, was not miraculous. No, what struck me as an uncanny coincidence were the boots and the neat stack of items next to them: a Swiss Army knife, a canteen two thirds full, and a sealed plastic bag containing a leather-bound journal and pen. My own canteen was empty and had been for a day, a night, and most of another day. The boots, which I needed, were my size, and the knife replaced a multi-tool I'd recently lost. As for the journal, this journal, it was blank except for one word penned neatly on the upper left margin of the first page:

William.

Another ghost story, I thought. I have millions of them.

For offering me salvation and an extension of my own expiring time, I anointed each of William's sunken eyelids with a single precious drop of water and named him my patron saint. And why not? Life has shown me as many varieties of religion as there are varieties of people.

I took several slow swallows from the dead man's canteen. "Thanks, Saint William," I said. The words were gravel, scraping and catching as I coughed them up. "If this water isn't poisoned, I'll assume you intended to bless me."

For reasons not founded in reason, I wound Saint William's watch and left it on his wrist. The early evening air was as clear as its empty silence. I had grown used to the absence of functioning cars, airplanes, and other machines and the sounds those machines made, but there were no buzzing flies--which I'd come to expect near dead bodies--no croaking buzzards. In that swollen stillness the watch's renewed ticking seemed as loud and terrible as a gavel striking a tin table. Covering my ears did not help. I howled, startling myself. Sometimes the smallest stimuli provoke the most violent reactions. Like a certain virus, as I recall.

"Wrong place, wrong time," I told Saint William, whose expression didn't change.

The water was stale and warm. On the plus side, it wasn't spiked with arsenic. I'm here, aren't I? Or my words are.

As I was about to leave, it occurred to me that Saint William had lengthened my life, while all I had done was wind his watch. In the decades since the last meaningful calendar, the line between reality and nightmares--sanity and madness--has become a blurred, moving boundary. A reasonable man, or a desperate one, would have taken the boots, water, and knife without a second thought. But I had

second thoughts, one of which was that I owed a debt to a body as salt-cured as beef jerky. And that if I didn't pay, the dead man would collect. Sometime. Somewhere. I'd known that to happen.

Two thousand dollars in soiled, sweat-stained fifties were clipped together in the bottom of my pack. After some effort, I found them.

"They say, 'In God We Trust,' William," I told the new saint. "What do you think of that?"

His hair, as fine and frail as abandoned cobwebs, stirred in a breeze I hadn't noticed until then.

"So, you're tight lipped," I said. "Just kidding."

Saint William wore his sense of humor on a campaign t-shirt from the time of Presidents and the people who nominally elected them. The shirt lampooned a candidate who had once imitated intelligent life. "Legalize Our Dope. Elect Joseph Barton," the image's caption declared.

"This and a 14-year-old virgin will buy you a cup of coffee," I said as I wedged the bills under the saint's hands. I can't recall the last time I savored a cup of coffee, and I have never, as far as I know, enjoyed a 14-year-old virgin. Nobody enjoyed me when I was fourteen, that's certain.

The money fluttered beneath Saint William's fingers like the wings of a trapped moth. It was then that I noticed he was wearing a wedding band. I might have been moved to tears if my soul hadn't been more parched than my body.

"We have something in common, William," I said. "Love and loss." That made us brothers in a very large fraternity.

Give it a rest, I told myself, you're overheated. I patted Saint William over his silent heart and sat with him until the sun fell and its pale sister rose cold and full in its place.

"When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore," I sang, but my knowledge of the lyrics, and joy in singing them, ended there.

Summer or not, a desert shivers under the blanket of darkness. With a cloudless sky and a moon bright enough to cast my spectral shadow on the softly glittering salt, I stood to go. Again, I hesitated. After all, money was a poor offering. When the banking system collapsed, we learned that paper currency was our most successful printed fiction. Old bills are still useful, for starting fires and conversations. Saint William's fire had gone out. Intuition told me that he had died with a purpose, a goal. At a minimum, he had a fine sense of direction, but he wasn't going anywhere.

"What was your wife's name, William? Why aren't you with her?" I asked. "What do you want from me?"

Do the spirits of the dead speak to our hearts? I think so. I heard William's answer in mine and read it in the blank pages of the leather-bound journal, which I hadn't intended to take.

A written history is another way of measuring time. A simple narrative beginning, "When I was your age" or "You'll never believe what happened to me" will do. Long before I met my patron saint, the great majority of personal narratives had come to ends as abrupt as a clock's last tick. Their haunting voices told me that I was responsible for our history, that William had left his journal empty for me to fill. Write it, the voices said; mark the time of that brief, horrid, wild transition that brought an early end to the 21st century. Hopefully, the living will read this when our own blanket of

darkness lifts. And Day One will mark a new calendar, and a new era.

After I shoved the journal and pen into my pack, I touched Saint William's hand and considered his wedding band and the one I no longer wore, torn from me along with my ring finger.

"Sarah," I said.

The last physical memento I had from the wife I lost was the necklace I wore. Although Sarah had not been particularly religious, she had her own variety of reverence for a Celtic cross with a Latin inscription, "*Ibit amor; ubi fides*," meaning, Where there is love, there is faith. I removed the necklace and put it next to Saint William's compass, over his heart. The top of the cross pointed toward what I imagined was true north, which is not always the same as magnetic north. Sometimes finding true north requires inspiration.

The saint's watch was still ticking. I desperately wished I could reset it.

"What time is it, William?" I said.

For you, it's now and then, he told me. For him, it was now and ever.

As I had done so often before, I found my lodestar when night collapsed around me. Shivering, I walked, pointing myself into your future and my past, along the twisted path of love and ruin to where all the trouble started. Anyone who follows will soon understand why I was in no hurry to go back.

