

LOST DOGS

By

Peter Christopher

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Early Preview

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*The beauty forcing us as much as the harshness.
Our spirits forged in that wilderness, our minds
forged by the heart.*

- Jack Gilbert

They are along the highway. I mean the dogs, the cats too, but mostly the dogs. They trot the blacktop. They lie dusty in the blowing grass between the two lanes coming and the two lanes going. I sometimes see them crossing the highway with their eyes rolling in terror at the cars and trucks blaring horns at them and them running faster. They get to the tall grass. They slink into a ditch. They make the parking lot at Sonny's with the big dumpster out back.

Most of the cats I know come out at night. When I see a cat during the day, it's usually when the flies are already in a whirling feast. The flies blow off as if in a soft explosion of buzzing cat. The flies come back, travel the tongue curled black, fill an eye socket.

The dogs watch me walk the highway. They watch from the deep grass, panting, ready to run. Most are mutt dogs. Most are alone. Some are starving. Some are pregnant or slinging rows of pink teats. Not too long ago, I saw a litter tumbling over one another from a concrete culvert trickling water under the highway. Some bigger dog watched over while the litter of four played and the tractor trailer rigs rumbled above. A day after I saw those dogs, I went back out along the highway with another kind of feast. I swung a plastic bag holding half a pepperoni pie, a few fatty rib bones, the little miracle of an okay-smelling tuna roll I had pulled from dumpsters. When I got to the big culvert they were gone, as if they had never been. All four pups and the bigger dog, the mother dog, whatever they were or were not, were all swallowed up.

Some of the best diving around is done at Four Star. About midnight, I start watching from across the street. I stand in low hedges stomped lower as the night delivers a cheesy-pizza-of-a-moon all of us can eat. A cat crosses the parking lot in the moon-

light. The cat slips around a corner, heading-I would bet-for Four Star's dumpster and some diving of his own.

Not long after I see the cat, a dog crosses the parking lot. The dog looks skinny hungry and all business by the way he trots. The dog disappears in the direction the cat disappeared when the lights at Four Star cut out. The oven boy fires up a doobie twist as he floats out the front door. Oven boy poots off on his scooter. Four Star Pizza's manager, wearing his sanitary-pizza-paper hat, is in such a hurry when he leaves that he runs a red light. I take my time going through the parking lot and out back.

Up on his hind legs at the big dumpster is the skinny dog. He tries to claw himself closer to the pizza boxes left stacked on top of the heap. Skinny dog looks at me, shows me his dirty yellow teeth, his long ones.

"Don't mess with me," I growl. "I'm the bigger dog."

I show him my broken teeth. Skinny dog moves off, sits under a tree trailing down Spanish

moss. The cat I saw crossing the parking lot sits up a branch in that tree. The cat's tail hangs as if diseased, dying moss. Both the cat and the dog look at me as if I might know something better.

"I'm the bigger dog only for now," is what I tell them.

I don't have to tell them how after diving some you almost forget the shit-soup smell of the draining muck at the bottom of the dumpsters. Tossed into the smell of Four Star's dumpster are the usual bundles of cardboard and paper, loose diapers, ripped and leaking plastic trash bags, and on top, a tottering stack of taped pizza boxes holding tonight's mistakes: maybe an anchovy and pineapple pie that caught on fire while oven boy nodded in dooper dreams, or pies delivered cold nobody would pay for, or a bored baby-sitter's prank order. I take a peek. Two eggplant and a lobster is tonight's haul still warm through the boxes. Two eggplant beauties and what looks to me like melted runny chunks of Taiwan-plastic-lobster toys poked loose from the gumball machines at Winn Dixie, what smells to me like rotting-

fish-stinking-blue-cheese-moldering-rat puke so strong that your stomach twists away faster than your mind can begin to say to itself, “Jesus H. Christ, *no*, there is no way I can even *think* about taste testing this one!”

Skinny dog clicks his teeth, slings drool, as he snags in mid-air the eggplant slice I toss him. The slice is gone in two quick chokes. Chops are licked. Skinny dog slows somewhat after his fourth slice. Both skinny dog and the cat ignore what might pass as lobster at some other party. The cat sniffs at the eggplant slice I flop up into a nearby branch, bats a paw at it. The cat, owned by neither hunger nor fear, looks down at skinny dog and me looking up at him in all the moonlight.

People say I’m crazy doing what I’m doing. Nearly everybody I know figures anybody living the way I do—the long quiet, the always looking for some luck—is short a baked bean side order of a full lunch. Most everybody has called this one right. Every morning I start out walking from zero toward the possibility of making it work for one more day. I kick up dead

palm fronds along the side of the highway and see what happens to those of us not behind the steering wheel of a big machine cranked up.

Now that I've said that I should say this, I was walking the highway this morning when I heard something, some whining. Down on the other side of a ditch, on the hood of a wrecked bus long captured by kudzu and weeds, I saw something move. Up closer, crouching, carefully parting long leaves sharp as a suicide's straight razor, I saw a little dog twitching in the day's growing heat. Her burred-thick coat was mostly black, but for a splash of white at the chest and throat. Her four, long, pale paw stockings and her tail tip were also white.

Sometimes you know right away when your luck has changed. Sometimes you feel as if something bigger and better than yourself, something lighter than air, is gathering itself in your lungs.

She yawned. When she was done, the little dog lifted her head into looking around. When she saw me, she thumped her tail hard, whacking metal, the sound like some ghosting big engine still running

fast under that bus hood.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not yet so fruit loopy, so rotten with self regard, that I don't know what's going on. I know that I'm nobody's dreamboat. Most women don't go for me. I should say that, for a long time now, most has not amounted to any, but that doesn't stop me from giving my best shot.

I walk the wide, air-conditioned aisles of Pic-N-Save. I doodle dong around HARDWARE. I pick up a hammer. I squeeze the trigger on an electric drill. I sword fight with a wooden-handled toilet plunger when I see the woman I'm looking for in HOUSEWARES.

She is even better looking than her employee-of-the-month picture posted by the cash registers: less glossy, more fleshy around the jaw, more hair teased up higher than I have ever seen hair teased, and I have been a hair freak for a long time now, more confidence in the way she holds her mouth and in the way she looks at me, who once started out tiny and pink and who is now swollen and hairy.

“May I help you?” she asks.

Her kind of confidence up close, the way her mouth moves when she talks, speaks to me of fear.

“Yes, yes, you can, but first I want to congratulate you on your Pic-N-Save employee of the month merit award, Mrs. Melissa Carter, Customer Service Representative,” I say.

“Well, ummmmm, thanks,” she says, the little crack already starting to widen.

“No, I should thank *you* and by the way, your official winner’s picture doesn’t do you justice. Really. I mean it. Your hair, your. . .”

“Thanks, but what can I help you with?” she says, looking around so that I know she knows and that I have to work faster, or smarter.

“Well, I just wanted to ask you about something,” I say.

“Yes, go ahead, how can I help you?” she says.

“Okay, all right, you know how people, whether customers or just regular human types, are strange,” I say. “I mean, how you are with one person

for a while, eating and sleeping and living with them, hearing the little noises they make when they are in the bathroom the first thing in the morning or right after making love, and you are talking to them, maybe complaining a little about only a few of the smaller things, or later sometimes going places together, sometimes holding hands as if holding hands still really meant something, truly loving them, and then it stops. . .”

“That’s enough right there, mister,” she says.

“Roland, you can call me Roland,” I say.

“That’s enough,” she says. “Now, do you leave on your own, or do I have to holler for *Merton* to come to **HOUSEWARES?**”

“Merton?” I say.

“Yes, Merton,” she says.

She looks over to **SPORTING GOODS**, three cool and clean aisles away. A big brother wearing the red Pic-N-Save smock stands among the bowling balls, the big three-holed bowling balls. His huge hands hold one in a way that makes it look like one of the little bowling balls used for candle pins in a

beer joint.

She says to me, "It's your call. . ."

"As I was saying, you know how after they have gone and you are in the bathroom and you happen to look down at their toothbrush hanging there as if the dang thing is waiting for the loved one to come back and you take a closer look and see the bristles all bent from the little grooves in their teeth that you have run the tip of your tongue over and over and never will again when. . ."

"Merton!" she sings out. "Merton, can you come over here for a minute?"

Merton moves the way you would imagine a Merton moving, fast on his feet for such a big guy, all ass muscle and arms working very well together.

"Merton, this gentleman was just leaving and I was wondering if you could show him the way out," she says.

"This way is the way, my man," Merton says, nodding toward the double doors at the front of the store.

She gives me a little wave good-bye, not in an

unkind or sarcastic way, and goes back to folding very thin dish towels on sale, three for a dollar.

I want my money's worth so I start throwing air punches, an uppercut or two. I shuffle. I pretend I'm making something happen. I know I'm not fooling anybody, not even myself. My hands are too small and I have no real thing for fighting. I stop with the late round action. I mostly go meekly.

"Merton, you know how people, human beings, are really kind of strange," I say, a little out of breath. "You know how you are with one person for a while, eating and sleeping and . . ."

"I know, my man, I know," Merton says. "And ain't it something? Ain't it really something the way it all goes down?"

"Yes!" I say. "Yes, it is!"

Out in the ferocious heat rising off the tar of the parking lot sticking to my one wingtip worn down at the heel and my one basketball sneaker needing a new lace, I say to Merton, "Oh yeah, right, okay, and there's one more thing."

Merton is just as cool looking in his smock as

if he was standing over an open freezer, smoking cold, in the Pic-N-Save frozen food section, if Pic-N-Save had a frozen food section. He is one smart dude with job security, as much forty-hour week as anybody has nowadays.

“You can tell Mrs. Melissa Carter, our Customer Service Representative, fucking merit award winner for the month, that she can. . .”

“Yes?” Merton says to me.

Merton is big and smart and icy cool and also not unkind. His smile is real.

“You can tell her, if she wants to, she can still call me Roland.”



I'm giving it another shot.

Out back of the Sawamura Japanese Steak & Sushi House, in the parking lot with the potholes and the chunks of busted-up asphalt, is where Nishi usually goes during her breaks to take quick and quiet puffs on her slim cigarettes one after another. While I

wait for her, I gurgle at a pint of Old Grandad. I go through the dumpster, a Boone deluxe model. I do so to keep my chops up. My diving has become not so much taking what I can as what I need. The amateurs, or worse, the monkey walkers, are the ones in a long sweat, mixing everything up all the way to the bottom while looking for cans to cash in for a quick taste or sniff. In their hurry, they lose or mess up every decent thing they happen to come across—I have found nearly new lava lamps, dart-boards, coffee makers, computers, and more—whether they can use it or not, whether anyone else can use it or not.

Eating what you find, finding what you eat, is what separates the professionals from the part timers, the men from the boys, the big dogs from the littler dogs. Finding a pepperoni pizza hot in its box stacked out on the nightly heap by a college kid with feeling, or coming across cans sometimes a little dented or missing a label for Vienna sausage, deviled ham, tuna fish and such, is one thing. Moving on to the dry foods: chips, cereal, cookies, pasta, while making sure they are, for the most part, crisp and ungreen, is

something else. So is fruit with the skin bruised, cheese gone a little moldy blue, chocolate with the cocoa butter turning white—more food than I can ever eat. No wonder I've gained forty-three pounds. No wonder I get the nasty runs, usually during hot weather. Sure, I watch for every elbow macaroni to squirm around into a maggot. Sure, Tex-Mex is always questionable. A lot of ethnic food is not always what you at first might think. Only the best and the bravest dive at the Chinese and Japanese joints. Like most things though, you have to pick and choose, study the take-out menu, and go with the best. In Hogtown, hands down, the best is Sawamura, home of the dumpster with the baddest smell. Once you get past that smell, baby, you got it licked. That shit is the Olive Garden.

“Roland,” Nishi whispers from the shadows near the high wooden fence. “I have something for you.”

Nishi's pale face is a little hidden moon under her scudding cloud of long black hair. No it's not, but she is really something, as Merton would say, with her hair almost as long as she is tiny, her silky

Sawamura kimono and ornate sash, her chunky high-heeled sneakers. Did I say how Nishi sometimes reminds me of somebody I knew a long time ago? To look at her is nearly feast and memory enough.

“Roland,” she whispers. “Come get some stir-fry before the boss misses me.”

She also has chop sticks and her ciggies that she smokes while I eat.

“Nishi, let me lick your ankles when I’m done,” I say.

“Roland, don’t start,” she says.

“Your tiny ankles, your tiny knees. . .”

“Roland, please,” she says, puffing faster. “I like you, Roland, but it is not there for me in that way.”

I said nearly.

“Maybe some day it could be.” I say, burping some shrimp, some dear Old Gramps. “Maybe after I get less swollen?”

“No, Loland.”

“Did you say Loland?”

“I said Roland,” Nishi says.

“Oh, I thought I heard you say Loland, but anyway, why?”

“Why what?” Nishi says.

“Why won’t you maybe go for me after I get back on track and everything else comes into play?” I ask.

“Why, because I love another woman,” Nishi says. “Because we live together and we are sometimes in love with each other at the same time.”

Did I say before how only the best and the bravest do triple gainers at the Japanese joints? Did I say you have to quiz yourself on the take-out menu? Did I say once you get way, way, way past the smell you got it licked?

“I’m a sushi eater myself,” I say.

In the quiet, I hear the tree peeper toads. I hear the traffic off on the highway.

“Well, you know, that is, when I can get some, any,” I say, “you know. . .”

More toad clamor: whump, wheep, whump.
More traffic slushing past.

“I’m sorry I said that,” I say. “Well, not that I said what I said about sushi diving so much as that I hurt you and that, you know. . .”

“I know, Roland.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“I know you’re sorry,” Nishi says. “How’s your poo-poo shrimp?”

Nishi is tiny, but her heart is huge. Nishi’s heart fills the parking lot to overflowing with her goodness. Her kindness is such that she flies us through the darkness above the headlights of the cars and the trucks whining along the highway and over a thunderstorm flashing in the distance. She leads us on through the widening night that feels as close and as heavy and as alive to me as my own panting heart.

I’m smashed, so go ahead, laugh at those sentences.

I’m really such an amateur drunk.

So what? So go ahead and run me over in a Lincoln Town Car. Give me impetigo. Send me into the jungle to take all the fiery heat whatever little sincere guys want to throw my way.

On second thought, I'm not that drunk. I'm not so gone as to forget that I have seen all that, done all that, bought the fast-shrinking, shrunk too tight, XXL T-shirt. Nobody has to tell me my best shot has never been none too good.

Another day, another Grandad hangover. Even so, I'm out earlier than usual, before the sun machineguns the asphalt and what is left of my brain. Southwest Sixth Street is quiet, but for the locusts power drilling their electric buzz song into my head. Those locusts and the 6:13 Cotton Belt thrumming the rusty rails through town. Others of us are also up and about. Sam the Dealer Man sits on a picnic table near the basketball court waiting for a young blood to show up for the next shift. A somebody or other, a Laotian-Manchurian-Laplander on a bicycle, rattles chain on his way to school or work.

"Are you with me, Doctor Woo?" I call after him.

A catbird watches and calls the play-by-play from his seat among the waxy leaves of a Chinaberry tree. Mighty Casey crawls to the plate. Actually, I'm

wingtipping and dribbling along in my sloping-worn shoes when a van goes by fast. The van slams to a stop about a quarter mile up street. The van's side door bangs back and a woman is thrown out. She lands hard. Her head takes a couple of bounces among the weeds, but she comes up working her mouth in a way that shows her spirit is not yet completely eaten out, "JERK-OFFS! ASSHOLES! DUMB PRICKS!"

By the time I get to her she is on to a different game. She is on her knees, gacking.

The sun shoots me a little more while I wait on her. My eyes boil in a big pot out in the front yard of the shotgun shack that is behind my eyelids. My brain squats heavy and thuggish. My skin flakes off as crumbly-old as the yellow newspapers that failed to keep the freezing cold from the attic of my boyhood.

So, maybe I'm still a little drunk, okay? Or maybe I wish I was, okay?

"Mickey Mantle Liver Shots all around!" I scream to no one in particular.

The catbird imitates her heaves and my

groans.

Another Samoan-Somalian-Croatian-type person bikes past. Everything is too hot and hazy for me, a little too oriental, a little too. . .



“You all right?” is what I say when she stops puking long enough to dab the back of a hand at her lips punched fat.

“Do I look all right?” she croaks.

One of her flip-flops has flipped off. Her T-shirt and stretch pants are rags showing her ass meat. She looks like a curb whore, worn-out, busted down, thrown away by just about everybody she has ever met. She is skeleton still dying with filthy hair matted to her head.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” I ask her.

“You got any money?” she asks me.

I fist around in my pockets for \$1.47, all in change, which I tell her about.

“That’ll do you, Bud,” she says. “Follow me.”

She staggers up and slaps one flip-flop across Southwest Sixth and into the jungle growing along the creek. The catbird follows too, swooping from branch to telephone pole to shopping cart overturned in the little clearing. Beside the cart, there are overturned boxes, a ripped blue pool tarp, a big lounge chair with the legs snapped even stubbier around a heap of ashes and charred wood.

She has me sit in the angled Easy Boy lounge while she kneels in front of me. My head bangs around pretty good. Bases are loaded and Casey is at bat. Stuffing, musty and piss smelling, scratches at the back of my neck as if some hairy animal, a rotting dog, is somehow hiding in the lounge and snuffling around with its bristly snout for some last air. The curbie heaves and catches herself before getting me out. My little stray is hidden by hair and a roller of fat.

When I open my fist I can smell the copper smell of sweaty coins. She takes the change without missing a beat. Slup, slup, slup. I stroke chairdog’s chinny-chin-chin in time with the slupping.

While we were crossing Sixth, I think I remember she soft drawled that her name was Suzette. I let myself go with Suzette and sink further into some of the old, boundless ignorance. The old spooky tooth I have become shoots my very own death rays. My head sizzles from the blasts and I pump a splooge monster. I too join in the destruction lying just about everywhere under the balding hot sun.

The catbird, perched on the cart, calls balls and strikes, calls it right alright-warbling, laughing, crying softly as a baby.

The great thing about her is she is not as scared as the rest of us. Well, maybe a little bit, but most dogs will have nothing to do with strangers. Given any kind of chance, most strays will run off, or ignore you if you don't have food. This one lets me come up to her hanging around the old bus wreck whether I have a half-eaten hoogie hero or waffles dripping with syrup or even when I don't have anything at all. She whispers hello. She lets me stroke her head. I put my arm around her and we are in the cat-

bird seat. We lazily watch the dragonflies and the little lizards. The lizards are really tiny dinosaurs running over the flaking prehistoric plain of the bus hood that once housed a big driving load. I look down into her brown eyes carrying love and a certain helplessness. I pinch off a seed tick and mash it. I scratch her along her mottled throat and do all the worst chitchatting.

“. . . And believe me when I tell you I was giving it to her straight and hard as in jab, move, jab, big right word hook to the bigger brain lobe of one Mrs. Melissa Carter, our Pic-N-Save Customer Service Representative and employee standout for the month of May. I was, after all, a customer. Well, I was almost a customer. I had thought about buying something, a so-called plumber's friend, if I had had the bread, which I didn't, but I would have if I did, when I asked her, our dear Mrs. Carter that is, with the stacked-high beehive do, a decorated expert in dealing with the human species, how, I asked, can we connect with somebody in a way that lasts longer than a salami and onion sandwich a la dumpster when the

monkey walkers haven't had a good goddamn hike from Sam and his boys in three days and they are wild in their agony . . .”

She looks at me with those sweet brown eyes like all the good ones have and listens to every crazy word I say.

Not that nothing is easy for nobody. Cars and trucks are stopped at the traffic light. The shiny new zipsters and the old pick-up trucks clunking as if trying to throw a piston, the smashed and smashing rocket ships and battleships, are backed up hot inches from one another filled with people waiting patiently. These are men and women looking straight ahead, not talking to each other, not seeing me, or if they do, they see a hunk of walking trash with thirteen cents in his pocket. They act as if I'm just another something to look through, more oily air, a flawed nothing farting past them.

A young woman in an old Nova doesn't move her head, her eyes, not even a little, when I knock knuckles on her beater's rear window. I smile.

She acts as if nothing is happening in her rearview. I flash my psycho-zombie-drooler's face. I bare my broken monkey teeth. She fast wheels the old car onto the grassy shoulder, fishtail skids and guns it through the light, keeps on going up the long highway.

Now there is someone more than just me owned by all our big and little fears, at least one woman speed jock not just breathing chilled air and looking straight ahead as if paid to shut up and not see, just keep driving, keep going, only to wait and wait and wait somewhere else; a broken toilet seat, a creaking chair at a desk in an otherwise empty office, a supermarket check-out line, a packed jail cell smelling of rampant sweaty fear, a small restaurant table where one night's leftover food could feed a family of three for a week, a stool in a bar near the tracks where the soapy-flat beer sloshes every time a freight train blows by, a hospital bed with restraining straps, a sofa in front of a very tiny television set showing, *The Price is Right* where we all wait locked-down, jacked-off, chopped-up for the grand prize-grinning old dog

death himself.

I tell myself that I have tried not to let women and money run my life.

I mumble something about how I was never much good at waiting, dangling, pretending the fix wasn't in. I pretend to take only what I need. Until then, I flop on a broken bed in a room so small I had to lie down to pull my shirt over my head. I listen to Aretha Franklin and other soul survivors on the boom box I found behind Sound Shack.

I know I am just another cat in a tree, only not as good as a cat. I am a monkey, no, worse than that, a bloated man hairy in all the wrong places, up that branch, falling into the waiting mouths of those with nothing more to do than drink, eat, fuck, kill—all of it in the name of getting more money and power over Little Red Riding Hood running through the darkening woods and Brutus chuckling while pile driving Popeye and Davey Crockett eating Mexican musket balls at the Alamo and Tarzan of the Apes whirling around underwater while knifing a giant

crocodile and my old man holding me underwater until my soul floated out limp and Dennis Prevey the Houghton School bully kneeling on my shoulders while belting home run punches off my face and my first job where I killed rats in the stinking wet hell of that tannery for a nickel a rat and the nuns chasing me out of the Catholic Church for eating a meatball sandwich in catechism class and stomping fourteen miles of fence in shale stone blistering the skin raw from my hands while the old timers laughed and the dizzying hunger as I walked all night that one winter night down by the docks to keep warm and watching the Vietnamese boys coming toward us knowing it was either deal them a good hand of death or die trying and lying on a hospital cot for two days after they micro-waved my eyeball so my eye dripped down my face sunny side up and. . . Claire. . . my God, Claire. . . she is the only something I would have done differently, harder, more of.

Inside my head is woofing like a dog.

A fly flies around in this cardboard box of a room.

The fly lights on my foot.

There is more than enough room in here for all of us, the Queen of Soul, Tarzan swinging through the trees, the pomp and splash of the Catholic Church, all the big and little eaters.

Jesus Christ, I'm so fucking fat.

I'm fat and tired of talking to myself.

No, I'm not talking about my first sushi-nookie-teriyaki or the lying television soap opera in this late afternoon that is memory. If Merton had known Claire, then even Mr. Super Cool himself would have said right on, that is one hell of a hitter, somebody who knows how to stroke that low, hard, inside pitch out of any park. When she swung her long hair away from her face and pulled me down and kissed me, I was kissed. I know nobody not in love wants to hear this shit. No one cares about how one time when she kissed me, a hairy-sloppy-teetering-ass-grabbing-swooning-wet kiss, we fell, cracked our teeth together in such a way that I saw brain stars. When I tried to get up she grabbed me by

my belt and I farted. No woman I know wants to have anything to do with men and their thing with farting, but Claire looked me right in my eyes and tugged at my belt again. I farted again.

We were in love.

Most of us are skinny dogs on the hunt. Sometimes, if we are lucky, really lucky, we might come across someone who gives us some big real of themselves.

Claire and me did the farting thing again and again until we laughed ourselves crazy sick.

Hey, maybe this guy, me, myself, I, really is crazy?

Is or are?

Hello?

Doctor Woo?

You want to see crazy?

Skip the grandstanding. Skip the flashy fisti-cuffs. Head straight for go and playing with yourself as if you are sitting in a nest of angry scorpions while wearing your mother's favorite butt plug. Eat hot gas-

oline-soaked chimichangas from Olé El Toro and light your ass on fire for dessert. Do what *you* have to do. I want to make it clear that for me, some twenty-two years ago already, Claire was the original something, my deluxe model, the one who turned on the lights.

I mean, I just slept. Now I'm awake and on my hand is the same fly from before. I recognize him and his scrawny fly arms and legs.

“Hey, fly, still hanging around, huh? Well, hang around long enough, fly, and I'm going to name you Leopold.”

Moving fast, I use a boxing combo Benny at the New Rochelle Y taught me at five bucks a pop when that was one hell of a pop. Hook them to the body, hook them to the head, then bang, hang up the phone, put out the lights. Benny at seventy-nine was still booming with life. That was Benny for you, then Benny croaked.

I catch Leopold with Benny's old move.

“You *are* Leopold and you know something, Leopold, I could croak you too, but I'm not going to.

Flies are but gods to children. Didn't Bill Shakespeare, or somebody else old and croaked, say something like that?"

I know I'm messing with Leopold. I know I've aged like a punk in an old movie. I got the bad teeth, a gut, and only a little understanding of making my way.

"You too, Leopold? You want to believe, Leopold?"

I want to believe.

"You can believe, baby, when I tell you it's not going to end for you in this place, not now, not today. No Vietnamese boys are out in the open losing their heads from the fire we lay down. Not on this one. No body is wrapped in a rug left on the side of the road. No bloody butcher paper is ripping open in the bottom of a dumpster to show a dead baby's tiny hand."

I let him loose.

Leopold buzzes around for the longest time before landing on Mrs. Melissa Carter's liberated employee-of-the-month mug shot somehow found

decorating one bent wall of this box I call home.

“Okay, Leopold, if that didn’t grab you, how about the news that the little dog I love is everything I need. Yeah, I said love. I sometimes tongue her before I take off. Don’t look so disgusted for Christ sakes, Leopold, you’re a fly. Lucky for you, Leopold, I’m easy going because you are somebody, one fly, who is going to make it if I can help it, at least for one more day.

I know I have got to cool out.

I know, Doctor Woo, I know, but I just remembered another one. I remember how one hot night we sat on Claire’s bed. We ate oranges for dinner and we talked about every big and little thing from our day. She had taken off everything and sweat ran in streaks down her throat and between her little breasts with the shouting nipples. When we could no longer take the heat and noise cramming her small room, we dragged the mattress onto the roof. The wind around our heads was a moan as if the sound and feel of night itself. I lay down and again and again

she swept her long hair over my skin. Sleep was furious, as if I was flying with the wind. The city horns and the sirens were far away and yet we heard them so clearly. The clouds were close to our heads. The sheets were blowing. I held her and we flew while her hair surrounding us was a darkness that was a better night.

When Claire went, she went fast. By the end, I carried her everywhere. She weighed sixty-eight pounds. Her teeth fell fast out of her black gums. She was her long hair that had gone white from what they dripped into her to save her. She gave me, with all her suffering, hair by hair, cell by cell, moment by moment, the best death she could give.

Inside my head is a big want for a paper bucket of Sonny's baked beans, a side of some of those delicious smoked ribs. Sometimes one of the brothers working over the hickory pit will hand me a paper bag out the back door. Most of the time I look for us myself.

Mist rises from the pavement tonight. Mist and hunger and memory are everywhere. I can't remember seeing many flies at night. I can't remember seeing any, at least not while night diving. Where do they go? Do they get stuck in fly traffic and stare straight ahead? I bet flies know better. I know Leopold knows better, but I'll have to ask him. Sure, I hear a little dumpster buzzing now and then at night, but those are most likely the fly divers like myself, checking out what people and the other flies have left.

I stir around in the big dumpster at Sonny's with a wire shirt hanger. I come up with somebody's doggie bag. They most probably had the waitress pack it for them and forgot to take it home. Inside the bag, there are some nice smoked pork slices, a fat knobbed bone, a three piece. . .

"Yo, scrapper, what you got for me?"

He is a big one, gaunt, but big. He has a long antenna. He has that monkey-walker need coming off him hard.

"What do you want, Daddy?" I say to him.

"Didn't your motherfucking mama ever teach

you not to answer a question with a question?” he says. “I say what you got there for Kingsley?”

“I’ve got thirteen cents if you want it,” I say.

“Thirteen cents, sheeeet, old timer, don’t you lie to your bigger.”

“I’ve got change and pork slices and. . .

“Sheeeet, scrapper,” says Monkey Walker, “I’m not going to ask you but one time more before I. . .”

Monkey Walker catches me with the truck antenna.

For me, it is no longer the fear of most things so much as the strangeness of them. Really, most things we do as people are so very strange.

He is fast and he catches me again, this time across the neck. He takes me down. As I go, I take his antenna. I snag it from his hands and lie on it. I doggie whimper. I beg for mercy. When Monkey Walker comes over muttering to get his piece of me, when he is close enough that I can smell the teeth rotting in his head, is when I have my good steel blade at his throat.

He slathers and wrestles a little in the sleeper hold I have on him. I shave him. I crease him a little line under his chin. He understands blood. He quits.

“Now do you run or do I slice your lungs out?” I say.

“You’d be doing me a favor,” he says softly, bloody spit foaming from his lips.

“I know,” I say softer.

We whisper while looking into each other’s eyes. I turn him loose hard and fast, stomp him a little more. He takes it. I step on his antenna, bend it, snap it into small pieces that I throw into the tall darkness of the trees. None of it means nothing. We’re a couple of bums on parade.

I walk bleeding through the mist rising like my ghost wanting out into the Spanish moss.

When I look back, we are gone.

I wake having my neck licked.

I try to move s---l---o---w.

I move s-----l-----oooooooo-----w-----e-----r.

She laps my face. I soft dent my weight

around on the hood of the old bus. I lean up. My shirt, crusty with dried blood, puckers open. The gash between my ribs has also been licked clean.

I really have gone zombie not knowing how I got this far. Most of me is hot and throbbing. All of me is hot and thirsty. I can barely breathe I'm so fevered hot.

She licks me more and I look into her loving eyes.

Why of course, Roland, you rusting-can-of-Spam-for-brains, you idjit, you fuckhead.

So I'm not the smartest guy in the world.

So this whole time it has lapped me right in the face and I never got it. Of course, she has known all along, and has just kept going with it, not letting on, enjoying it, making nothing of the mystery.

"Welcome back, darling, I missed you so," I say to this little bitch with the beautiful brown eyes. "I knew you would come back to me, but I never thought you would come as a bus-living stray."

She rests her head in my lap. I touch her soft ears, her muzzle, and I talk to her. I tell her all the

things that I have wanted to tell her for so long now.

I monkey yammer all the big and little things
I know she likes to hear.

I buzz.

I meow.

I talk in the voice of a flophouse down-and-
outer drinking and hooting all night through the rot-
ted canvas slung over a rope hanging between our
cribs. . .

“And don’t think there ain’t some gamer left
in me, boy, with the way this mug of mine is a pitted
fright mask like I don’t know it every time you and
everybody else looks away from the night I jumped a
flying fast train and got landed in behind an open
boxcar of wood slash. By the time I caught on what
was happening, I was moving too hurried to do any-
thing other than hang on and take it, them wind-
whipping splinters, for the next nineteen towns, them
driven wooden needles sticking in me everywhere my
skin was not covered by the long sleeves of my moth-
er’s own work shirt.”

“No tickee, Doc, no laundee.”

I talk until all the voices in me give out and then I hold her. I mean, I hold her again.

When everything gets too hot for her she moves down to my feet like a dog instead of the woman I know she is. We sleep touching and unafraid. I sleep knowing we again have the chance to happily fail at our lives.

After three days and three nights of rain my cardboard shack is soaked through and through. I watch drops running down the wall as if racing one another. I trace a finger over the welt on my neck. I watch Leopold twist together his two front legs as if thinking, worrying too.

The rain has turned the parking lot into a pond. A picnic table in back of the nursing home has been stranded by the rising water. A cat crouches on the table, an old gray cat. His tail is splayed wet and muddy.

“Hey, Leopold, I’ll bet you somebody let that cat off. You want to bet that some student going

home for the holidays tossed the old guy from his BMW after seeing the brothers and sisters having lunch under the trees? Some law student most likely saw a few of the brothers and sisters dressed in their nursing clothes when they were laughing it up around the picnic table because it was Friday and they were happy collecting some of the green, even if it was for taking care of old ones warehoused for death. Maybe that same budding law student named Kip or Brent or Kent thought, Hey, those easy-going nigs might also have it somewhere in their hearts to take care of an old tomcat.

“Puss, puss, puss!”

I hold up a can of meatball appetizers. I short whistle as if for a dog.

The cat watches me without moving, doubtful, even when the rain comes harder, the thunder rolls closer.

“Leopold, you can believe me, man, when I tell you I’m *really* trying. Every day I visit her and every day I try my best to get her to come back to live with us. Sure, I don’t play up the fly part, no offense,

but you understand. Even so, Claire won't come. She only goes so far as if she is on an invisible leash. I have even tried leading her on a rope, but she spins and leaps, chews her way loose, barks, barks, barks. She is as scared as the rest of us. She won't leave the bus. I might as well move in with her. Now don't get nervous, Leopold, I'll ask her if you can move in too. We'll set up a tarp, lay down some boards. Her and me will get married and head straight for that place of living together where you accept so many things as if they are not really happening. Hell, I'm already there. Am I right or am I right?" Leopold flies off and lands on my cleanest dirty pants wadded up and thrown in a wet corner.

The rain is more water standing around deeper.

The cat is gone.

Claire is not where she usually is. The rain-drenched air is filled with the weeping of something wrong. No, it's not, but there is something not right. She doesn't come greet me from out of the bus and

she is not standing on the moldy green upholstery and she is not barking on the bus hood or roof or climbed into the trees with the Spanish moss almost touching the rising swamp water.

“Claire!”

Snakes are in the trees, wrapping through and over and around the higher branches and each other. The snakes wriggle around, hissing when I come close.

“Where are you, Claire!”

The rain splatters on everything. I push my way back through the wet heaviness of the leaves to the highway. The slower traffic plows water. A tractor trailer blasts by with a big watery tornado of wind.

Down the highway, I see something. In the whipping grass, I see her try to get up, try to drag herself away.

“Claire, it’s me, don’t be afraid!”

I sit in the beaten down grass and mud. I take her in my arms and hold her. With her fur wet she is so much smaller than she looks, so much more deli-

cate. She lays her head on my leg. Blood seeps into my pants and shoes.

“Easy, darling.”

Her back end is crushed. Her breathing is bubbles of blood. Her eyes look into my eyes as I hold her. I stroke her. I touch at her soft ears and I start to tell her. . .

“Darling, I’ve been making all the stops. I went to Four Star looking for something special for you, a little pepperoni pie. Leopold sends his love. He’s not doing much today, you know, hanging around, doing his thing, getting in the usual shit. I saw Mrs. Melissa Carter who is in charge of the COSMETICS aisle now and asking me what happened to her Employee-of-the-Month picture that is mysteriously missing from near the cash registers, and I saw Merton, who said his home on the west side is almost all paid for. Merton said he is going to try and take it a little easier from here on in. I said to Merton I’ll believe it when I see it. Don’t quit on me, darling. Nishi has quit her job. Bobby, you remember Bobby in the kitchen at Sawamura, said Nishi quit and went

with Trish to California. They took off just like that. Please don't, darling. That's what we should do. Bobby got a postcard from Nishi saying things are really looking up for her. Nishi wrote how she and Trish want to open a Russian, or Hawaiian, or Slovakian coffee house, I'm not sure I'm remembering right what was which. I do remember he said she wrote that they now want to spend all their time together. Please, Claire. I haven't seen the monkey walker. I haven't seen him at Sonny's or anywhere else. Please, darling. Not again, darling. I wish I could see the moon again. I want us to see the moon shining in puddles in the parking lot of Winn Dixie and believe we see the face of God. Please, darling, please. I know the rain has soaked everything, but I'll get us a better place. We can move in together like we talked about. I'll make it nice, or I can move in with you if you want. Do you remember the time Tom had to move out from his brick hole on the lower East side and we moved him in the middle of the night so the landlord wouldn't. . . Please. . .

I forget the words.

For a moment I almost forgot how I'm going
to die alone in a room far from where I was born.

Is it okay to forget?



I know how hard it is to watch what death
does to those once living. I cleaned the blood from
her. I combed her hair with my fingers. I carried her
back to the old bus. And for two days, like an old
dog, I slept by her side.

Why wait any longer to let the world begin?

I say you can have your maggoty cake and
you can eat it too. I wish I had something more to
drink, paint thinner to huff up. I wish I was really
hammered as I walk Southwest Sixth Street this early
morning. The greed, the fear, the anger, the wild sad-
ness are already racing around, zipping and zinging all

over the place. Sam the Dealer Man is doing his job that might as well serve up as a nine to five thing the same as the keeping-on plan that Merton is on. The little dino lizards are racing around, flowing fast as nature, trying to get big so they can eat us again. The catbird is dive bombing the world.

I have come to watch the world from the lounge. I stroke tufts of rotting chair hair. I'm catching all of this morning that I can right in the chops when Suzette comes down the street. I can tell by the way she walks that she is drunk, high, that she is in a lot of pain limping along. She stumbles hard just as the sun coming up, catches her from behind, lights her up, as if her head and hair are on fire, as if she is wearing a halo of fire.

“Hey, Suzette!”

Babylon Sister looks around as if blind, as if the radiance is too great for her to see with.

“Over here, Suzette!”

“Yo, Bud,” Suzette says, not really looking at me as she says it, wobbling some on her way over.

“Buddy,” she says, gobbing spit for a while,

stringing it down to the street. “Got any?”

“Twenty-seven cents worth,” I say to her.

“You want a donate or take it out of me?”

she says.

“What I got is yours,” I say.

She doesn’t say anything. She sways in the breeze.

“It’s yours if you want it,” I say. “And everything else I got too.”

She laughs. She looks at me and says, “I got too much of most of everything as it is, but I could use a little more jingle jangle.”

When she bends to take the change from my hand, I look at the light licking though her hair as if a grass fire sprung up again alongside the highway, or fire on a far mountain.

Once, while hitchhiking, I was picked up by a family driving an old station wagon. I remember trying to talk to the man and woman sitting in the front seat, but no matter how I tried, they would not say anything to me as if I was I-talian in their eyes. I soon fell asleep in the backseat, the little girl sleeping with

her head on my lap, while the man drove us. I slept and slept. When we stopped some where deep in that night, I remember coming to and looking out the window. There were other cars and trucks stopped, right in the dusty road. The little girl was awake too. She pointed out the window and said something I could not understand. I looked some more and saw that the mountain far below was on fire. Smoke drifted over us. People got out of their cars and trucks with crates of squawking chickens in the back. We got out too, the little girl and me, while the man and the woman and the boy stayed back waiting in the station wagon. The little girl and me were out among the others not saying anything either, not doing anything other than watching the fire. I remember watching for a long time, nobody going nowhere, nobody saying nothing, when cattle began coming up the road. Bellowing cattle herded up the dirt road around the cars and farm trucks stopped in the darkness. The little girl began to cry, and for the first time in a long time, too long really for me to remember when, I cried.

Suzette strolls away, coughing and laughing.

Her hair ablaze, Suzette walks without looking back.

The old grey cat is still hanging on, hanging around. I see him lying on the picnic table in the late afternoon sunlight. I talk to him from out my cardboard back door sawed crooked with a broken-tipped steak knife. The cat takes his time, stretches. The cat comes over when he wants to come over. He purrs and rubs against my legs. His hide is salted lumpy with buckshot. His big yellow eyes burn as if smaller suns.

“This is Leopold,” I tell him. “Now be nice.”

The cat acts as if he is listening to me, but I know better. Leopold knows better too and keeps his distance.

I get the dented can I fished loose from one of the dumpsters at Winn Dixie. I open the twelve-ounces of chunk light tuna in water and I set the can on the floor.

I step back.

The cat looks at me, at Leopold buzzing
around.

The cat eats.

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