

Dwayne Hickenbottom and Journey to the Centre of the Birth.

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Being dead had no advantages. He'd thought long and hard about that statement. The grim possibility of a slow and gruesome death had often crossed his simple mind, not because he was suicidal, sadistic or even just a bit strange in the head; just really really clumsy. If there were a way to blunder through a situation and escalate it to its most volatile point with the minimum of effort, he would find it. Jebediah was a Tanglefoot.

Tanglefeet are a people so awesomely unlucky, that they don't even get entered into the Readers Digest special draws. As a species, they generally keep themselves to themselves. Partially because they are a simple folk, taking pride in the joys of the old world, such as farming and raising cattle. Long hard days ploughing fields and shearing the Yakkal are the stuff of dreams for the Tanglefeet. They'd be the first to entertain any guest who'd wonder onto their land they are as kind and hospitable as they are simple. More often than not though, the rest of the galaxy tends to keep well away for fear of their bad luck and sudden uncoordinated physical movements being contagious.

Not a day would pass without Jebediah blundering into some form of compromising situation or another. Growing up on the farm back on Heekal Seventeen, his unfortunate knack for getting into the most unlikely and unpleasant predicaments was considered 'cute' and 'adorable' by his toothless old Grandmother. Though in all fairness, Grammy was a few peanuts short of a full jar and could often be found talking to her toes.

The journey to the palace had been relatively uneventful. Unless you count the incident in the marshlands when two female Fillokrackens misinterpreted his request for directions as a three way wedding proposal. The ceremony itself was 'just darling' he remembered thinking. Although the buffet and dance went on a little too long for his country tastes and Jebediah was short on time already. The suns were already beginning to set and he was carrying precious cargo.

'Well?' The King's voice boomed out through the Kingdom. It was that kind of deep throaty voice that could almost be considered sexual, if it wasn't being projected from such an unpleasant smelling creature. 'My mother has *how many* noses?'

'Three.' Assured Jebediah. 'Three. Each of them is as beautiful and pert as...'

Thinking on his feet was just another of life's little skills that had eluded poor little Jebediah. The tatty looking farmer's son was as swift and inspiring with his tongue as a man with a mouthful of a cheese and gravy sandwich, chewing through his best speech on paint drying times. '...Your nipples.'

'My what?!'

‘Nipples..?’ Taking a break from her usual pastime of kicking him when he was down, Lady Luck sided with Jebediah on this one. The King was a very proud ruler and was increasingly conscious of the battle against gravity his chest had been fighting these past few years. No longer was he the muscular young dragon he had been in his youth. Old age had snuck up on him and turned him into middle-aged and portly ruler. He was well aware that he had to appear strong to his court, and a sagging chest could be seen as a sign of weakness. Having Jebediah compliment his body like this pleased him greatly.

‘Very well. I will excuse your rudeness this time.’ He snorted, flexing his chest slightly. ‘Just mind you watch your words in future. Or perhaps next time I might not be so forthcoming with my mercy.’

‘Thank you your Majesty.’ He coughed. The oxygen rushed back into his lungs as the King removed his body weight from the Tanglefoot’s chest. ‘You’re very kind.’

‘I know.’ The King looked down his noses at Jebediah, not once offering to help him up from the marble floor where he’d thrown him.

‘Now tell me again farm boy, who are you and why shouldn’t I have you beheaded?’

‘Ah’m Jebediah Dirtyknees.’ He dusted himself down, trying not to wince when he saw how the King’s thigh scales had scratched his arms during the scuffle. ‘And ah bring eggs from the farm.’

‘Eggs?’

‘Yes.’

‘You bring eggs?’

‘From the farm. Yes.’

‘Well...?’

‘Yes thank you.’ Jebediah smiled, his bloodied lips framing all five of his wooden teeth. ‘And how are you?’

‘Dandy.’ The King snarled, bemused at the simpleton before him holding out his hand expectantly.

‘Shake?’

‘I’m not shaking your hand.’

‘Why ever not? That’s not very gentlemanly of you.’

‘In case you’d not noticed it, I’m not a gentleman. I’m a Dragon. The King of Dragon City, master and chief of all Dragons. The strongest and most fearsome ruler this world has ever known!’

‘...’

‘Besides, you spat in it.’

‘To clean it.’ He continued to smile, gesturing again how he wanted to shake hands.

‘So where *are* these eggs?’ This was all becoming too frustrating for the King.

‘Eggs?’

‘Yes, you said you brought me some eggs.’

‘I did?’ The King nodded in disbelief at the delivery boy. ‘Oh yeah, there they are, back yonder.’

Jebediah and the Dragon King turned to look at the pool of broken Yakkal eggs that oozed together at the other side of the hall. The green and yellow mess glistened in the sun.

‘Ah.’ The toothy grin faded. ‘It’s not my fault!’

‘*You* dropped them!’

'You attacked me!'

'No I didn't!'

'Yes you did!'

'You're right. I did.' The King agreed. 'But you shouldn't have said that about my mother!'

'Ah didn't say any such thing.' Jebediah protested. 'Ah walked in the room and you passed wind.'

'I did *not*!'

'You did too.' Jebediah grinned. Like all simple-minded people, there was nothing he liked better than to talk about bodily functions. Flatulence was a personal favourite of his. 'That there guard back there done introduced me to you, then you done let out a royal bottom burp.'

'Infidel!' The King exclaimed, outraged at such a suggestion.

'It's true, your Majesty.' Seconded the guard, who had been eaves dropping the whole conversation. 'And truth be told, it did kind of sound like a voice.'

'Stank too.'

'Are you saying...?' The King folded his large scaly arms in disbelief. 'That when this scruffy looking Tanglefoot entered the royal hall, that I, the Dragon King, passed gas?'

'You done farted.' Jebediah nodded, still grinning like the simpleton that he was.

'And that...' He continued. 'I mistook the sound of my own royal gas, as the voice of this hayseed insulting the number of noses that my mother has?'

'It is possible, your Majesty.' The guard stood to attention, praying that the King didn't notice that he wasn't really a guard, but the janitor. The real guard had taken the day off to see his girlfriend in the next village over. He'd just offered to step in for the day because he liked the uniform.

'Infidels!' The King threw up his arms in rage as he commanded the guard to remove Jebediah from his presence. This came as quite a relief to both Jebediah and the guard, as dragon gas can be quite potent. In fact, it is thought that long ago a whole flock of Skyshark were once wiped out after they came too close to the rear end of a Dragon Warrior after eating a rather hot and spicy meal. The story goes that the force of the offense was so strong that their nostrils exploded, causing them to all fly into the side of a mountain. This was particularly embarrassing for the Dragon Warrior as his intended mate was perched upon the cliff of said mountain and received a broken wing from the sudden fall.

Jebediah started back out on the road home to Heekal Seventeen. A wasted journey you might think, not him though, in his mind everyday was an adventure and every step a new beginning. A somewhat simple and childlike view on life you may think; yet this is the way of all Tanglefeet. So what if he'd failed to deliver the Yakkal eggs to the Dragon King and because of this, forfeited his earnings? The guard he'd met had been very kind, not as rough and demanding as the guards who usually eject him from such places. Plus he had that wonderful smell of disinfectant that he found so agreeable.

He knew he'd done it. Naturally, he'd deny it until he was blue in the face. He'd done it though. He knew it. They knew it. Everyone would know it. He'd deny it though, over and over. No one would ever question him though, not to his face. They never do, never to his face. Behind close doors they'd talk though. They'd talk about

him, and what he did. The disgrace. But it was natural! Everybody does it. Even him, even the Dragon King. Should he have the guard and the farm boy silenced? What if this got out? He'd be a laughing stock in his own Kingdom. Somebody would have to pay. Who though? Who was to blame for what had happened? He'd not eaten anyone who hadn't agreed with him. Well, that wasn't strictly true, if they had agreed with him he wouldn't have eaten them. That wasn't the point though; somewhere down the line he'd eaten someone, or something that had upset his stomach. What was it? Who would pay?

His eyes searched the throne room for an answer, as if one would suddenly appear written across the wall. None did though. Usually answers came quickly to him when he sat here. It was his place to meditate on the events of the day and make sense of everything. His time to be alone within himself and be at one with everything around him.

Then it came to him, last Tuesday! He'd been out on a royal visit to one of those peasant towns that his public relations advisor kept telling him to visit. 'Smile. Wave. Kiss the baby.' He hated those, it took him forever memorise those motions. In his first year of rule he'd accidentally eaten four babies. 'Well' he remembered arguing with his Public Relations Advisor, 'If they put them that close to my mouth at lunchtime, what do they expect?'

Lunchtime. That was it! They'd stopped off to get lunch at a local fast food restaurant before meeting the public. Something about making sure he was fed before greeting the new mothers.

That had to be it! He must have been given a bad burger at the fast food restaurant. That's what caused his lower intestines to feel like they'd been spin dried. Holding his gurgling mid region and swearing under his breath, the King made a silent promise;

Whoever had sold him that burger would pay. After all, he was the Dragon King! He had been poisoned and not only was that treason; it was the direct cause of him to be flatulent in public. The whole event had to have been premeditated by a sinister mastermind. There was no other way it could have happened. Fast food employees are heavily trained professionals, skilled well in their craft. The notion that one of them could let a bad burger make it out to the public was unheard of. He had been *intentionally* poisoned, and there would be hell to pay!

He knew if he sat on his throne long enough everything would become clear. It always did. With new motivation and a plan of revenge in mind, he stood up and flushed.

He could tell that he wasn't going to do it. He'd seen it a thousand times before and was about to see one thousand and one. The obese bugger threw more food on the floor than he did down his oversized gullet. Dwayne couldn't fathom how someone who'd obviously had so much practice at eating, could get the process so fundamentally wrong.

'Food goes in the mouth.' He thought to himself. 'It's not that complex a principle is it? Simply pick up the morsel of your choice and place it between your teeth. That's in the large hole above the chin, just below the nostrils. Surely it isn't that hard a movement to grasp?'

Dwayne had watched the creature gorge through three heavily stacked trays of burgers of various size, shape and grease content. Most of which had escaped its intended destiny of being devoured, and instead been propelled through the air to various parts of the lobby. Buns on the walls, meat patties on the ceiling, napkins everywhere! The only tidy spot in the whole area was the small pile of little green

things that the customer had painstakingly pulled from every purchase, and placed in a neat pile at the edge of the table.

This was a common event, Dwayne had noticed. Even though it was possible to specify that you didn't want any of those little green things in your meal, nobody ever did. They seemed much happier having them in their food and removing them themselves. He thought on some primal level this was the modern equivalent of hunting. Not content with just accepting the meal in front of them, they felt the need to contribute somehow to the feast. Hunting down all the miniature green nastys and expelling them from the banquet seemed to appease the urge. The neat pile they always left them in was obviously some form of celebratory display.

With the last four burgers being unboxed, he showed no signs of doing it. There was only one exit from the lobby and there were no less than three bins between there and here. Dwayne had only recently emptied each one and placed a fresh sack in the bin housings, as shown in his 'Lobby Host Handbook'. So he knew full well that there was no good reason for the customer to not drop off at least *some* of his garbage as he passed by.

Here we go; last burger gone, final carton of fries being forced into the face and inevitably dropped to the table as the mouth reaches maximum capacity. Now the big finish, the giant sized cup of diet soda...done! Now was he going to be the one? Was this piece of hairy backed knuckle dragging consumer that manners forgot, going to have the thought and consideration to take his tray to the easily accessible trash bin? Would he be the first of his kind to make the giant intellectual leap between the piles of rubbish he now sat belching into and the shiny clean swing bin, not twelve foot away from him?

Dwayne tried not to look as if he'd spent the last few minutes watching the customer throw food all over his nice clean lobby. In order to do this he utilized a trick that he'd honed back in his previous job at the stationery store. He'd learnt early on that if he walked around with a pen in his hand and frowned a lot, stopping occasionally to point at the corners of the ceiling and pretend to suddenly realise something of moderate importance, that anyone one who was watching him would be duped into thinking he was doing something productive. Sometimes he'd carry a small black notebook with him and gesture like he was taking notes, just to maximise the effect. Unfortunately though he'd lost his pen this morning, so he just continued to mop the same bit of floor that he'd been mopping for the past ten minutes.

Here he goes.

'Hello Master.'

'Hello Nigel.'

'How's it going out here Master? Are you keeping the lobby nice and clean for our wonderful customers?'

'Just fine. The place is just darling... Now move your spotty green butt out the way, I'm about to beat some table manners into that son of a sloth over there!'

'Over where?' Dwayne knew full well that the customer had left the restaurant after Nigel had fluttered in, but he had to do his best to convince his companion that he wasn't the lily-livered coward he actually was.

'Ah man.' Dwayne threw his mop to the ground in frustration. 'You let him get away!'

'Sorry...'

'He left his trash all over the place too. Now I've got to clean that up! Thanks Nigel.'

'I'm sorry Master, I didn't mean to.'

‘Just get this cleaned up.’

‘Okay Master.’ Unaware of how he’d just been duped into taking care of Dwayne’s workload, Nigel smiled happily to himself and picked up the first burger box. He hummed a little tune as he piled the mess into a black sack and sanitised the table for the next person. Truth be told, he was just happy to be inside away from the rain. He hated the rain.

Dwayne hated humming. Partially because he wasn’t very good at it, (he spat when he tried) but more so because he found that people only ever seemed to hum the most annoying pieces of music that would play repetitively over and over in the back of his mind at a later date. He’d lost count of the number of times he’d woken up with the theme from *that* soap suck in his head. How did it go? ‘Daaa daaa. De de de de de daaa daaa...’ That was it. Aw crap! Now he’d have that in his head all day!

‘All clean.’

‘Impossible! You’ve only just started.’ Dwayne stood in astonishment. Not because Nigel had finished cleaning the area in record time, leaving it clean enough to perform a highly delicate bowel surgery operation on the table, but somehow he’d managed to become even more annoying than Dwayne had thought possible.

‘Uhm.’ Dwayne flustered and pointed quickly at a non-existent ketchup stain on the floor. ‘You missed a bit.’

‘Where?’ But by the time Nigel looked back up, his role model had disappeared. Presumably to the coffee machine for his favourite beverage.

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