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PRESENTS
a Short Story

Twits Do It Better

SAMPLE

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In remembrance of
Terry Pratchett

Chapter One

You can learn a great deal about someone by studying the company they keep. Of course, the same can be said about the contents of someone's bedchambers, or their smell. I once even heard Garuk's witch-doctor say the same about studying someone's brains.

Take Imora, for example. Anytime we're down in Sandusky at the drum circle, she is surrounded by Golem, Hard-winner, Stoker, and Hass. Four brutish Duskins that more or less stumble about while the music plays, rather than actually dance with her.

Tripping over their own feet is inevitable with all those extra digits to worry about. And one or two of them occasionally sets their hair or loin cloths to flame while twirling drunkenly near the bonfire.

I'd deduced rather quickly by Imora's company that she was in the market for love. Really, if you ask me love is for the birds.

Obviously it hurts. With all that nightly screaming, coming from her bed chambers, even a dodo could figure as much.

And everyone knows dodos are almost as stupid as turkeys.

Take Travis for example. He was a turkey of the philosophical sort, but to be fair, he only drowned because it took him too long to figure out where the rain was coming from. Ever since, turkeys everywhere got a bad wrap.

What's worse, is that Travis had been rather thin.

If you'd ever seen a trim turkey, besides at the dinner table, you'd know it was an awkward sight indeed.

He had been three months without a single decent gobble. Trying to determine if turkeys shared a common enemy with extra-pounds because of their affinity for gobbling. He'd gone on an all-seed-diet in

attempt to narrow his girth, and for months only ate like, well—a bird.

Rumor has it, he was once heard saying that he was so skinny that he felt as if he might just fly away. Unfortunately, he just stood there staring up at the sky.

Another possibility would be that his being a picky eater meant that he was only pecking out the poppy and morning glory seeds.

Garuk's shoulder isn't the only place I've enjoyed hanging out you know. I liked to spend a lot of time in books. There is a lot to be learned in books, if people would only read them. If you'd read them, you'd know that birds like me have natural intelligence.

They don't call me a Twit just because of my glasses. Those are for my nearsightedness. But, books, nevertheless are my second favorite place to forage about. Albeit, mostly for the worms. Yes, Cecil misses books, but that's about all I miss from my old life.

The bugs in Garuk's scalp serve as a fairly consistent form of sustenance.

That grub was stuck between two tectonic plates of dandruff. Slurp.

Sometimes I'll get a spider if we've been rushing through a thicket, other times a tick, if I pick around a bit. But mostly there are lice.

I swear Garuk's hair is kin to carnivorous plants. I've found a louse hanging by the

neck, entwined by one of Garuk's greasy tendrils. Of course, I gobbled it up.

The Duskins aren't a bad outfit. They are surely a step up from the Brumbys. Anything beats being known for hitchhiking on a horse's arse. Though the flies were rather tasty. But, those days are behind birds like me. This Twit has moved back up in the world to more intelligent beings. Beings who can compliment our own mental prowess. These beings even communicate with one another and share in social and semi-moral quandaries; they talk. Look, here comes one now.

"Ug, Ugga boom la chacka ta."

That's Duskin for, "Hi, good to see you, and the bird."

You'll notice most of their sentences end with 'and the bird.'
I am a mark of social status you know.

Okay, maybe I can't understand *everything* the Duskins are saying, but I get most of it because I am likely as smart as they are. If they wanted to be any

smarter than I, then they'd have to start reading. And no one knows how to read. Not here.

There were plenty of books, cave paintings, even structures of mathematical precision where I came from in Egypt. It's just that none of those things have made it as far as Tera Austris.

Back in the deserts of Egypt, there were plenty of pictograms of Twits standing on the shoulders of Royalty. I knew they were royal because that is what Marcus, the cat, called them.

Marcus was also royal, he had the Pharaohs at his every beck and call. A pur here, a meow there. He was welcome in the temples, whether he was royal or just a royal pain in the something or nother.

Problem was, if you weren't a falcon, who more frequently appeared in those pictograms, you weren't warmly welcomed on shoulders anymore. An exception was the camels. Though they had more of a hump than a shoulder.

One could live off of camel ticks, if you don't mind sand in your food and scorching sun year round.

The only other live-in option there was to find a rare oasis, but even then the solitude and exclusive diet of scarabs would eventually turn any good bird into a loon.

After three annual bouts of locusts, I'd decided that I wasn't going back to scarabs ever again, but leaving Egypt as a nearly flightless bird was no small feat. Neither was I the *only* twit who wanted to migrate away from the setting sun.

When the caravans came through, camels would depart twenty twits deep on some occasions. On others, some camels wouldn't make it out of Egypt at all, due to that one last bird lighting at the only bald spot left on the hump. Invariable that would send the camels legs to a buckle. We won't say that the last bird necessarily broke the camel's back. But, in most cases that bird's name would turn out to be Straw.

Straw was a particularly over-indulgent twit and luckily didn't try hitching on the camel that I eventually commandeered.

A good strong camel might get you two hundred miles. It's a dry and bumpy ride, and the lack of water and abundance of extreme heat are just to be expected.

We busied ourselves by preening one another and scavenging the parasites off of the camels' hides.

What a journey it was!

“Ug, Uga boom la chock to,” says Garuk before both Duskins look my way.

Now, I try and remember how much of a real treat it is to be admired.

I recognize this certain Duskin as Meatpan. Despite his name, most of the stews he serves are largely vegetarian. He’s as wiry as old Spanish moss. That’s to say, there’s a reason he became a cook—he couldn’t hunt to save his life.

Marla was the only woman that could save his life, and that had been on numerous occasions. It became clear who carried the club in the hut after Garuk found her rescuing Meatpan from the clutches of an over bearing blackberry bush.

When it came to hunting and/or gathering, Meatpan did neither.

“Chock ta,” said Meatpan.

These Duskins always have such hungry eyes.

Here comes Marla, clearly unhappy.

“Ugga boom Meatpan chock to, boom uga boom!” She was pointing her club at the thin Duskin, and then thrusting it toward Garuk and I accusingly.

Sure was an awful lot of talk going on about the bird...

Garuk ignored them both and sidled by, the sounds of holy matrimony fading, no less animated than before. I glanced back and saw Meatpan duck beneath a rabid swing.

You see! Sometimes even I forget how bad love can hurt.

Chapter Two

A world class journey teaches you a lot of useful skills.

The first it taught most of us, on our way out of Egypt, was to run.

About the time I realized that the selection of ticks had become scarce from the camel's thick coat, was about the same time the owners of the caravan started noticing that their selection of twit was becoming quite thin as well. Who knows if the ticks noticed.

The camels may have had some idea at the change in weight had the weight not simply been transferred from the back of some beasts and into the bellies of others so, they had just lumbered on fastidiously.

When other passengers, further down the hump, start hopping aside to avoid being nabbed for dinner, it gets your attention.

The first thing you notice is that they

actually moved. If they had room to move, that meant another twit had *made* room. If another twit had made room, there were fewer twits than from the start. It was bad news all around.

The dry earth was fractured. When our feet hit the stiff stand, it was only in hopeful escape from the hands of the hungry caravaners. We fled across the marbled heat in an arrowhead formation of five. Driven a mile across land that resembled a giant pair of chapped lips, waiting to gobble us up.

Gobble us up, it eventually did. A huge crevice at the base of a steep incline was our eventual escape. Our formation took to wing as we dropped into the narrow shadows of the abyss.

Most of us did more plummeting than we did gliding. By the time we gathered at the bottom of the gorge, white plumes had turned rust colored in every bird's desperate attempts at clutching to the chalky walls of the drop.

A good thing about leisurely plumping up on camel ticks is that your rear end makes for a softer landing when it goes *PLOOP* into the shallow moisture of a fissure. For many of us who had grown too out of shape to glide with any real purpose our bottoms saved our own bottoms.

The small trickle along the gorge was just lively enough with algae and tadpoles to afford us a second chance at liberation. But things were going to take some adjusting.

From the darkness of that abyss, my comrades and I could see the clear sky overhead, mocking us.

With each passing hour, it grew more apparent to all of us, that our food would not last forever. Avian selfishness rears its ugly head when friends stop preening one another.

That was potential food in there after all!

One morning, Dorris, the thinnest of the group, began doing long passes back and forth down the crevice. She'd take to wing and glide the length of our crumbling

prison.

I had to admit, the girl was driven.

I too grew tired of watching the flocks fly far overhead, just dots against the blue above. Freedom just really on the tip of our wings. And that is what the second thing of my world travels would teach me. To just get on with it.

Grab life by the talons.

Not that I really possessed any talons so to speak. But I could grip a good foot. And the kestrel who one day dared to swoop in and pluck Dorris from her constant gliding was just the talons I needed to grab.

Escape is simply a matter of brains.

Dorris didn't have much in that department. I do give her an A for effort. Truly, if it wasn't for watching Dorris' practice of flight, I may have never learned to do it myself.

But that wasn't until later in my journey to Duskin.

I had been conserving energy in the gorge.

Well, I was laying around and sipping

passing water.

Overall, I was protecting my own small lagoon of tadpoles. But, in a way it was conserving energy.

While lying there in the ravine, I watched the kestrels circle and swoop. It was growing more apparent that one of those hawks were gonna take a go at Dorris. Of course, Dorris was too focused on watching the ground come up to be worried about the sky coming down. Okay, okay, the right thing may have been to let ole Dorris in on her likely demise. But a Twit has to save his own skin ya know. And skin was quickly becoming the only thing left on this twit's bones. Besides, Dorris should know by now that I watch out for number one. I made no attempt to hide it.

While we'd been high-tailing it away from the caravaners and their camels, Dorris had screamed, "It's useless we'll never outrun them!" and I had replied, "We don't have to out run them. We only have to outrun Bob and Beatrice."

If that wasn't a hint, I don't know what was.

To make a long story short, the Kestrel who nabbed Dorris, departed with a heavier meal than he'd bargained for. By the time I had a hold of Dorris's foot, the kestrel was already climbing to avoid the cliff wall.

Wouldn't you know, that his fellow raptors took no time in noticing I was hanging out below the afternoon lunch.

The Kestrel banked when the others pursued him. Good thing that selfishness is a common quality among all avians! They fought over me until we were well out over the open sea.

Over and over we turned. I tucked my head, bobbed and weaved, and held on for dear life. Once I was utterly exhausted, I had no choice but to let go of Dorris, who had already joined the big bird in the sky; no pun intended.

I caught an updraft and had a successful glide for part of my tumbling descent, but at length plunged into the warm waters of the bay. And this, my readers, was the part of my world journey

that I learned to swim.
It was a crash course.

Twits are remarkably built for
floating, I found.

Diving was a bit of an issue, for I couldn't
seem to keep myself under. And that I did
over and over as the falcons swooped and
grabbed for me.

I was imminently going to join Dorris, this
time involuntarily, and would have, if it
weren't for the whale.

Thank you for enjoying JAY HORNE's
TWITS DO IT BETTER
Find more of Cecil in the adventure: A
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