

The Death Whistle

I travel by myself on vacation to Texas. Sightseeing, allegedly. I'm not normally one for this type of touristy vacation, but this year I'm desperate to get out of the frigid darkness of upper Michigan's snowy woods.

Unfortunately, as the north is oppressively cold the south is unbearably hot. Being even more humid than the rest of the region, Houston's reputation as the 'armpit of America' is well earned, and before long I'm not walking, but stumbling my way to the space center, drenched in sweat. I absorb little of the experience there, nor from the Art Car Museum in the city.

Early the next morning before the rising sun makes the temperature unbearable, I take a walk to one of the less overcrowded beaches and dive into the warm ocean water. Back home, even in summer Lake Superior is an ice bath.

I enjoy that swim so much I lose track of time.

At two PM, the sun is high and glaring its scorching beams down on my back. I gather my things and scramble up the beach and onto the steaming streets.

The hellish heat creates mirages on the asphalt as I lurch towards the hotel. Wandering blindly down the sidewalk, the minutes crawl by and city traffic zips past and before long I realize I'm lost.

I'd ask for directions but I can barely stand in this broiler. Half a mile down the street I lean against a baking brick wall and let it support my weight. Panting heavily, I wipe the dripping sweat from my brow and look up at the sign above my head.

Antiques - Souvenirs - Curios

Either this place has air conditioning, or I am a dead man.

I push through the creaky wooden door of the old, alleyway sized shop and an old bell dings overhead. The entryway seems to be an antique in its own right.

About the small, narrow room a torrent of coursing air is propelled by a large fan. At the end is a counter with a wide glass case. The walls are stacked with various odd items, some of them tacky, factory made souvenirs typical of the location and others more rustic with a mysterious air. On top of the counter is a minifridge containing water bottles.

A young cashier sits in a desk chair behind the counter, with his head propped up on his hand. "Hot out there?" he asks.

I point a shaky finger at the refrigerator. "How much for the water?"

"Five dollars."

"Per bottle?" My jaw drops. "That's extortion."

He shrugs. "Gotta stay in business somehow."

"Have you considered selling antiques?" I sass.

"You wanna buy any?" he returns.

I growl from the back of my throat and look over my shoulder.

Inside, bankruptcy. Outside, heat stroke. Ugh.

I retrieve three bottles, slam them on the counter and slide a twenty dollar bill across it.

Before he can even give me the change, I crack open the first bottle and chug it down. Leaning back and hanging onto the edge of the counter I drink it down to the last drop.

The empty bottle falls from my hand and bounces on the floor. I slouch forwards and support myself on the counter, my vision tilting.

The cashier looks at me over the rim of his sunglasses. "Are you okay?"

I look down through the glass surface of the counter. Inside the case are numerous old curiosities. Bowie knives, strange totems and a taxidermied rattlesnake. In the center is a collection of moulded black effigies shaped like skulls, adorned with ornate headdresses or other mystical ornaments. All with a tube sticking vertically out of the top.

"Hello?" the cashier asks. "Are you alright man?"

"What's with the clay skull things?"

"Those are Aztec Death Whistles. Have you ever heard of them before?"

I shake my head.

"When you blow into them it sounds like a human scream." He pantomimes blowing into the whistle with his hand cupped underneath it.

I tilt my head, an eyebrow raised. "Can you demonstrate?"

"Ah, sorry. No can do. These things are extremely loud, and I wasn't exaggerating when I said it sounds like screaming. Somebody might call the cops."

I pause, scratching my chin and pondering the rows of apple-sized clay whistles rendered in the shape of the expressionless dead. Save for one in the back corner. This one bears a feminine visage, its cracked lips stretched around a gaping mouth. The tongue retreats behind misaligned teeth and the eyes are wide open in horror. The whistle's hair is carved in a raggedly wavy pattern behind a headdress of real, but mostly missing and withered old feathers.

Just looking at it draws a grimace from me.

The cashier points at it. "That one you're looking at is authentic by the way." He pauses. "Allegedly."

I narrow my eyes. "Meaning what?"

He opens a file cabinet, thumbs through the files and retrieves an official-looking document. Which he places on the counter. "Old Mexican lady that dealt it to me had this. It's a certificate from a carbon dating lab that places its creation around 1460. The lab is reputable, so there's no real reason to believe they'd get it wrong, and if true it means that actual Aztec jaguar warriors carried this whistle into battle. I mean, probably."

"You don't sound so sure."

“It doesn’t look like any death whistle I’ve ever seen. Normally they look like skulls.” He gestures at the rest of the collection.

“Did you verify with the lab if the document she gave you was legitimate?”

He nods. “Honestly though? I’m still skeptical.”

“How much did you pay for it?” I ask.

He pauses, his gaze becoming distant. “I’d rather not say honestly. A lot less than it’s worth. It almost seemed like she was eager to get rid of it.”

I narrow my eyes at him.

“But that’s not uncommon,” he hurries on. “People come in here all the time with stuff they’re trying to get rid of fast.”

The price tag stickered in front of it is reasonable. Despite myself, I’m so intrigued by this thing I can’t help myself.

I scratch my chin, then feel for my wallet again.

Carefully packaged for travel and stowed away in my suitcase, I decided that unravelling it’s foam padding would risk damaging it on the way home, so the whistle remains untested.

Within a week I catch my flight back north and drive to my land in the backwoods. Pulling up to my house, I’m surprised to see my neighbor sitting on one of the deck chairs. There’s a fair bit of trust between us, and I had asked him to take care of my hobby farm while I was away but did not expect to see him there.

He waves to me as I stand up out of my car.

“Everything okay, Norm?” I call out as I walk up the path to the door.

“Not really. Somebody was throwing rocks at your chickens the other night.”

I stop. “You’re serious?”

“Probably teenagers or something.”

I pace back and forth. “Shit, shit, shit,” I mutter and pat my pockets down nervously. “Are the birds okay?”

“Ahh, no. Also no.” He reaches into a plastic bag by the chair and pulls out a dead chicken.”

I clench my fists. “Did you see any of them?”

Norm shakes his head. “I wasn’t here. Looks like it happened last night. I went to feed them this morning, found the dead chicken and lots of rocks. Sorry man. However you’re gonna deal with this, it’s up to you now. I can help file a police report if you want?”

I shake my head. “No use. Thanks again for taking care of them for me while I was gone.”

“Sorry man,” he says, walking past me. “Wish there was more I could do to help.”

With that, Norm gets in his chevy and drives off. He lives more than three miles away, that’s how isolated I am out here.

Isolated.

Those kids better not come back.

Later, while unpacking and washing clothes, I unwrap the Death Whistle and place it on a shelf in my bedroom. The eerie little effigy looks out of place in the rustic interior of my woodland cottage, but all souvenirs do. That's how we remember the places we've been, I guess.

That night I'm roused by a loud bang outside, echoed by a cacophony of distressed clucking.

I sit bolt upright. "Son of a bitch!"

Jumping out of bed, I quickly throw on a shirt and pants, then fling open the top drawer of my nightstand and grab the revolver stowed inside. I spin the chambers to be sure it's loaded and cautiously peer through the blinds towards my chicken coop.

Sure enough, in the dim floodlight outside, I watch a rock fly over the fence and deflect off the feed trough.

Those mother fuckers!

Grabbing a flashlight and running out into the hallway, I push open my front door, gun still in hand.

Peeking around the corner I aim down the iron sights in the direction of the pen.

A dark silhouette moves in the distance and another stone strikes a chicken.

A chorus of giggling laughter and barely hushed voices breaks out.

Laughing. I can hear them laughing at my chickens!

I aim at the silhouettes, and pause, suddenly aware of my breathing.

Shit, what am I doing? I'm not about to shoot a bunch of teenagers for harassing my livestock. I should just call the damn cops...

Another rock sails clean over its target.

Damn, who am I kidding? Out here in the sticks it'll take the police twenty minutes to respond and by then how many chickens am I gonna lose?

I lower the gun and smile. I've got a better idea.

Shoving the pistol into my waistband, I dash back to my bedroom, and grab the Death Whistle.

Back outside, I take a deep breath, in, out, in again... cup my hand underneath the whistle and put my lips to the mouthpiece and blow as hard as I can.

The man in the antique shop had in fact understated the horrifying noise of the Aztec Death Whistle.

The sound that comes out of the whistle is a blood curdling scream of inconceivable terror. It's an unbearable banshee wail that makes my whole body shudder as it pierces the quiet night air.

The trespassers scream back and I can't help laughing.

I blow into the whistle again and let the spine-tingling screech echo about my property again.

Loudly, they scramble away through the underbrush and I follow after them barefoot, blowing into the whistle so rapidly even the trees shake with the cacophony of its agonized wails.

I chase them all the way to the property line before I turn around and walk back to my house, cackling the whole way.

As soon as I can stop laughing I return the gun and flashlight to the nightstand and the whistle to its shelf. I slide under the covers and fall back asleep.

In deep blissful sleep I hear the noise again, that horrible scream. My eyes snap open.

It's still dark outside.

Did I imagine that noise? I must have been dreaming...

A slam comes from down the hall.

I jump out of bed and quickly jam the pistol back into my waistband then lunge for the whistle. Creeping over to my bedroom door, I raise it to my mouth. I pull the door open and peer around the corner.

A tall silhouette looms in the dark hallway near my wide open front door.

Hand drifting to the revolver in my waistband I slowly back up behind the door.

This isn't funny anymore, there's someone in my house!

I eye the whistle. Well, this worked the first time, didn't it?

I cup my hand underneath the Death Whistle and blow.

The only sound is a weak, empty hiss. I look down at the whistle.

Did I break it?

I shake the whistle then blow into it again, hard. And again. Nothing but a hollow hiss.

Footsteps approach down the hall, quiet creaks of the old floorboards.

I drop the whistle and grab my flashlight, aim it at the open door and draw my gun as the intruder steps into the threshold.

A young woman with dark brown hair and native features crowned with a huge macaw feathered headdress paces in. Her skin is bleached stark white and blood stained up to the elbows. Her colorful woven garb has a gaping bloody hole in the center where her heart should be.

I empty the gun. The muzzle flashes illuminate the room as bullets rip through the intruder, leaving more bloody holes in her chest.

Undaunted, she takes another step forward.

I stumble backwards and trip over the bed, falling flat on my back against the hardwood floor as I frantically try to fire again and the pistol only responds with an empty click.

Crawling backwards, completely cornered by the woman, I can feel the desperate thumping in my chest.

The spectre opens her mouth wide and unleashes a soul-tearingly horrible scream as her blood-stained hand reaches for my beating heart...