

Poor Dumb Turkey



**A Short Story
by**

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“Whoa! Not that one,” Sam Miller called. Pushing his rangy form in front of the elderly Yemeni he more gently told him. “It's all right mate, I'll do this one myself.”

“No problem, Mr Sam, I fill it like the other one”, the old man reached again for the jerry-can fixed to the side of the Land Cruiser. “You must always have both cans full of water,”

“Yeah, right, but this one's dirty. I need to clean it first.”

Dirty wasn't the word, Miller laughed to himself. If the dumb turkey opened the can he'd have a fit. It still contained the best part of a gallon of “Flash” – undiluted spirit. Very illicit spirit!

In the 'Dry' state of Qaisuma the distillation of alcohol was a lucrative source of extra income for a fellow who had the nerve to do it. Last night he had set off to deliver a couple of gallons, carried in that innocent-looking water can, but his customer, a new bloke, had chickened out of the full quantity. Leaving Sam with the surplus, and out of pocket – or so he figured it.

He'd been so ticked off that when he drove back to his quarters he'd just left the jerry-can strapped to the Cruiser, gone inside and downed a few jars. Quite a few it had turned out. What the hell, he had thought, it's Friday tomorrow so no work.

Today, later than planned, he was fuelling his vehicle prior to setting off into the desert on a fossil hunt --- having totally forgotten to offload the illicit liquor. Still, no worries, he'd drop it off in a minute. He was keen to get away into the desert. Fossils always had the potential to bring in extra dollars. Blokes often made money on the side by fossicking. Petrified wood and 'Desert Roses' were easy enough to find. If you knew where to look.

What drove Miller were stories such as the finding of a fossilised fish, complete in every detail, over near Riyadh. The joker who smuggled that out had retired on what a collector in Hamburg had paid. Or so the story went.

Here in Qaisuma too, up in the northern jebels, there was stuff to be found. Access was difficult, but that kept out the turkeys. Most people were, in Miller's book, dumb turkeys, unable to see the big picture. He even had a big sign over his office desk saying, "How can you fly like an eagle when you're surrounded by turkeys."

The Yemeni sweet-water attendant was securing the one filled jerry-can to the side of Miller's vehicle, whose interior was crammed with racks of tools and test equipment. He was still grumbling away at Sam's refusal to let him fill the second can. Miller ignored him, but he could see the fellow giving him the sort of look that suggested he knew why he hadn't been allowed to touch the second can.

“Up yours, old fella,” Miller told him with a white-toothed grin as he climbed into the vehicle.

Arriving outside his quarters, he checked the time. “Jeez! I should have been on the road two hours ago,” He unfastened the liquor-containing jerry-can and carried in to his kitchen. No time to decant it now so he dumped it under the sink. He swiftly packed a few basics. His did not need much food

for the day ahead, but he made sure to half-fill a Koolbox with ice from his Westinghouse, into which he arranged a half a dozen cans of near-beer.

Into a brown paper bag was unceremoniously dumped a half-loaf of bread, a fresh packet of cheese slices, a couple of tomatoes and gherkins. “Some gourmet feast,” he said with a grin.

Humping the insulated box and the small bag out to the Cruiser, Miller saw two of his neighbours loading their pick-up truck. They had a portable barbecue, a couple of 5-gallon insulated water containers, two Igloo-chests and bags of fruit and stuff.

“G'day Dick. Gary! You fellas off on a Transarabia expedition?” Miller called sarcastically.

“Just the beach.” grunted Gary Webb as he lifted the Igloos onto the truck-bed. “Meeting some of the others down there.”

“That's right,” said the other man, “How about you? Are you coming for a change?”

“No, mate, I'm heading into Al Jawaz,” Miller lied with a straight face. Pointing to their load he jeered, “All that for a day at the beach? Christ, you really are a pair of turkeys. That's enough for a week.”

“Sooner a live turkey than vulture bait!” he got back.

They loaded their respective vehicles, bantering good-naturedly, until Miller yelled, “See you beach-bums tonight,” and drove off. The others waved. They were used to Sam Miller. He

was always a bit of a loner. Friendly enough with his dry sense of humour, but an independent type.

Once in a while he would let his hair down and tie one on with the rest of them, but generally he kept himself to himself. Everybody knew that Sam was into making an extra buck wherever he could, but that could be said for most of them.

As for Miller's stated destination, it was plausible. A half-hour drive away, Al Jawaz was the state capital and main commercial centre.

Through the Qaisoco main gate and onto the black-top highway, Miller put his foot down. When he reached the town its streets were congested. The Friday influx of Asian workers from outlying contractor's camps turned the town into a heaving obstacle course. The main street was clogged with camp buses disgorging their loads – and then pulling out again without use of wing mirrors or indicators.

Miller was easing his way off the main street and onto the North-bound highway when he felt his Cruiser lurch sideways. At the same time he heard the bang and screech of metal upon metal as a camp bus bruised its way past him.

“You crazy bastard!” he roared through his open window.

At first he needed all his concentration just to drive away from the junction. When he got a chance to pull onto the soft shoulder, he saw to his fury that the side-mounted water can and most of its mounting had been torn away.

“Shit! Dumb bus drivers.” He was so intent on cursing all bus drivers that the loss of his main water supply didn't really signify. Still swearing, Miller climbed back into the Cruiser and continued northward. Ninety minutes later he eased off the black-top onto a sand track marked by empty forty gallon oil drums. At first the track was relatively smooth, graded by the traffic serving the Gas-Oil Separator Plant which appeared a half-hour later.

Passing the GOSP the track rapidly deteriorated. Miller took a firmer grip on his steering wheel as the Cruiser bucked over the ‘corduroy’, wind-scoured corrugations in the track spaced to cause maximum discomfort. After another twenty minutes he saw the mesa-like jebel he was headed for. Knowing that it was still another hour's drive away he fished out a near-beer from the Koolbox. The icy liquid was heaven, so good that he cracked another, tossing the empty away

Setting the full can beside him he fumbled a cigarette into his mouth. As he lit it a deeper than usual rut in the track jolted the can onto the floor of the cab, half spilling its contents. "Christ! This really ain't my day," he blasphemed.

Just before noon he reached the mouth of a wadi which cut into the rugged Maroof. There were few signs of tyre tracks, but the cliffs ahead looked interesting as Miller drove deeper into the Jebel. Stopping, he savoured the desolation and barren stillness. He decided to try the cliffs on his left. Although everywhere was now exposed to the midday sun, that side would benefit from shadow later. Stuffing a fossicking hammer into a pocket and slinging the Koolbox onto a shoulder he began the scramble up the loose scree of tumbled rock.

Reaching a broad ledge about eighty feet above the wadi floor Miller set the Koolbox down and sucked in lungfuls of the dry air until his heart stopped pounding. When it did he gave himself the reward of another ice-cold 'tinny', and moved along the ledge, can in hand, searching.

He occasionally paused and chipped at the rock but soon abandoned each attempt. Moving on, he drained the already tepid fluid and dropped the empty can. As his eyes followed the can to its rest he spotted an obvious ammonite. It was face up,

embedded in a rock which had fallen from above. Miller squatted and lifted the rock. “Wow!” he cried. “It’s whole and it’s perfect.” The ammonite was indeed perfect: every spiral, whorl and indentation immaculately preserved through the millennia

Miller was awed that in his hand, eighty feet up a desert cliff, hours from the coast, was proof that this had all once been a seabed, burial ground of countless marine creatures ... and, he happily told himself, now money in Sam Miller’s piggy bank.

He turned his eyes to other rocks in the area. Could he be that lucky? His fingers closed over another large stone. As he lifted it there was a vicious hiss and a flash of serpentine movement beneath his hand.

“Shit!” Miller gasped, dropping the rock and leaping back. His right heel came down on the can he had so recently discarded. Although the soft metal crumpled there was still enough resistance to twist his foot beneath him. The ankle buckled, throwing his body violently down and to the right. As he crashed over the ledge his thigh hammered onto a jagged rock and he screamed at the explosion of pain.

He somersaulted down the steep slope, yelling until his head banged onto the wadi floor and he blacked out. By luck he

had fallen into an almost perfect ‘recovery position’ Just as well, because as consciousness returned, his body rebelled against the insults it had received and he vomited.

When he fully regained his senses there was no lapse of memory; he recalled only too well what had happened. Oddly though, right now he could feel no real pain in either leg, although his head throbbed unmercifully.

Time passed, with Miller lying still in shock until the fierceness of the sun beating down on his body forced him into some kind of protective action. Action his body immediately protested. Wave after wave of incredible pain surged through his injured thigh.

When the worst had subsided he kept his lower body still while running his hands over his head and upper body. The blood that now showed on his hands was already mostly tacky and dark without the brightness of active bleeding. Miller figured that he wasn’t in too bad shape – if you discounted a stinking headache and what had to be a broken leg! Gingerly exploring that leg he was hugely relieved that there was no massive bleeding or nasty chunks of bone sticking through his denims. By the Grace of God the great femoral artery was intact.

All he to do now was get himself back to the shelter of the Cruiser!

After minutes of painful experimentation Miller had reached a conclusion. Shit or bust, he was going to have to tough it out and drag himself along regardless. He could not stay in the open with the sun frying his brains, and for sure the Seventh Cavalry were not going to come charging to the rescue. That made him think of John Wayne. Old Duke wouldn't let a little thing like a busted leg hold him down, thought Miller grinning through his pain. Jeez, the Duke would self-amputate the offending limb with a Bowie knife – Fighting off fifty crazed Apaches with a handful of pebbles for an encore.

“Yeah! In your Hollywood dreams,” Miller told himself aloud, but, summoning every ounce of guts and determination, he also urged himself, “Come on then, sucker, be a friggin’ John Wayne.” Knowing that no sort of gentle approach would work, he gritted his teeth, reached forward, grabbed sand and rock – and pulled.

The inferno of pain that coursed through his body tore a ragged scream from his throat. Miller, sobbing and cursing, hauled himself forwards another foot or so. After the tenth such brutal effort he passed out again.

Coming to, he raised his head and estimated the distance to the Land Cruiser. It seemed tantalisingly close, but he knew it would be a long slow haul. Lowering his head, Miller looked at his watch. Somehow it had survived his fall and now showed two-twenty-four. Hell, nearly three hours to sundown. He had to reach the shade of the vehicle, no matter what.

Somehow he found the courage to carry on dragging himself forwards. Sometimes several metres, sometimes barely one before the pain overwhelmed him. He passed out a few times, but he persisted until nearly an hour later he made it. Shade! With his very last reserve of determination Miller dragged himself under the Cruiser's bulk. It was still bakingly hot but at last he was sheltered from the direct radiation of the sun.

His entire body was in protest at the abuses it had suffered. As his muscles relaxed a little from his exertions, Miller began to shiver uncontrollably in reaction and in shock. Feeling the mists of another lapse of consciousness approach he welcomed them.

Throughout the rest of that afternoon and into the night he fluctuated between spells of fitful sleep and painful awareness. The interior of Qaisuma was still influenced by its coast, and although cool its nocturnal temperature did not drop as dramatically as in the great deserts. Although he still had bouts of

shivering, and found his face filmed with a sheen of cold sweat from time to time, Miller was grateful. Especially for the sweats. He knew failure to perspire in his situation would be really bad news.

As dawn began to register, Miller realized that he must somehow get into the cab of the Cruiser and reach what few resources he had left. His main sources of liquid were now soaked into the road at Al Jawaz – or, dammit, inaccessible eighty feet up the cliff behind him. Inside the cab was a half-spilled near-beer, some tomatoes and a few small gherkins. He could also try radioing a distress message – if the crappy little comms set would transmit far enough!

Thinking these things was easy, but would his body obey? Hah! As if he had a choice. By now the pain from his damaged thigh had subsided to a dull, stiff ache – until he moved! His worst discomfort now came from the many abrasions to his hands, chest and ribs, aggravated as he had forced himself over the wadi bed yesterday.

“C’mon you wowser,” he muttered. “Time to rock ‘n roll.” As he crawled from beneath the Cruiser, he told himself, God, and the universe several other things. Not very polite things, but they helped him through his painful efforts.

His next giant hurdle was to raise himself erect enough to tackle the door. Every move involved pain. Sheer bloody-mindedness drove him through the grim agony of clawing his way upright, first using the wheel trim, then the upper tyre and finally the wing mirror to do so. His whole body demanded to be left at peace, but he fought on..

Miller was overjoyed to finally wrench the passenger door open and reach in for the near-beer can. Lifting it he was dismayed at how little had been unspilled and it took every ounce of his will to just take a couple of sips at the warm remains. Now for the radio. Had he the moisture to spare he would have spit .. the bloody radio was just beyond reach as he stood propped outside the cab. Dash-mounted and just inches away from his groping fingers.

Somehow he clawed and lurched his way to the rear door of the Land Cruiser, heaved it back and leaned in. Picking the longest screwdriver he could reach he made his way back to the open passenger door. From here he tried again and again to hook the radio set's microphone, but, weakened and uncoordinated, he failed. Eventually Miller gave up the unequal task and, taking his meagre resources with him, carefully lowered himself and crawled back into the Cruiser's shade.

As he suffered through the day, Miller regretted his earlier secretiveness. When he was missed, all that anybody back at base knew was that he had headed into Al Jawaz.

In fact it was late that Saturday evening before there was any anxiety over his whereabouts. Everybody at Qaisoco had their own duties and problems and if his absence was noted at all it was assumed that he was out on some kind of maintenance trip. Dick Scott first raised an alarm when Miller didn't show for dinner in the mess, and his vehicle was nowhere to be seen.

Dick telephoned Sam's section manager, Phil McClaren, at his residence about seven-thirty and put the problem to him. Sam's boss put him on hold whilst he checked work programmes. These showed that Miller had been scheduled to inspect and sign off for QS32, a newly-built communications tower. Leaving Scott on the house telephone he used his cellphone to check with the sub-contractors who had just erected QS32 and discovered that none of its crew had seen Miller that day. In fact their manager was annoyed that the job had not been officially accepted. McLaren started to worry. He got back to Dick and asked if he was sure that Miller said he was going to Al Jawaz yesterday.

“Yes, positive.”

“Well, wherever the hell Sam is he sure wasn’t on the job today. Listen, Scotty, I’m gonna get Abdullah Turki to check with the Al Jawaz police. Let me know if Sam shows up there, OK?”

As McClaren hung up he felt a hand on his shoulder. Turning, he saw his wife’s face wearing a look of puzzled concern. “Trouble, honey?” she softly asked.

“Yeah. One of my guys is missing. Sam Miller. Look, Pam, I have to go check this out with Abdullah. He’s the only guy who can get any sense out of the locals.” McClaren kissed his wife’s cheek, picked up his keys and made for the door.

“Phil dear, drive carefully.” She called after him from the doorway.

It was close to eleven when he returned. Letting himself in he called, “Pam. I’m back. Can you fix me a drink, honey? I’m bushed.”

He slumped into an armchair with his wife perched beside him gentling his greying hair, McClaren recounted how Abdullah Turki, the Qaisoco Government Affairs Officer, had telephoned around. As usual, communications outside the Qaisoco network had proven frustrating. Even with his status he had to endure the

cut-offs, hangups, interruptions and usual buck-passing. However, it became clear that nobody resembling Sam Miller was in jail, hospital or the mortuary. Finally Abdullah had sought the assurance of the police that they would recheck in the morning, and that they would especially patrol the more frequently used off-highway tracks around the city.

As he had walked McClaren to his car the young Qaisuman had placed an arm across the American's shoulders. "Try not to worry, Mr McClaren. Allah is merciful. He will take care of your man Miller. We of Qaisoco will put our own resources to assist Him in the morning."

"Thanks Abdullah. I really appreciate your help." McClaren had replied, genuinely grateful if still worried. "Right now I guess that I had better pass this up the chain of command."

True to his word, at first light Abdullah Turki pushed Qaisoco Security into sending out patrols to supplement the police effort. He also had a helicopter fly over the area around the capital. All that Sunday the young Qaisuman and his staff coordinated the search for Sam Miller. Unsurprisingly they failed to find him.

Miller still lay beneath the Land Cruiser, hidden in the Maroof. His physical sufferings were borne as stoically as possibly. The pain of his fractured thigh was tolerable as long as he didn't move too much. It was a trade-off. Occasionally he had to change positions just to relieve the pressure on his ribs and chest and breath more easily. For that he would accept pain. For other bodily functions, however infrequent, he would not. Now he voided where he lay, and to hell with dignity.

What was killing him, quite literally, was the lack of fluids. Miller was extremely weak, and desperate with thirst. He had eked out his tiny ration of tomatoes, gherkins and dregs of near-beer with incredibly fortitude, but now they were gone.

His thirst was so demanding that he again forced himself to crawl from beneath the Cruiser and dragged his way to the base of the jebel. Above him was the Koolbox and life-saving liquids. He fought to pull himself up the ragged slope but, however frantically he tried, it was impossible.

He collapsed, slumped in the open at the foot of the jebel. The searing heat eventually forced him to start the desperate crawl back under the Cruiser. This further exposure to the sun meant that Miller was now a very sick man. That he made it back to the shelter of the vehicle was miraculous, but the expenditure

of his last reserves of energy was too much. He fell into a fitful sleep, almost a coma.

By dawn Monday Qaisoco's full resources were thrown into a full-scale search and rescue mission. An operations room had been set up and three helicopters diverted from their normal duties to sweep the whole Sheikdom Offshore platforms had been contacted but with negative results. Miller had to be somewhere in the desert – or in the northern hills. One helicopter was quartering that wide jebel area.

Occasionally Sam was aware of hearing the sound of this machine. The clatter of rotor noise was distorted by the jebels and echoes bounced around in the wadi in which he lay. The noise was familiar, and seemed somehow urgent, but he could not grasp its significance. Senses numbed, he swam in and out of consciousness. His tongue was by now massively swollen and his lips split and painful.

By radio contact with base and when they returned for refuelling all three helicopters had to report negative findings. The ground patrols, concentrated in and near the capital city, also radioed a lack of success. Abdullah Turki shook his head glumly after another round of telephone calls to the police. Even the small Qaisumah National Guard had been searching to no avail.

At noon food was sent in for the operations room personnel and between handfuls of rice and fish, Abdullah Turki made the decision to concentrate on the northern jebels, especially the Jebel Maroof.

“Why there especially, Abdullah?”

“It is a feeling I have inside me .. but also because he can not have been missed south of here. Despite his friend's insistence that Mr. Miller had been headed for Al Jawaz, the chances of all patrols missing a vehicle the size of a Land Cruiser down there are unlikely. Plenty of vehicles have been spotted, but all are accounted for.”

The helicopter crew which had flown the morning's searches of the jebels agreed that the area was such a maze of hills and wadis that a more thorough search was needed. With ground backup. “Some of those wadis are so darned narrow and twisty it wouldn't be difficult to miss a truck there,” admitted the pilot.

“Okay,” decided McLaren, “if you agree Abdullah, we leave the police and the Guard to continue in the south-central, with Qaisoco backup from guys working there normally. All choppers

and available 4-wheel drive ground support from the company are to search north and in the jebels.”

“Agreed. I have to meet with the Director this afternoon, so can I leave you in charge here, Mr. McLaren?”

“Of course. Please pass on my thanks to the Director for all the help the company's giving us Abdullah.”

Meanwhile, in the wadi, Miller's need for fluids was desperate . His tongue was so swollen and split that he could no longer suck pebbles. He knew with certainty that he would not last the day out.

A helicopter crew found Miller at 4 pm.

What alerted them was a flash of light from one of the cliff sides. When he had leaped back in alarm from the snake, Miller's cigarette lighter had fallen from his shirt pocket. It lay now, flashing a small beacon as the western-lowering sunrays struck it. As the helicopter hovered to check the flashes the Land Cruiser appeared below them.

“Qaisoco Base, Qaisoco Base. Search Chopper Two – We have a truck – Eastern side of Jebel Maroof. Off the track from GOSP 17 Bravo. Over.”

“Roger, Chopper Two. Any sign of Miller?”

“Base – Two. Negative. We're setting down and will go in on foot. Out.”

The helicopter alighted clear of the jebel and its two-man crew ran into the wadi. Closing on the Land Cruiser they saw a booted foot beneath the vehicle. The pilot threw himself down and wriggled towards the body lying there. “Jeez, Pete. Not good,” he muttered, “the guy's burned all to hell. What a mess!”

The observer joined him. He winced and cursed as he too saw Miller's condition. “Can you get a pulse?”

The Pilot felt at Miller's throat. “Damn. I don't think so. No, I don't.”

“Let's get him in the open,” the other flyer suggested, pulling the body out by its armpits.

With Miller in the open they could see that his right leg, swollen and set at an odd angle was the obvious major injury, although it was clear that his whole body was torn and abraded – and brutally sunburned. His mouth gaped cruelly open, forced that way by an grossly swollen tongue.

“Hey, Pete! I heard something.” A faint rasping breath came from the body before them and the pilot felt again for its carotid pulse.

“Yeah!” he yelled, “I think I have a pulse!!”

“I'm gonna resuscitate. If I can,” he continued, looking with dismayed pity at Miller's mouth and tongue, “Pete, we need water and ice from the aircraft.”

“On my way.”

The pilot gently eased a finger into Miller's split mouth. The tongue almost completely blocked the mouth opening and the airway inside. Pus and grit caked the parched lips.

“How the hell am I gonna do this?” Wait, he thought. Normally you go mouth-to-mouth and block off the nose. This

guy's mouth is already as good as closed, so can I reverse the procedure?

Tilting Miller's head to extend the airway, and delicately cleaning the nasal area he bent and placed his mouth over Miller's nostrils, palm covering the damaged mouth. He exhaled a small, experimental puff of breath. It seemed to pass without obstruction.

Here goes, he thought grimly. He turned his head, inhaled, and again closing his mouth over Miller's nose blew a long steady breath. From the corner of his eye he could see Miller's chest. It rose. By God, it rose!! Controlling his excitement he commenced a rhythmic mouth-to-nose resuscitation. When the observer returned the pilot was sitting back on his haunches. "He's breathing," he said simply.

Between them they applied wet, cool cloths to Miller's mouth and forehead.

"I radioed Base. Told 'em we have the guy and are concentrating on emergency aid before we shift him," Pete reported as he now worked to fit an inflatable splint over the still unconscious Miller's leg. His partner concentrated on the injured

man's mouth. Carefully he squeezed trickles of water into the mouth itself.

A second helicopter landed and its crew brought over a frame stretcher. With the first pilot still concentrating on rehydrating Sam Miller, the others looked around. They remarked on the damage to the side of the Land Cruiser and its missing water containers, while Pete checked inside the vehicle before raising its hood.

The others saw the drag-trails between the vehicle and the jebel wall. Slowly they pieced together what must have happened. It was the second pilot who spotted and then climbed to retrieve Miller's Koolbox.

“Jesus! That poor bastard. Fancy knowing that fluids were so close, but being unable to reach it.”

“Yeah. It must have driven him crazy ... but why the hell didn't he still have some kind of fluids right here in the truck. Dumb!”

“Dumber than you think, Chuck,” said Pete in a sorrowful voice, “Dumber than you think.”

“What do you mean?” asked his pilot looking up from Miller's side. The observer showed a clasp-knife.

“That was in his pants' pocket when I splinted his leg.”

“And?”

“I checked the truck and the radiator's still full. This poor dumb turkey was lying under the truck – Within inches of the bottom radiator hose pipe.”