



The Girl Who Swallowed a Cactus Scene by Scene Summary

SHOW SUMMARY

School is out for the summer; the weather is hot, and the boredom is heavy. But 8-year-old Sheila and her pack of pals aren't going to let the summer heat wear them down. When their fantastical junkyard fort draws the attention of a walking, talking, surprisingly well-dressed coyote, the adventurers suddenly find themselves deep in the desert, facing The Council of Howls, The Sting Brigade, The Death Cactus and much more. It's a whirlwind adventure about how we affect the environment and the animals with whom we share the planet, and how we take on the mission of saving the world from ourselves. A unique twist on traditional storytelling, where a bit of moonlight brings a menagerie of found objects to life, this original play shows the power of memory and imagination and will captivate and inspire audiences of all ages.

SHOW SYNOPSIS

PROLOGUE

Lights up on a pile of debris. Pieces of cars, sticks, bricks, and other junk litter the surroundings. A person walks on stage, carrying a car hood like a shield. This person is Dust Cloud, and they quickly take in the surroundings and address the audience. For the remainder of the play, Dust Cloud will serve as the play's narrator and will portray every character. Dust Cloud begins to describe the world in which the story lives, from the **Council of Howls** to the **Challenge of the Death Cactus**; but unfortunately, the audience has no idea what Dust Cloud is talking about. Well, not yet! So, the eccentric character transitions into telling the story of a young girl named Sheila. Born from the deserts of New Mexico, Sheila is the energy of the sun contained within an 8-year-old's body. Everyone wanted to be around Sheila, and all the kids in her tiny neighborhood, miles and miles away from the nearest town, had to be her friend.

Sheila can be a lot to deal with. While she could be frustrating at times, the days of summer are long and slow, and hanging out with Sheila was never boring. Leon, another 8-year-old in Sheila's isolated neighborhood, shared these feelings about her. He'd find himself subject to cuts and bruises from being dressed up in garbage bags and pretending to be a monster, and yet he still went on with the next dream of Sheila's. That next dream—well, that is exactly what Dust Cloud introduces the audience to. This very **true, amazing**, and especially **true** tale is what Dust Cloud moves into as they explain this tale of five adventurers, each with their own **special** role to play. Sheila is simply the captain of the group.

THE FIVE ADVENTURERS

Dust Cloud, continuing their conversation with the audience, introduces the five adventurers, and represents them by using pieces of debris as dolls. They start with Dennis, the eldest of the five kids. Dennis was not just the oldest, but also the biggest and **strongest** of the group—super strong. Naturally, Dennis felt he should be the leader of the group, given that he was the oldest and the strongest; however, as Dust Cloud explains, that was never going to happen. Sheila was always going to be the captain, and it would never be any other way.

Dust Cloud returns to describing Leon, articulating the 8-year-old's **intellect** and **cleverness**, especially when it came to his hands and fingers. Leon is very adept at taking things apart but putting it all back together, well that's another story. He is skinny and a little self-conscious, but Dust Cloud makes sure to note that whenever Leon does speak, it is typically **wise** and **helpful**.

Raising two identical pieces of debris, Dust Cloud introduces the crowd to the Twins. The Twins probably had names at one time, but people just refer to one as Shy and the other as Eager. Both kids were 6 years of age and could be spotted just by the sound of their giggles, something Dust Cloud mentions they do a lot. All in all, the Twins were just ready and willing to be a part of anything, no matter how crazy.

Dust Cloud takes a step back and brings all the debris dolls together: the five adventurers—Sheila, Dennis, Leon, and the Twins, Eager and Shy.

THE PILE OF JUNK

Dust Cloud looks to the audience and begins pulling out various pieces of junk. With this junk, they create the **Pile of Junk**. Yes, it is objectively junk, but what it really is, is **magic**. Within this pile are the sidebars of a swing set, the top bars of monkey bars, the boards from a teeter-totter, and an old red car hood. There is also a slide, and, most importantly, there is an incinerator. It no longer works, but Dust Cloud lets the audience know that it was like a rocket ship for the five kids.

Ahead was a whole summer, and Sheila and her gang knew exactly what they were going to do with it. They were going to turn this **Pile of Junk** into a shining city of junk. And so, they did. Day by day, Sheila and her friends worked on their fort until, one day, it was complete. The kids transformed that pile into one mighty fort, complete with traps and all.

Dust Cloud pauses, then proceeds with the story. With the fort complete, the kids had nothing left to add—until one Thursday when two very special things happened. The first thing was when Dennis found a beaten-up **orange cone** in the canyon behind his house. This would be the perfect addition to the fort! They considered placing it at the entrance of the fort, but it was decided that it would draw too much attention to where the real entrance was, making their traps useless. So, they decided to place the cone near their traps so that any passersby would be drawn towards the traps and not the entrance. However, these cones often signal danger, which might then draw people away from the traps, making them useless again. This back-and-forth argument only ended when Sheila came up with the brilliant idea of placing the cone on top of the incinerator, having it act as a sort of castle flag. And who could argue with Sheila?

The second special thing that occurred on that fateful Thursday is what Dust Cloud moves on to next. Sheila's mom is heading out of town the next night and asks her daughter if she is comfortable spending the night alone without her. Sheila, already filled with wonderful, mom-

less ideas for the night, gleefully tells her mother she is fine to stay home alone and wait for her mother to return in the morning.

THE COYOTE

Sheila would have the night alone to herself to do whatever she wanted. So, Sheila and her friends decided they would spend the night, after indulging in some delicious frozen pizzas of course, in the fort. It was the perfect night and sweetened when Dennis came up with a brilliant game: Car Tag. Dust Cloud outlines the rules: each kid would lie on the ground next to the dark dirt road behind Sheila's place. Whenever they saw a car or its headlights, it was time to get up, sprint to the fort, and slip inside just before the car's light caught them in its beam. It was amazing—at least until Dennis got caught in the headlights of a huge pickup truck.

"This is the moment where everything changed," says Dust Cloud. The truck pulled to the side of the road, its headlights shining on the castle of junk, and out stepped a coyote. The Coyote walked toward the fort on its hind legs and sported sunglasses, a faded jean jacket, and dusty cowboy boots. The Coyote approached the kids, who were naturally frozen inside their fort, and grabbed the **orange cone** from atop the incinerator. With the cone in its arms—or paws—the Coyote threw the cone into the back of his truck and climbed into the cab.

Without questioning why, Sheila burst from the fort and raced toward the cone. Alas, Sheila was small and could not climb into the bed, but Dennis was right behind her and hoisted Sheila up. Soon, all five adventurers found themselves in the bed of the Coyote's pickup truck. Away they went, down the dusty road, over rocks, and across arroyos until they reached a canyon filled with human junk.

SANDROCKSUNMOONHILLSHADE

Dust Cloud picks the tale up at this canyon of junk, where all five kids have found themselves. It does not take long before they are discovered by the Coyote, accompanied by a Bobcat and a Bighorn Sheep. In the face of all these animals, Sheila remains bold and brave. This impresses the Coyote, who was expecting a more fearful child. Nevertheless, the Coyote presses on and asks the kids where they are from. "New Mexico," is their reply, but the animals scoff. These humans claim it is **their** state, but it is clear they do not belong here.

Unfazed, Sheila raises the cone and explains exactly why they are at this canyon now. The Coyote stole their cone and drove them here, to this land of **SandRockSunMoonHillShade**, and this is no one's doing but the Coyote's. The Coyote is deeply insulted by this accusation and leans in closely to become more acquainted with these kids now in his company. Sheila gives the Coyote everyone's names, and the Coyote responds with his own: **Prince Desert Marigold**.

After some brief introductions and teasing about the Coyote's name, Prince Desert Marigold moves toward the children and accuses them of being spies in a war. However, the five adventurers have no idea what the Coyote is talking about. So, Prince Desert Marigold, now surrounded by countless animals of all types, tells the humans exactly what this is all about.

THE COUNCIL OF HOWLS

Dust Cloud continues to act out the story for the audience, now explaining the **Council of Howls**—a gathering of the desert and its inhabitants coming together to plan how to push the human invasion back. For lifetime after lifetime, human homes, roads, shops, and trash have

encroached on the desert; and now, there is no more desert left to invade. It is time for the desert, and the animals within to push back and destroy the destroyers (humans). With one signal, every animal of the desert will use human junk as their weapons to assault human civilization. Jackrabbits and roadrunners will litter the highways with nails and screwdrivers, vultures will use plastic bags to dump sand and rocks on the heads of those running away, and rattlesnakes will slither out of briefcases into schools and offices. Every inch of human life will be assaulted by a desert pushed past its breaking point. All it takes is one howl from the **Howlaphone**, and the signal will blare across the realm. Prince Desert Marigold raises the **orange cone**, and it becomes clear the **orange cone is the Howlaphone**.

Outraged by this plan, Sheila fights back, calling the animals mean for wanting to do such things to nice people who likely don't know what they were doing. She suggests that perhaps humans and animals could live **together** peacefully. All the animals laugh at this. In the desert's experience, humans, or **two-legs**, have proven that they do not want the animals in their world, and that two-legs wouldn't last a day in the desert.

Sheila will not back down. Amused by her steadfastness, Prince Desert Marigold accepts this as a challenge and presents the **Sting Brigade**—a road of glittering, snapping, and stinging scorpions. The trial is simple: walk across this road without being stung to death. The Coyote says that a four-leg or no-leg animal can do it, unlike hairless two-legs. There was no way, and Sheila knew this; but Leon comes forward with an idea. Using his **cleverness**, he grabs junk from the piles around and constructs makeshift **stilts**. All they need is for someone with strong legs to walk across the expanse of the **Sting Brigade**. They all turn to look at Dennis, who grabs the stilts, knowing this is his moment. With the stilts on, Dennis walks on top and through the scorpions, who, despite their numerous talents, are unable to reach him.

The humans cheer, and even some animals look impressed by the kids' cleverness; but Prince Desert Marigold is not. Annoyed by their success, the Coyote challenges the group to eat a cactus—the **Death Cactus**, one covered in a thousand spikes. This is a test no one is willing to volunteer for, except Sheila, who would never back down from a challenge. Dust Cloud returns as themselves and shares with the audience that even the Coyote, though he would never admit it, began to have some respect for Sheila, even if it was the tiniest amount. Returning to the story, Dust Cloud as Sheila grabs the cactus from the Coyote, carefully of course, and using a bowl from the junk canyon, places the cactus inside. She then finds an old eggbeater and uses it to pulverize the cactus and all its spines until they are nothing but **paste**. Glob by glob, Sheila eats the cactus. It tasted awful, but before long, she **swallowed the entire cactus!**

Triumphantly, Sheila looks at everyone—humans and animals—and declares that yes, it is possible for them all to **live together as one**. Prince Desert Marigold cannot accept this; he will have none of it and yells to all present that he will not tolerate such a thing! Destruction is coming, and there is not one thing that could change his... and suddenly, there they are. The Twins, Eager and Shy, holding the paws of the Coyote. It is in their eyes that Prince Desert Marigold can see the unwavering, unfiltered **love** that only the most open-hearted can have. The Twins see him, and Prince Desert Marigold softens. The kids did not come to destroy but were there, willing to meet him and his desert companions and show them their **love**.

So, a deal is made: to choose **conversation over destruction**, and for Sheila and her human companions to work on living a life that is considerate of the environment and the animals within it. They are to work and check in with the animals to ensure that their needs are being met, and if they are not, go back and work even harder to make it a world where **everyone** can live

peacefully. The only condition is that Prince Desert Marigold must give Sheila a ride for the check-in.

In the back of the Coyote's truck, they ride back, all the way until their castle—the fort, the jewel of junk—is beside them. They all step out, and with a grand gesture, the Coyote hands the **orange cone** over to Sheila, promising to return the next full moon. And just like that, there was only the dust left from the truck and a couple of kids to prove if the story was real.

EPILOGUE

Dust Cloud returns as themselves and speaks to the audience directly one last time. The story was not a dream, nor a figment of one's imagination. **It did happen**, and Sheila maintained her promise. She made room in the towns and cities for more wilderness and met with Prince Desert Marigold once a month for their Full Moon Tea. Then one day, Sheila had a suitcase, a sleeping bag, and books. Prince Desert Marigold showed up, and off together they went. She was around 23 or 24 when she left for a very long time, and while her work brought animals and humans closer together, both groups began to grow distant again. Someone needed to be the bridge between worlds now that Sheila was gone.

Dust Cloud steps forward. They would be that bridge because they saw and were there when Sheila swallowed that cactus. Shy, Eager, Dust Cloud—it does not matter. Taking up the mantle left empty by Sheila, Dust Cloud explains the work they must do. Pulling the **orange cone** out again, they declare they will build another fort, castle, or anything and place the cone on top so that whoever or whatever animal comes by they will recognize it. They will walk out of their pickup truck, dust off their cowboy boots, take off their sunglasses, and know Dust Cloud will be there for them. The only thing that Dust Cloud has not figured out is whether they will respond in human or with a big Ar-Ar-AROOOOOOOOOO. End of play.

THEMATIC BREAKDOWN

THEMES

| COEXISTENCE AND UNDERSTANDING

- o Nature is all around us. The plants, the animals, sights, and smells remind us how we are part of a beautiful world bursting with wonder. But how we live with nature is up to us. **The Girl Who Swallowed a Cactus** shows us how if we are not careful, our choices can cause harm to the environment. Magical places are not just in stories, they live in nature around us, and it is up to us to protect it.

| CURIOSITY AND CREATIVITY

- o In **The Girl Who Swallowed a Cactus** Sheila and her friends solve their problems with clever thinking and kindness. They always try to understand their problems to learn how to help. Sheila and her friends teach us that when we ask questions and work to understand our problems, we can solve anything.

| ACTIVISM THROUGH ART

- o We can all make change. **The Girl Who Swallowed a Cactus** teaches us how we can use art to make changes in our world. Using the power of our mind, creativity, and heart we can make a difference.

SCT'S ENCORE DISCUSSIONS

CAREGIVER QUESTIONS

1. Sheila and her friends learn how their choices can impact the environment around us. What can you do to help the environment?
2. In **The Girl Who Swallowed a Cactus** Sheila and her friends solve their problems with quick thinking and kindness. How do you solve problems in tough situations?
3. **The Girl Who Swallowed a Cactus** teaches us how we can use our voices to make positive change. How can you use your voice to make a difference?