

In the Desert

At twelve o'clock noon on a Sunday, an SUV sped down a small Arizona side road. The machine glided over the weathered asphalt, cutting through the desert air, heavy with the heat of the midday sun. In the passenger seat sat one Gustav Miller. Mr. Miller, a cellist, wore a pair of aviator sunglasses. He always wore them. Overwhelming light flooded his pupils and futilely assaulted his useless retinas. Miller was blind.

A certain stereotype exists of the blind man who exudes positive energy. Such a man has moved past the unfortunate hand he has been dealt to find the true beauty of human experience. Mr. Miller was not one of these men. He was not humorless, but he was prone to fits of melancholy in which his anger and bitterness toward the world would show through. On this day, he was escorted by his cousin, the driver and owner of the vehicle, Andre.

“Gus!” Andre yelled over “The Cats In the Cradle” blaring over the radio. The combination of the radio and the sounds of the road made conversation difficult. Gus didn't respond.

“Hey, Gus!”

“What?” Gus barked at his cousin.

Andre turned down the radio so that he could be heard. “Look, Gus. I'm sorry about what I said. I don't really know how it is.”

“It's fine,” Gus said, trying to cut the conversation off before it began again.

“No. I mean it. It's just, Uncle Pete...well, he means well. I think he comes off like a hard-ass, but he really.... He's always talking about you.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Give the guy a chance, man. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Do you know how ridiculous you sound? I know what he’s like. I grew up with him. I lived with him for 18 years. You don’t get it.”

“If you go in there with that attitude, you’re going to ruin it for everybody. My dad’s going to be pissed if you guys make a scene. “

“It’ll be fine. Just drop it.”

“I’m just saying ...”

“Drop it. Ok?” He couldn’t understand. It wasn’t his father. He hadn’t grown up under his oppressive laws. He hadn’t faced his oppressive expectations.

Peter Miller was a New York Jew. He was a transplant in Arizona, having met Gustav’s mother during his time at university there. His mother was a Christian, and their marriage had caused a stir in his father’s family. After optometry school in Philadelphia, they returned to Arizona, where Gustav was born. He and his father were often at odds, more from lack of understanding than from actual disdain. Peter Miller was a Reganaut who had bought into the American dream entirely. Gustav was never sure why his father had adopted such a conservative mentality. Perhaps, the stories of his grandmother, who had come to America from Russia as a child and taught herself to play piano, had inspired him to adopt an individualistic mentality. Either way, Gustav could never be the ideal son that his father wanted. He imagined that his father expected his first born son to be an all American, a strong, outgoing athletic type. Gustav had been dark and gloomy from the beginning. His parents’ different backgrounds had resulted

in his development in a cultural dead zone. He had grown up a part of neither culture, and he remained a constant outsider all his life. He was bitter about his blindness, and he spent all of his time cooped up inside, listening to music or reading fiction stories in Braille. He partially resented his father, as ridiculous as he knew it was, for forcing life upon him in the first place.

The radio became deafening again and Gustav rolled down the window. The whipping wind blocked out everything. The air was hot. The leather of the seat was hot, burning the backs of Gustav's legs. The metal frames of the sunglasses were hot. Everywhere, oppressive heat. That's Arizona.

The SUV continued down the road, unabated, for some time.

Suddenly an expletive, screeching tires, violent, jarring motion and a gut wrenching crash. Bits of broken glass rained down. Gustav was completely still, paralyzed in shock. He stirred, twitching with the nervous energy of a body that had suddenly ceased rapid movement. His whole body tingled, pin pricks in his fingers.

"Andre," he said, "Andre? What happened?" He reached over, groping at the driver's seat. He found Andre's shoulder and shoved him a few times. No response. He felt for Andre's head. It was bent over the steering wheel. He poked the motionless face but received no response. "Oh, shit," he thought, "Andre's dead."

Still numb, dazed, he grabbed the nylon handle on the top of his book bag and his cane. He opened the door, and stepped out, foolishly. He tripped over something hard and went sprawling. The cane flew from his hand and he fell, face first, into the sand. Stricken by sudden panic, he sprang up. He began to search frantically for the cane, slapping the hard ground violently, twisting and turning in place. Luckily it was within reach. He grabbed it and stood;

now realizing that in his frantic search he had lost his sense of direction. Perhaps only a few yards from the car, he was completely lost. Fear seized him. His breathing, already strained, became all the more labored. He spun his cane around him hoping to hit the car. No luck. He realized that if he began to move in the wrong direction he might become lost for good, wandering through the desert. His eyes began to well up. He cried out and stomped in frustration. The desperate voice echoed across the dunes, and the obliterating isolation of the expanse began to set in. Throwing his backpack on, he wandered off into the void, hoping to find the road.

He walked unsteadily, tapping along the uneven ground with his cane. Stones and tufts of grass littered the ground, and his going was fraught with difficulty, tripping and stumbling every few steps. Beads of sweat began to form on his forehead. One reached critical mass and trickled down his face. The cool track lingered and began to itch.

Continuing in the direction that he assumed was north, his cane came into contact with some vertical mass. He tested it, hitting it with the cane. The cane bounced back dully and he suspected that the object must be organic. He reached out to touch it. Needles jabbed his fingers and palm and he felt drops of blood begin to swell forth from some of the wounds. He drew back in pain. "A cactus," he thought.

He turned from the cactus and continued walking. He walked for what felt like hours, but time became meaningless to him with so little in the world to indicate its passage. He occupied himself by humming the song from the radio or counting his steps.

He could on occasion here the cry of birds in the distance. One cry grew closer and closer as he walked. When the sound seemed particularly close, he stopped. The rustle of feathers was faintly discernible, and he could sense the eyes of some creature upon him. He paused and turned

his head toward the sound, as if he could will himself to see it. Under the bird's gaze a strange feeling came over him. It squawked at him. He could feel some connection form between them; he thought he could feel its mind. He was stricken by the purity of its perception, the rapid transfer of sensory data into thought and action. The skittering of its talons over the rough ground was faintly audible as it moved about in response to his own, hesitant movements. He felt an uncomfortable brotherhood with the creature; familiarity but at the same time a violent division between these two animals perceiving each other in a desolate world. That violence took hold of him and a rage grew in his chest. Tightness and pressure spread through his body. Jealousy, jealousy that such a creature should see the world while he stumbled about in blackness, jealousy that it should fly and see everything. See flowers, see canyons, see colors. See sunsets. See him. The bird usurped his rightful place on the hierarchy of existence. It looked upon him, took in his visage, when he could never do it himself. He swung the cane down in the direction of the bird, smashing it against the ground. He heard again a rustling of feathers, and he felt the slight breeze produced by its wings as it took flight. To produce such an effect he supposed that it must be a large bird. He called it a vulture.

His assaults had alerted some other creature, and he perceived the jarring and unmistakable sound of a rattlesnake. It hissed like a sausage on a hot stove. Gustav remained completely still, the breath caught in his throat. He didn't dare to attempt to move away, on the off chance that he should move closer to it. It continued to shake violently, angrily. It seemed as if it was speaking to him, but he couldn't tell what it was saying. Realizing the futility of the situation, he relaxed. For several tense seconds, he stood opposite the serpent. It continued, tempting him to make the first move. Then, perhaps sensing he was no danger, the snake

silenced its voice and disappeared. Still tense, he tried to move away from where he suspected it had gone. He continued on his way.

His progress was slow, but after a short while he came upon what felt like a large boulder. The heat had exhausted him and his clothes were soaked through with sweat. He sat down on the boulder and took off his shirt. He threw the disgusting rag, heavy with moisture, down on the rock beside him and heard a distinct slap. He pulled a book from his bag and turned to his place. His fingers slid over the page. The story centered around some idealistic young man, accused of some crime he hadn't committed. The story was obviously an allegory, with a Christ figure as its hero. He grimaced and shut the book.

His stomach began to rumble, and he remembered an apple that he had put in his bag before he left home. In a quick motion he pulled the bag to him and fumbled around in the front pocket. Finding it, he pulled it from the bag and took a bite. It was sweet but tart, and the juice momentarily slaked his thirst. He knew that soon he would be even thirstier. Realizing that he had left his water bottle in the car, he slumped forward dejectedly. At this point it might as well have been thousands of miles away for all his chances of ever finding it. His eyes began to well up again. If only he could see, this would hardly be a problem. If only he could see he might have lived. So many problems, so many failures, all because of his useless eyes.

The knowledge of his impending death sank in. It was a cool, numbing feeling. Even in that burning desert he felt cold, cold and impossibly alone. For a brief moment he felt the pain of existence, the pain of individual being, divided eternally, mind and body, from the natural world. He imagined he could feel every cell squirming, screaming in agony, wishing only to cease and return to nothingness. But in another moment the feeling was gone and his discomfort

overwhelmed his senses. “This is how it ends,” he thought, “a miserable end to a miserable prick.” In a rage, he threw the apple into nothingness. He submitted to his fate.

Then as if by divine intervention a voice rang out.

“Sir, excuse me sir!” He heard a long Texas drawl. He hurried to pull his shirt on. “Sir! Are you alright?”

“Yes! Hello? Thank you.” The words burst out of his mouth, in nervous excitement. “Yes. I’m lost. My cousin crashed his car somewhere in the desert. I’ve been wandering for hours. I think he’s dead.”

“Well, I see the car son.” The man, probably an older gentleman from the sound of his voice, muttered uncomfortably. “It’s not 30 yards from you.”

Gustav shrunk in embarrassment. He realized he must have been walking in circles for hours. For a minute he heard the sound of footsteps on the dry ground and the sound of the man rummaging in the car.

“Oh, he’s not dead! He’s just knocked out!” The old man’s voice yelled out from the distance. “It ain’t no problem, but we better rush him to the hospital! Can you help me with this?”

Gustav sat in silence for a moment. “Not really, sir! I’m kind of blind,” he yelled back.

“Oh, sorry! I should have realized! Hey, Sheilah, can you help me with this fella?” The old man and his wife helped load Andre and Gustav into the car.

Driving back Sheilah said to him, “You sure must be relieved that we found you.”

“Yes,” he said, forcing a smile, “Thank you both. I’d be a goner without you.” But sitting in the air conditioned car and racing ever closer toward home, his uneasy mind squirmed.

Relieved, yes, he thought, but still blind.