

KNOWING WHO'S DEAD

by Craig Strete

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The lights come up on three Indians, center stage, two young men and one old man. The stage is bare. TATO and ELK BOY are carrying NATCHEZ, the old man, cradling him in their arms between them. They are making halting progress directly toward the audience.

TATO

(Struggling with the weight, almost stumbling)

How far is it to the burying ground?

ELK BOY

I don't know. But dead people sure are heavy.

TATO

Dead people ought to be like tires. That way you could let the air out of them and they'd be easier to carry.

ELK BOY

Or you could leave the air in and roll them to the grave. Course with our luck, we'd probably have a traffic accident.

TATO

I feel like we are climbing a hill to oblivion.

ELK BOY

Ah, yes, oblivion. Other Indians have been there before.

TATO

And more will follow them. Sometimes the world is built that way.

ELK BOY

We must be getting close to the middle of nowhere. Do you think it is possible that we have been carrying this dead old man ever since the world began?

NATCHEZ

(Opening his eyes)

I'm not dead yet.

TATO

Yes you are. Shut up.

NATCHEZ

(Appealing to them)

I'm not dead. No really. I'm almost well.

Their forward progress is now halted. They stand at the front of the stage.

TATO

Stop making trouble. You ought to be glad we volunteered to carry you.

ELK BOY

Some people! You lug them to hell and gone and what thanks do you get, nothing, just at the last minute, somebody wants to start an argument. That's old people for you.

(Shakes his head, looking displeased)

You just can't do them a favor!

NATCHEZ

(Trying to be reasonable)

Look, I ought to be able to tell whether I am dead or not.

TATO

Listen old man, if we let everybody decide everything for themselves, what kind of world would this be?

NATCHEZ

A far better world than...

ELK BOY

Stop your damn complaining. We are doing all the work. We are doing all the sweating. All you have to be is dead. It's easy. There's no work involved.

NATCHEZ

Easy! Who cares about easy! Let go of me!

(He begins to struggle in their arms and it's all they can do to hold onto him)

You can't bury me! I'M NOT DEAD YET!

ELK BOY

You opinionated old people are always making trouble.

(Almost stumbling)

You have to have everything your way or you complain, complain, complain. Listen at your age, you're lucky to be dead.

NATCHEZ renews his wriggling in their arms. It throws the young men off balance. They trip and all three fall to the ground. NATCHEZ is the first to recover. He jumps to his feet, stands over them.

NATCHEZ

See. I now present an even more convincing argument. I am standing up. Could I stand up if I were dead?

TATO

(Dusting off the seat of his pants, helping ELK BOY to his feet)

Must be rigor mortis. I've heard of cases like this. Yep. You're stiff as all get out old man. You ain't really standing up. You're just stuck in the ground like a war lance.

NATCHEZ

So watch this, stupid young man and be convinced. I will amaze you with my living elasticity.

To refute this, NATCHEZ immediately bends over.

ELK BOY

What's an elas-picity?

TATO

I don't know. Its either one of them fancy mixed drinks white people make to rip the back of your head off or he's got a tattoo that forms words when you flex your arm. You never can tell with old people. Its just one stupidity after another.

NATCHEZ

If I had rigor Mortis, I couldn't bend over like this now could I?

They stare at him in puzzlement. For the first time, doubt begins to show in their faces. They seem to be considering the idea that the old man might not be dead. NATCHEZ tries to straighten up but his back is locked in place.

NATCHEZ

(Wincing with pain, tries to move but can't, looks embarrassed)

I'm stuck! You young men are gonna have to help me!

TATO and ELK BOY exchange a knowing look.

TATO

You'd do anything to get out of this, wouldn't you?

ELK BOY

Some people just don't know when to quit. They just make up any little thing and we're supposed to buy it. Jesus! What does he think we are, a couple of tourists?

TATO

First he says he isn't dead, but he is, now he says, he's stuck. He's a shameless old liar is what he is, if you ask me.

ELK BOY

Yeah. I heard about corpses suddenly sitting up on their burial racks. Muscle spasms is what it is, or they ate something that didn't agree with them and its just gas. Probably he ate stinking burritos and now the old faker is having one of those damn gas attacks. Guy just don't know when to quit lying. He's not stuck, he's just folded up with gas.

NATCHEZ

(Straining, his face contorted with effort)

I TELL YOU I'M STUCK!

ELK BOY comes over, grabs NATCHEZ's arms from behind, puts his foot on his back and tries to straighten him up. The old man shrieks with pain but nothing happens. He cannot straighten up.

ELK BOY

OK, I'll give him this one. He IS stuck. That's the most rigorous mortis I've even seen.

NATCHEZ

If I was telling the truth on this one, I could also be telling the truth about not being dead. How's that strike you?

TATO

Quit fooling. You're too dead to skin.

(Bending over to stare in the old man's face)

Now you're really giving us a hard time old man. How are we going to bury you at a right angle?

ELK BOY

(Looking unhappy)

I tell you old people are nothing but trouble.

(also bending over to look at the old man so that all three are bent over in the same position.

Well, he sure isn't going to fit in the coffin this way!

TATO straightens up, moves closer to the old man and then suddenly tries to push the old man's head down.

TATO

Maybe I can fold him.

NATCHEZ

(Shrieking)

You maniac! I can't bend that far!

TATO

Maybe if you come over and help me. We'll both jump on his head and our combined weights ought to....

NATCHEZ is so angry he rises up of his own volition.

NATCHEZ

You got me angry now! A dead Indian is not a good Indian! My vengeful spirit is going to break your noses!

ELK BOY

At least he admits he's dead now.

TATO

He's a hard man to convince.

NATCHEZ

(Outraged)

I am not convinced!

TATO

Let's discuss it. I'm willing to discuss it.

ELK BOY

That's very Indian of you.

NATCHEZ pulls out a knife. He stabs TATO with it. TATO clutches his chest, falls back and then collapses to the ground, dead.

NATCHEZ

Now who's the dead one?

ELK BOY looks at the old man, then looks down at the still body of TATO. He seems

puzzled.

ELK BOY

Well, I have to admit. Tato LOOKS a lot more dead than you do.

NATCHEZ

That's because he's dead and I'm alive.

ELK BOY

(shrugging)

Hard to say if he's dead or not. Maybe it was just something he ate.

NATCHEZ

Let's pick him up and carry him to the burying ground.

ELK BOY

It seems like a reasonable thing to do.

They pick him up, carrying him in the same manner as NATCHEZ had been carried.

ELK BOY

He really looks dead. How is it that you know who's dead and who isn't?

NATCHEZ

(As they begin to carry him offstage)

I am old and have death always on my tongue. I know the taste. Not quite as refreshing as cold beer but a taste all the same. And you...you are young....as young as I was once...and the young do not understand death.

As they are about to leave the stage, TATO speaks.

TATO

I'm not dead.

ELK BOY stoops over, so that one hand is free to pick up a large rock. He lifts it menacingly over his head just as they are about to exit the stage. ELK BOY raises the rock and strikes.

NATCHEZ

Why did you hit him with that rock?

ELK BOY

Sometimes you just get tired of life being.....one big argument.