

# THE DUST DEVIL





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# **THE DUST DEVIL**

A SHORT STORY

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## THE DUST DEVIL

The sky was a thick, mottled gray. Clouds skittered across the sky, but one could not be determined from the other. A foggy drizzle hung in the air, saturating everything that could not escape from its penetrating grip. A breeze was having difficulty pushing the fallen leaves across the lawn toward the next home on the block. Rain had fallen and pasted the orange, yellow, amber, mottled, and red colors together, and then to the ground. They were molded into a batch of a sticky substance that appeared more like a quilted carpet covering the earth than what they really were: dead leaves dislodged from life that had fallen to their grave. They were an annually fulfilled prophecy warning anyone who dared to watch the autumn ritual of their own eventual fate.

The few leaves that did remain on the trees rustled in the wind and wrestled to keep their grip on what life they had left against their inevitable demise. Dampness caused the bark on the branches and trunks of the trees to turn dark, almost black. They appeared threatening, unfriendly, and most certainly foreboding.

Harley was content to sit at his kitchen table, drinking coffee and wishing that “Curley” would return home soon. Casandra felt a need to visit her mother in the city every once in a while. The tie between mother and daughter was strong. Harley could not understand why that was so, but it was, and he had long ago learned to live with it. He went through the same routine every time that she felt compelled to make another pilgrimage back home. On Friday night, he enjoyed the freedom. On Saturday morning, he began to miss her. And on Sunday, he remembered again that he couldn’t live without her. He was beginning to miss her.

He spread his fingers apart, the palm of his hand face down upon the plastic tablecloth that was spread out across

the composite maple tabletop. Slowly, he began to beat his fingers, one after the other, against the sticky surface.

*I have got to get up out of this chair and get something done*, the words rolled over in his mind, as if they were the words of a song he dreamed up as he drummed a tune on the table.

He pushed his chair back away from the table, hooking his forefinger through the too-narrow handle of his favorite mug, and moved toward the coffee pot for his second refill. As he poured, he overshot the mug, spilling the dark liquid across the laminate surface of the countertop. He watched it flood toward the crack between the counter and the wall underneath the window over the sink. Most of it disappeared like a miniature waterfall, out of sight and out of his mind. He wiped the remaining stain from the countertop with the left sleeve of his shirt with one swipe, and brought the steaming cup to his lips with his free hand.

Harley shoved his left hand deep into the front pocket of his tattered jeans, propped himself up against the edge of the counter, and stared out through a window pane that dressed up the top half of the wooden kitchen door leading out to their back yard.

*Where are you, Billy?* The thought was raised out of his own memory, certainly. Still, it surprised him, as if it had come out of nowhere. He had not thought of his brother for a while. He never was found. He had been reported missing a year ago today, but not a trace of him had ever been discovered. As far as the police could determine, he had just disappeared. They supposed that he had changed his identity and moved away for a new life.

‘It happens,’ they declared.

He stared at his brother’s home across the back yard, and his eyes moistened as he replayed a precious memory of the two of them, tossing a football and barbecuing hotdogs on some long past Sunday afternoon in the theatre of his mind. He could see them still, as plain as day, but

then the image slowly dissipated, absorbed into, and stolen away by the gray, damp, fog that dominated and permeated everything. All that was left of Billy was a bamboo rake as his memorial, left leaning against the white birch that stood as a silent sentinel, marking the property line between the two families' homes.

Harley jumped, spilling drops of the hot liquid over the rim of his mug when the clock struck 8:00 AM. He pushed himself away from the wall and stood straight, taking a long draught of java. He appreciated the warmth it provided, and felt it slither down the length of its journey until it came to rest, settling somewhere out of the way down in his gut, for the time being.

He drew his mouth taught and rolled his tongue across the surface of his upper lip, and turned away from the scene outside. Rinsing his mug at the faucet, he dropped it onto the stainless steel surface of the sink and finally decided that he had better get to work. Curley would be disappointed if he did not get any of his chores completed by the time she finally did return from her mother's. He grabbed his fall jacket and thrust his arm through the sleeve as he passed through the back door on his way toward the shed. He was destined to retrieve the tools he would need for this job.

Once outside, he shivered from a chill that he had not expected. Maybe he needed a heavier coat. He involuntarily pulled his collar up around his neck and zipped up the coat until it closed together, nearly under his chin.

It was dark inside the little wooden building. He stumbled against the handle of a shovel that had fallen from its place since the last time he had been in the building.

*I wish I'd put a window in this darned thing when I built it*, he said under his breath, kicking the wooden shaft aside. He returned to the front door to open it wider, letting in more light. Through the murky, dusty light, he spied his old bamboo rakes hanging on the back wall.

*They'll still do for one more year, he convinced himself. They still have more than half of their tines left.*

He made his way around the wheelbarrow, over the riding lawn mower, and through the empty barrels that he needed to fill with sand in preparation of the upcoming winter. He had to reach over three sets of sawhorses that had somehow managed to work themselves into his way once again. He had to stretch too far, and slipped, falling on his belly against the crosspiece of the nearest horse. The head of a nail that had not been driven in far enough cut through his shirt and scraped his skin. A trickle of blood flowed out and stained his t-shirt, and soaked through into his flannel shirt.

Angered, he tossed the horse aside where it collided with the front grill of the lawn mower. He heard the distinctive sound of the cheap plastic covering over the headlights of the machine crack, and then he heard a tinkling sound, as several of the tiny pieces hit the wooden floor.

His eyes were becoming more accustomed to the dusty darkness inside the shed. He could see more clearly now, and was able to maneuver closer to the rakes so that he could easily pry them from the grip of their perch along the wall. Once they were in his possession he retreated into the misty gray of the out-of-doors, armed with a pair of old bamboo rakes.

Something prompted him to glance over his shoulder toward his brother's house. He could not see anything out of the ordinary. Nothing seemed out of place. The old barbecue grill sat rusting away beside the garage, partially hidden by overgrown vines and piled up broken bricks and cinder blocks. Mildew, mold, and moss grew thick atop the old asbestos roof shingles. That spot remained shady, having been protected from the sun by the massive, ever-spreading branches of an ancient oak tree. A lack of paint

on the dark side of the old wooden structure allowed the wooden boards to rot and begin to fall away.

Harley's eye was drawn to a couple of colored leaves that rose up and danced across some old railroad ties that had been tossed aside, and left to decay at the back of the shed. The wind pushed the pair first to the left, and then back to the right. Two or three other leaves joined in their ritual as the spinning dance continued across the junk pile. Long shafts of uncut grass swayed and bowed as the twirling wind picked up speed, drawing the dancers closer and closer to each other in a frantic chase to catch up with each other in a tightening circle.

Harley stood, mesmerized by the hypnotic movement of the debris as more and more of it was picked up into the unseen shaft of spinning air. The funnel grew taller, repeatedly slamming itself against the rear of the rickety wooden structure, and increasing in velocity.

He caught another movement out of the corner of his eye. He instinctively turned toward his brother's house in time to see the curtains that were hung in the living room window waver and flutter. *Glenda?* Harley was sure that it must have been his brother's wife, but he saw no one. He stole a glance at the other windows along that side of the split-entry home. Each curtain was moving, slightly. At least he *thought* he could detect the gentle trembling of the cotton fabric hung in each glass.

Now he could hear the suspicious spiral begin to whistle. He turned back toward the phenomenon to watch it move away from the back of the garage. As saturated as the piles of leaves were, the little tornado was able to pick up any of it that lay in its path. As it zipped back and forth across the back yard, it cleared a swath of sticks and leaves, swallowing them up into its swelling belly. As it grew wider, so it grew taller. Now it reached nearly to the peak of the old building.

Harley stared into the circle, fascinated by the mysterious forms and themes shaping inside it. The darkening center seemed to take some kind of a image. Nothing he could recognize, but his soul was drawn to it.

*Eyes?* No, it could not be eyes. He talked himself out of that thought. He could imagine that he had spied a set of gigantic cat's eyes. They were yellow and bright, with a dark center. *Only the colors of the leaves*, he explained away the vision in his heart. Yes, it had to have been. They have now disappeared. They were gone. It was as if they were never there to begin with.

“Good.” He found himself speaking out to no one.

He turned to begin his chores. He walked back toward his own home, and began to sweep the outdoors at the base of the back wall of the house. He pushed the bamboo tines close to the cement foundation and began to scrape the bent ends toward himself, drawing small sticks, stones, and fallen leaves with each stroke. He repeated the exercise until he reached the entire length of the house, and then turned to work his way back to where he started.

The wind pulled the tail of his shirt out from under his coat. He felt it beginning to flap in the stiff breeze. He turned toward it; feeling like someone was tapping him on the shoulder. He watched the dust devil scoot away from him and stop fixed, about ten feet away.

*Odd*, he thought. He returned to his task, but could not shake the ominous darkness that overwhelmed him. Suddenly, he began to feel sick to his stomach.

The sky overhead darkened, even more than it already was. A cold chill spread across his shoulders and down his spine. He was beginning to panic. He wished that he had put his heavier coat on. He wanted to quit. He suddenly wanted to drop the rake right there where he was, and run inside the house. He wanted to jump into his bed, and pull the covers up over his head and hide from the world.

*Curley*. Her name slowly crept into his mind. *She'll be mad*. He promised her that he would have the cleanup completed before she returned. He recalled the promise to do the same last year, but then he could not keep it. The yard never was cleared of the mess, and it was quite a sight when the snow melted, and springtime finally arrived. Last year was just too close to his brother's disappearance. They had spent many memorable times in this yard that they shared together, and he could not bear the sadness and pain of working in it just yet. He did not want to disappoint Curley two years in a row. This year, the lawn would be raked clean, if it was the last thing that he did.

*No, I'd better finish up*, he told himself. Armed with his rake, he returned to the work ahead of him with a renewed will.

The sound sent from the twirling circle spooked him. A low moaning, a guttural whistle, rose from somewhere within it. He tried to ignore it, but he was compelled to listen. He cocked his head sideways in an effort to discern it more clearly. Was it speaking? No. What was it?

His eyes became fixated upon the spectacle. Dark splotches suddenly appeared inside it, and disappeared just as quickly. White. Black. Yellow. Red. Colors. A hand.

*What?* It was gone, but he was certain that he saw it. He could not have. That was impossible. He dismissed the idea immediately, but the picture returned to haunt him.

The low moan increased in pitch and intensity. The spinning became so fast that everything inside the funnel became a blur. He could no longer recognize any of the individual pieces of material or the identity of any substance as it picked up speed.

He watched it begin to move again, closer to him. He backed away. It moved closer still. The sound became deafening. He wondered why none of the neighbors noticed the horror of it. None came out of their homes to investigate. No one came to watch him watch.

He moved toward the spruce that he and Curley had planted the year they moved in to their new home. The wind moved with him, edging closer, and then closer still.

Harley was nervous. The sickening feeling deep in his gut was weakening him. His legs felt rubbery, hardly able to hold him up. He moved toward the backside of the tree, wanting to keep it between him and the menace. The cylinder moved into the tree destroying the spruce, tearing limbs off it, and then uprooting the entire tree, lopping it over to one side.

Harley bolted for the back door of his house, but the spinning circle shot between him and the safety of his home.

The high-pitch became a scream, a deafening warning. Was the animated thing was forming a personality? Did it already have one? Harley was certain of that, but he could not determine what it was or what it wanted. The base of the thing shifted closer, then stopped. Then it moved closer again.

Harley was so focused on the presence that he was unaware of hail, the size of nickels and dimes that had begun to pelt down upon him. A cold, freezing rain began to fall. He failed to notice the clouds formed by his breath, or that he had lost his hat to the violent wind long ago. His jacket flapped in the anger of the current of air that sped past his body, popping the buttons off his shirt, and almost ripping the clothing off his body.

He felt that if the wind did not desist, his eyes would pop out of his head, and that his insides would be sucked out in the vacuum created by this vision. He could hear nothing else except a roaring, like that of a freight train passing over him. He could feel nothing else except an increasing pressure pushing down upon him, like that of a crusher, pressing in and threatening to turn him inside out.

He was freezing. An icy grip closed around him, and everything turned as black as the darkest midnight. No sight, no sound, no feeling.

The telephone rang, and Glenda rose from breakfast at her kitchen table on Monday morning.

“Glenda? Hi.”

“Hey Curley, welcome home!”

“Glenda, have you seen Harley?” There was a worried sound to her voice.

“No. Not since before you left for the weekend.” She paused, knowing that there was more to the question than met the eye.

“When I got in last yesterday afternoon, there was no sign of him.” Curley sounded terribly distressed.

“None?”

“Dishes were in the sink. I thought he’d gone out somewhere, and that he’d come and crawl into bed sometime during the night.” She began to stutter nervously. “He never did come home.”

Fear struck Glenda’s heart. An all-too-familiar scene replayed in her heart. She moved to the kitchen window to peer across the back yard to the rear of Curley’s house. She looked over the top of the toppled spruce and spied the bamboo rake that rested just where Harley must have left it, leaning against the tree next to his brother’s.

Curley walked to the back door, and stared out the window across the same scene. Her gaze found Glenda’s face and their widening eyes locked.

THE END