

from MLKNG SCKLS

by Justin Sirois

94% Battery Power Remaining

Last night I dreamt about a mutt whose tail never learned how to wag, and under a sun that gagged us with heat, the mutt sat stoned with its mouth belching cones of pot smoke. Sometimes the smoke shone orange — sometimes it had the texture of *keffiyehs*. People passed it in the street, not looking between its ears. No one ever pet the mutt. Men on bicycles swerved around it. Cars pulled U-turns. Busses sped by. It was part something, but mostly something else.

Its nose was badly burnt.

It jiggled like cooked fat.

* * *

88% Battery Power Remaining

We hadn't seen too many vultures on the second day of walking. We hadn't seen much of anything.

Mostly, birds circled the bombings, where the cities barfed up body after wet body, mangled fighters or family members crushed on their sofas. The vultures swarmed, sallow in the heat. Overstuffed and grimacing. Big bloated turkeys with grimreaper smiles. Fat as shit birds that would send a jackal screaming in the other direction. And the frantic vultures clocked, in gangs, along the outskirts where all the other derelict animals scavenged, burrowing into sopped pantleg and sleeve, pecking out and picking clean. They weren't crazed by what they were feeding on, but by the volume and variety of meals available — *al dente*, *flambé*, *all fucked up*.

We'd left all that behind us, we'd thought, Khalil and me.

But we spotted our first bird in the early afternoon. A beauty. Its wings snapped like black sickles, crimping into the dimpled clouds

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and soaring down, banking against the breeze. A real beauty. A real fatty, too.

Stalking, it doesn't make a sound.

Khalil, not really looking up, says — Never see 'em alone like that.

— Yeah.

— You tired, man?

— Yeah. Kinda.

— Swim?

— *Don't* have time, man. I told you. C'mon.

— *Fine*, Khalil sniffs and we keep walking.

And he's silent for a while.

There's no time for swimming like there's *never* time for swimming. That's all he wants to do. Every time we stop walking, that's all he ever wants to do.

But we agree to rest for half an hour, choosing to lie under some loosely bunched palm trees far enough from the river to be safe. There'd been no boats or patrols and the opal waterway sparkles as we spread our blanket and savor the shade. Khalil stretches out on his stomach with a balled t-shirt pillow. I sit, drink some water, take off my shirt too. And I sponge my face with my *keffiyeh*. We drink river water from tin cans. Sweat and sand coat us like hummus.

My lips are cracked. Armpits itch.

Khalil's snoring by the time my can is empty. With his bare feet exposed to the sunlight, his body jerks every few minutes in thin dreams. I drape my *keffiyeh* over his heels, making two patterned hills. Sunburned feet would slow us down. We can't slow and we have to keep going.

I'm not tired.

The vulture appears again, revolving lazily in the distance. Standing, I squint, my palms laced into a visor. The vulture's inspecting something. Maybe something we should avoid. I leave my backpack, but my folding knife comes with me, unfolded because there'd be no time to open it if I had to in a hurry.

The only thing I've ever cut with it, accidentally or otherwise, is myself.

Walking away, it's impossible to gauge the subtle changes in elevation. I know tiers of fertile land patch the water's edge and they grow on forever, but from here all I see is rock and sand and the spiky hats of palm trees beyond the hills. The vulture dives below the horizon for a second, then reemerges nervously. At first he looks hurt, but he's not. I step slow. The handle of the knife feels like the old banisters from middle school — oil-coated and graffitied with names I've long forgotten and names I never wanted to know. My thumbnail revisits the same groove in the wood. I press the cold blade against my forearm for no reason. It leaves a pinkish band that vanishes.

I duck at the hill's crest. It's no more than a body length down. And down the little cliff, a beard of wheatgrass hangs off the chin of the river as it bends southwest, and the rest of the land is sand dusted rock. The tan landscape is only interrupted by squat huts built further up along the highway running adjacent to the river and they look like shortbread cookies — sturdy and strong — good roofs for good people.

The sun whitewashes all detail. I have to cup my brow with both hands, knife in my teeth; I taste the cedar handle. I see the stupid bird. Plummeting again, he kinks the tubing of his neck and lands with a *gong* — a sheet metal *bang* — and his talons tap-dance on the hot surface of a hood. And then there's a truck. A truck parked just before the wheatgrass. I can barely hear the engine idling. A pack of vultures ransack the vehicle. From the hill I see the back of the pickup, tires blown, both doors yanked open, and the ruffled ass of a black bird rocking back and forth in the driver's seat. He's tugging on something. More birds fill the bed. Feathers and wings and the heads of un-dead turkeys writhe, bumping steel with wet thumps, squabbling over scraps, and there're so many birds that it looks like the driver was hauling a shipment of pillows that happened to explode.

From the passenger's seat, another vulture takes to the air and completes the same circuit as the first bird I spotted. He swoops

down, settling in the white sand, skittering after another bird with a sneaker in its beak.

I can't see what they're eating. Don't want to. But at least we'll know to detour around the truck and maybe further from the riverside for a while. The truck's tracks lead to the highway, though the highway's probably far enough to avoid, too. We'll be careful.

Using the tip of the blade, I scratch under my beard before folding the knife away. My watch says I've been gone almost half an hour.

The birds keep slamdancing the shit out of the truck, shouldering each other for position, snapping and scratching. One of them flips out of the bed with something sagging in his mouth and he flaps frantically into the air, twisting in the wind. I watch him pass overhead in the direction I came, the weight of his prize making him bob like a balloon. It drips. A swatch of flannel flaps underneath his meal.

I double back. I untangle the T-Shirt from my head and drape it over scorched shoulders, and it's nice not having the sun in my eyes. Khalil's probably drooling all over his makeshift pillow. Hopefully he's not covered in ants.

I walk at first. The vulture leads; seesawing over the sand, and weighted by his cargo, he beats his wings whenever his shadow threatens to catch its toes. I jog. The knife clacks the back of my thigh inside my pocket. Sandals clap against heel.

A piece of whatever he's carrying flops to the sand. I run around it, not looking. Bumbling upward, the vulture decides to climb, and nearly capsizes, but flaps hard enough to reach the treetops. He knows it's safe there. When I get close enough, it's our camp, our palm tree he's chosen to nest in.

— *Shitty bird*, I pant, almost running now.

The fronds above Khalil rustle as if someone's strangling the tree. Leaves rain down. Khalil's still on his stomach, dead asleep, mouth open.

— *Retarded turkey*, I hiss, prying a rock out of the dirt.

And when I get within firing range, I sling the rock high into the leaves — surprised by my accuracy — and pop either the tree or the shitty bird because it unhinges its feathers and leaps, talon running in place. There's nothing in its beak. A few feathers spiral free. Two more stones rocket past his wings, but he's too high up to hit and all I want to do is scare the thing anyway. Cracking its hemorrhoid-looking head limp would be fine too.

I stand next to Khalil, out of reach. He'd take any opportunity to grab my ankle, try to scare me, but he's definitely asleep. He snores lightly, mouth agape, drool glistening around the ring of his lips.

Standing at the base of the trees, I lean back to see what the vulture carried all that way, but it's buried in the salad of leaves above. Sunlight twinkles between swaying green, the translucent olives and teals fanning methodically. I stare. There might be a cufflink shining starry and silver, maybe a ring on a finger that scratched the bird's beak with every peck, but I can't tell. Something taps the sand. Dull taps from a leaky faucet above.

Of course there's blood, I think.

A shiny red saucer clots in the sand. The center puckers and congeals each time a fresh bead drops. More red speckles the perimeter of the blanket, and, when I bend down, I see that Khalil's messy hair is marinated with blood and the maze of his ear is clumped syrupy. A blob the size of an olive slowly flattens into his scalp. It's so dark red that it could be motor oil and I look closer to make sure Khalil's not really hurt. Two final drops land on his cheek — *tap, tap*. They sorta make a smiley face, a little blood face with two red eyes and Khalil's nostril makes an oval mouth. My fingers move to touch his earlobe, but draw back.

For the most part, the tree has stopped bleeding. I look back up one more time before kicking as much sand over the blood puddle as possible, covering up every fleck. A little gets on my foot, but at this point I don't care. A few drops stain the blanket. I'll wash them out later.

I ease my sandal onto Khalil's shoulder, pump it. His eyes stutter open. He sits up and yawns so hard he shakes. I think he's gonna scratch his hair, but he doesn't.

I ask — Wanna go swimmin'?

He smiles. The little blood face on his cheek smiles too.

Make it quick.

