

Two Dates And A Desert

By Quincy Washington

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Written in 2010, “Two Dates and A Desert” is a short story from a guidebook for teenagers, written by Quincy Washington at 16 years of age.

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A family of four - mother, father, son and daughter - were lost in the desert. That week, they had embarked on a mighty expedition into the sandy plains of the Sahara Desert, with a troop of other intrepid explorers.

One night, a ferocious storm came upon the group, and took with it the lives of every person, but the remaining family.

They were now alone; hundreds of miles away from civilisation; without any means of communicating with the outside world.

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For three days straight, each family member starved, without a morsel or a crumb to quench their hunger.

Throughout their ordeal, the two young children sought comfort in watching the silhouettes of two birds patrolling the family from high up above, in the cloudless sky. The two birds doggedly tracked them with every step that they took deeper into the desert.

For the children, though their bodies grew weaker and more tired, it was their vast imagination which was not entirely lifeless.

The little boy and the little girl created in their little minds, the fantasy that the two birds were their personal guardians, and that these 'guardian birds' would eventually lead them to food, water and safety.

Once in a while, the boy would dredge from the golden sand, a rusty-looking twig.

Each twig was about 10cm long, and resembled a small grape vine, with the grapes stripped off of it.

The father was experienced in the natural sciences; he guessed that the twigs were remnants of a large fig tree.

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The mother was a keen astronomer and geographer, so her expertise would prove vital in navigating the vast desert.

About once every half-hour, a twig would be spotted on the dry, sandy ground. But, each twig was always the same size; positioned just like the one before it.

It remained a mind-bending mystery to the parents, where this elusive 'fig' tree could have been growing.

But, enduringly faithful to their flying "guardians", the son and daughter reasoned that the two birds in the sky would eventually lead them to this 'fig' tree.

Most noticeably, each time a twig was found on the ground by the father, the two birds would swoop in at a slightly lower altitude than before.

But in his frustration at seeing that the twig bore no fruit, the father would cast the twig as far away as he possibly could. And as soon as the father cast away the twigs, the birds would ascend to their original altitude, higher up in the sky.

For the mother, every twig found to bear no fruit added to the magnitude and gravity of her family's starvation.

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As the family walked deeper into the openness of the sprawling sand dunes, the frequency with which the fruitless branches were found seemed to increase. For every other twig found, the mother's desperation went up a notch.

For the children, each twig brought with it the glimmer of hope that sooner or later, the tree from which the twigs had come from would be found somewhere nearby.

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In the far distance of the vast Sahara, the horizon appeared to hang off the edge of the Earth. Every march forward was a mighty show of resilience against their hunger and their impending death, which only the parents knew.

But, as the sun began to advance further down the skyline, the father strayed about twenty metres away from the rest of the family as they trekked together across the endless dunes and valleys.

The father was wise, and the only one who could distinguish a poisonous fruit from a safe one, so he went on searching for food as a purple dusk settled upon the skies.

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It was getting very late, and with the father's trek for food proving unsuccessful, the mother welcomed, and prepared for their ill-fated end.

Then, out of the spotless blue sky, one of the children spotted the two winged birds swooping much lower to the ground once more: a sign that another twig would be found.

This time, however, the birds squawked in chorus, and as they descended even closer to the ground, the father could see that they were Pharaoh Eagle-Owls.

The owls hovered 30 metres above the family, and continued to patrol them at this much lower altitude, not showing any sign of leaving.

Suddenly, the father noticed another twig in the sand. And as he looked a foot away from the twig, about a yard behind him, he saw a mouse-like creature with a crowded mouthful of twigs hanging from its furry mouth.

It was the native 'jerboa': a herbivorous rodent.

The mother and the children walked over to see what the father had found.

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In sheer delight at its fuzzy cuteness, the daughter swooped up the furry creature into her little arms. And as she did so, the two owls descended into a fearsome attack on the tiny rodent. The father flung his arms up to shoo off the owls, and they finally flew away never to be seen again.

The father then realised that the two owls had been preying on the rodent for food, just as desperately as the jerboa had been following the family for its protection from the owls.

The mother watched her children sorrowfully, for she knew that no tree bearing fruit was in sight, and that, in fact, the tiny rodent was the explanation to the mystery of the twigs all this time.

In tailing the family, a few yards behind them, the rodent would seek protection from the owls, anytime they descended on it – which explained the presence of the twigs. When the father cast away a twig as far as he could, the rodent would fetch the same twig from where it was thrown, and cram it amongst the bundle in its mouth, whilst straggling behind the family for protection from the owls.

Dejected, starving and tired: the mother and father resided in their hopeless fate, but chose to not to inform their children that anything was as dire as it really was, and

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instead, reassured them that they would be leaving the desert the next morning.

As the family ventured further across the plains, the rodent bit the young girl's finger, at which point she quickly dropped it, and it ran away into the distance. The rodent discarded the bundle of twigs in its trail, which the mother then picked up.

And in that moment, a miracle appeared.

The mother saw two small dates hanging on the ends of one of the shortest twigs.

Without much afterthought, the father insisted that his wife and the children should eat the fruit, ahead of him.

The mother had forecast that the following day would be the hottest and most brutal it had ever been, and she loved her children more than anything else in the world; so she also sacrificed the fruit for her children, and the boy and the girl ate one date each, and both enjoyed a restful sleep that night.

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As the father and the mother went to sleep, they rested with peaceful assurance and contentment that their children would be nourished for a few more days.

The next morning, a glorious blue dawn tinted the peaceful sky.

After a satisfying night of sleep, the boy and girl woke up bruised and blistered by the hot sand. The two children snuck up on their parents to wake them up, hoping also, that their sore feet would be nursed back to health.

But, the parents were just as human as their children.

That night, as their children slept peacefully, both the mother and the father perished.

As the mother had warned, the road that lay ahead of the two little children would prove to be the most harrowing experience they would ever face, and the two children would have to embark on the intrepid exploration all alone.

The two children were left to their own devices, and had to figure out how to look for food, of which only their father could locate.

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The children trekked further into the desert, and by some act of serendipity, they stumbled upon what they perceived to be the same rodent from the day before. The girl quickly held the rodent in his hands to stop it from running away.

Later that afternoon, the children found themselves upon a gigantic date tree, presumably the one that the rodent had retrieved its twigs from. The girl jumped as high as she could to retrieve the fruit, and as she did this, the rodent screeched and fretted in her hand, but she could not reach the fruit. Meanwhile, the boy tried to climb up the tree's trunk, but fell hopelessly into a heap on the floor.

In their haste to quench their growing hunger, both children agreed to kill the rodent, and eat it, which they did immediately.

The tree had so many dates, more than enough to sustain the children for at least a week, but the fruit hung just centimetres from above their fingertips.

Had the father been alive, he would have been more than tall enough that he could easily have picked the fruit from the tree.

And had the mother been alive, she was smart enough to have known not to kill the rodent; a creature well

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accustomed to collecting dates from trees like this one, who could have saved them from starvation.

Tragically, after a few days, both the son and daughter perished.

The exact location where the children had died was only 100 yards away from a nearby village with clean water, food, communication and people.

Though the parent's generosity was commendable, had the mother and father divided the dates equally between the whole family, each member would have been sufficiently nourished; giving them enough energy to arrive at the destination that they were inevitably heading for.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Oftentimes, someone's action might appear brutal, unexpected and or uncalled for, but in the long run, is the wisest choice.

Have you ever given so much that there's nothing left for you?

Do you ever seek to offer help to other people, before checking how much you have left to give?

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It is unwise to give so much of yourself that you end up running dry. As 'Two Dates And A Desert' illustrates, if you give so much that you sacrifice an integral part of your own self, you will be taking away from the people who you were originally giving to in the first place.

Instead, replenish yourself to the best of your ability, so that you can perform at your optimum efficiency, and help others in need.

Because, no matter how desperately you wish to help someone, you can't give what you do not have.

So, seek to strengthen yourself first if you want to make a difference, because sometimes, the most selfless thing to do is to be selfish.