

Digger Dan, the Generic Man by Wes Brewer

It was years ago when I first saw Digger Dan. He was sitting on an old tractor tire that had been dumped at the edge of the Nairobi landfill. He didn't have a name then. Kind of a generic guy, he was. I thought he was just another of the old derelicts that searched the dump for scraps of food, or anything that he could sell. That was years ago, before Viet Nam. He just sat there hunched over, looking off across the dump, watching a little girl and several baboons separating big white kernels of corn from the trash and red dirt of the land fill. He didn't get up and beg like the others that hovered over the dump. He just sat there watching.

When I finished unloading the Land Rover he waved me over to where he sat. He patted the old tractor tire as if it were a good seat. I hesitated, then sat down beside him. His face was wrinkled and dusty, but I could see a set of clear eyes looking me square in the face. He put his arm around me and grasped my shoulder with a well worn, gnarled hand. He just looked at me, his eyes drilling into mine. I guess I expected him to beg for something, but he didn't.

"Son! See that little girl over there," he said. "She never begs. She's here every day, rain or shine. Never asks anyone for anything. Sleeps over there in those cardboard boxes. Got no one but herself. Baboons never hurt her though."

The old man's hand urged me to get up. I made my way around the landfill to where the little girl squatted on her haunches gathering corn into a dirt streaked, tattered dress, which hung low between her legs. The baboons coughed and bared their teeth at me.

"Jambo Bwana," she said. She smiled and stood up, holding the edge of her dress so the kernels of corn wouldn't spill out. Before I could speak, she thrust a handful of the red stained white kernels up to me.

"You take Bwana. I have plenty and there is so much."

I shook my head.

"No Bwana! These are for you!"

I reached down, cupped my hands together, and saw the joy in her eyes as she dropped the kernels of corn one by one into my hands.

"I have something for you," I said, searching my mind for what I could give her. I turned and went to the Land Rover for some soda. When I returned she was gone. I searched the dump, but couldn't find her. The baboons rushed in and fought over each kernel of corn that was left. I asked some of the other Africans hunting through the trash if they had seen her, but they hadn't. The old man just sat on the tractor tire.

"Did you see where the little girl went?" I asked him.

"Gone!"

"She left?" I asked.

"Just gone! You know! You see her face?"

The old man patted the tire again. I sat down and he put his gnarled hand back on my shoulder.

"Son, it's like a mirage!"

"A mirage?"

"Your face!"

"My face?"

"Comes and goes," he said.

I didn't understand. I could tell the old man was getting impatient with me.

"Some people only see what they want to see. She didn't want any thing from you. Just wanted to give you something. But you--you wanted something."

“I don’t understand.”

The old man rose.

"She'll be back when you have a mind for it!" he said.

What's your name?"

"Dan! Just Dan. Just seeing what I can dig up. You owe someone else something now!"

I looked at the red stained kernels of corn in my hand. He saw the questions in my eyes. He shook his head, turned away, and left.

The red soil of Kenya puffed into dust with each step the old man took as he trudged down the dry road. I tried to give him a ride. But he waived me on, muttering something about me not going where he was traveling. Then he stopped and pointed up the road.

"I might see you again, if you have a mind for it!"

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