

Figure of Speech

Jean Graham

“What the hell kind of a word is that?”

JD looked sceptically at the board in front of him and raised his eyes to an unusually subdued Buck Wilmington for support.

“A perfectly good word,” countered Ezra, quickly adding his triple word score to his already impressive game total.

“Well, I reckon you know what a chisel is, JD,” added Buck, “So what’s so unusual about a chiseler?”

“Because I’ve never heard of it,” protested Dunne, as Standish calmly reached for another two letters from the pot.

With a sigh the Southerner carefully set the square tiles on the rack in front of him and looked from one man to the other.

“Gentlemen, a chiseler has absolutely nothing to do with chisels; wood, stone or even marble for that matter.”

Buck narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Then what the hell is it?”

Ezra focused his attention on the Scrabble board in front of him.

“Well?” prompted JD, still not convinced that the ever-cunning and always unscrupulous Standish wasn’t trying to pull a fast one on them.

“A chiseler...” Ezra cleared his throat before continuing, “...is a cheat or a swindler.”

The fourth man at the table, Josiah, laughed softly, amused at the aptness of the word given the Southerner’s penchant for winning at all costs.

“Well, I’ll take your word for it, Ezra.”

JD scowled not entirely convinced that Ezra was being honest.

“Are you sure? That was worth thirty-nine points,” he exclaimed heatedly, “And you only added two letters worth one point each!”

Ezra smiled as he earnestly rearranged the tiles on his rack into various combinations.

“That’s what I call a sound return on an investment, JD.”

All four men looked up as the front door opened with a bang and the fiercely gusting wind thrust the wind-swept bodies of Chris and Vin directly into the warmth of the living room. The two men struggled to close the door behind them then stood, dripping wet and out of breath but grinning broadly as they quickly stripped off hats and slickers.

“That’s one bitch of a storm!” crowed Chris, if anything galvanised by his brief foray into the wild night to check on the horses, “And it looks to get worse before the night’s through. Looks like no-one’s going home any time soon though.”

Vin cast a quick glance at the silent group of men sitting around the table and nudged Larabee.

“Must have a game going. Reckon we could’ve been lost out there and nobody’d notice.”

JD turned back to the table first, suddenly convinced that while his back had been turned Ezra had stolen a furtive glance at his tiles. *Goddamn chiseler.* The irony of his silent curse was lost on

him as he struggled with his indignation, determined now to see justice done.

“Hey, Chris,” he called suddenly, “You got a dictionary somewhere?”

Larabee and Tanner exchanged a wary glance, Vin mouthing “Dictionary?” as his forehead creased in a puzzled frown.

“Someplace I guess,” responded Chris, more intent on getting dry than thinking about the whereabouts of his trusty Webster, “Try the bookcase.”

“JD, are you trying to insinuate that I’m being less than honest with you? Indeed, that I would lie about such a thing?” The degree of pathos he managed to instill into his words might have swayed someone not well acquainted with either his skill or eloquence but Dunne was ever wary of the resourceful Southerner and his words, if anything, made him more determined to pursue his quest for the truth.

“Just checking, Ezra.” A flash of green eyes spearing him like a pair of laser beams, made him physically draw back and mumble defensively: “It’s allowed.”

Chris and Vin approached the table as one and looked sadly at the Scrabble board, before Chris finally shook his head.

“Jesus, you guys must be desperate! Never seen anyone bet on a Scrabble game before.”

Buck toyed with the squares of plastic embossed with black letters in front of him and shrugged.

“Thought we might stand a better chance of hanging onto our money this way. Ezra just about cleaned us out already at poker.”

“And dominoes,” added Josiah.

Vin moved round the table and leaned over Buck’s shoulder to check his remaining tiles.

“Want the bad news now, Buck?” he breathed quietly, before moving away towards the fireplace and the roaring fire burning in the hearth.

Wilmington glared at the departing Texan but quickly turned his attention to the table.

“Dictionary?” he repeated, prompting Chris, “Gotta find out if Ezra’s pulling a fast one here.”

Ezra leaned back with a sigh.

“Gentlemen, I am truly disappointed that you should continue to harass me this way. Is not my word good enough?”

The voices chorused the answer in unison: “No!”

Larabee moved to the bookcase and quickly searched the rows until he finally located a thick volume and struggled to free it from between the other books flanking it. He passed it to Josiah but made eye contact with the Southerner.

“If it’s not in there then you forfeit, agreed?”

A quick nod.

“Agreed.”

Chris glanced around the table, looking at each man in turn.

“Agreed?”

More nods.

“Over to you then, Josiah. Check it out and get this game moving before JD here blows a gasket. What is this word anyway?”

“Chiseler!” announced four voices together, followed by a sudden silence as they all smiled at the forcefulness of their response.

Chris dug his hand in his pockets and frowned. “Never heard of it.”

Three heads turned to stare at Standish as if all their suspicions of foul play had just been validated.

“See,” said JD with a note of triumph in his voice, “No one’s heard of it.”

“My dear, Mr. Dunne,” reasoned Ezra patiently, “Have you ever seen a cuscus?”

“A what?” JD’s voice raised an octave at the apparent non sequitur.

“A cuscus. It’s a marsupial,” supplied Ezra helpfully, “Now just because you haven’t seen one does that mean it doesn’t exist?”

Dunne shot a glance at Josiah that clearly begged for help. Sanchez flicked through the dictionary.

“A marsupial of the genus Phalanger of New Guinea and adjacent areas,” he pronounced sombrely.

“He’s got a point,’ conceded Chris, still finding the entire debate amusing, “Now can you come to some agreement, get this thing over and done with, so we can have some supper?”

“An excellent suggestion, Mr. Larabee. Gentlemen?”

Josiah thumbed slowly through the thick volume almost chanting as he searched: “chi-rho...chiropteran...chirr...” A pause. “Chisel. Chiseler; to cheat or swindle, to to use unethical methods.” He slowly closed the book.

Standish grinned.

“Satisfied Mr. Dunne?”

“Aw, hell! Should’ve known better. Couldn’t you be wrong just once, Ezra?”

“Now that, JD, in a game of skill would be financially imprudent.” He gestured with an open palm towards Buck. “Shall we proceed? I do believe it’s your turn Mr. Sanchez and I believe I’ve taken enough ‘friendly fire’ for the evening.”

Josiah smiled and set aside the dictionary. With a sly grin he added three letters to the board making MORON into OXYMORON.

Ezra quickly shot a glance at JD. “It’s a figure of speech,” he explained hastily.

“I know what an oxymoron is,” he defended indignantly, “Jesus, give me credit for some intelligence!”

Sanchez grinned.

“I think you’ll find that puts me ahead of you Ezra.”

The Southerner stared at the board in stunned disbelief. Sixty points in one hit and no more than another two rounds to play. He raised his head and levelled a narrow-eyed and calculating

glare at the psychologist. Very slowly he picked up several tiles from his stock and began to place them with deliberate precision on the board.

“Hey,” started Buck, “It’s not your turn!”

Three heads bent to look at the chequered surface to read Ezra’s message spelled out in block capitals across the board.

JD succumbed first, a bubble of laughter finally breaking through, the tension suddenly lifting as he started to laugh out loud.

“Ezra, now I know that’s a word, but what I don’t know is if that kind of four letter word is allowed.”