

Turnings

by Mathew Paust

"Help me," the man said in his mind. He lay beside the folding camp stool alone in the middle of the woods, in the clearing where he and the dog always rested. It was the halfway point of their daily walk, about a mile up the trail from the edge of the woods that abutted the property where they lived. The winding trail had been cleared by their neighbor, who owned the woods and otherwise left it undisturbed. It was late spring, and tendrils of new blackberry bushes and other green growth were pushing up, making it harder to walk along the ruts and stumps and sun-bleached disintegrating tree parts that littered the way.

The man was alone because the dog had known something was wrong and had broken off and headed back soon after they started. She had acted a little strangely herself, and the man had shown his impatience, which quickly dispirited her. She usually burst up the trail, sniffing insatiably at anything that caught her eye.

Occasionally she'd double back to him or follow her nose off the trail into the underbrush, and sometimes the man had to call her to keep her from straying too far or from finding something rotting to roll in.

She lived for these walks. She'd doze morosely in her bed by the fireplace until she sensed the man getting ready each day. Her excitement when he finally appeared in his walking clothes, carrying his aluminum stick and wearing his backpack and blaze orange hat, inspired her to dance, her toenails clacking on the hardwood floor. Sometimes she'd whine and squeal and even bark with unbearable anticipation. At the front door, when he put on his mud boots, he'd let her outside to relieve some of her tension. And if it took a moment or two longer than usual to change from his moccasins to the boots, or to get something he'd forgotten for the walk, she would attack him playfully when he finally emerged on the porch.

"No no!" he would have to order her firmly, raising a hand to keep her from jumping on him. She always obeyed. She knew he didn't

like the physical contact that she loved, and she reluctantly heeded his wishes in this regard. The walk meant that much to her.

This one started out much the same for the dog, but for the man all morning a dark essence had been migrating almost imperceptibly from a corner of his heart. This gloomy patch advanced in a distinct lurch moments after the man stepped into the woods from the groomed acreage behind his house, provoked by the contrast he immediately felt with the sense of pleasant anticipation this transition brought as a rule. It wasn't the same. A pinch of impatience in the man, different from the dog's eagerness, had poisoned the moment they always enjoyed at the start of the morning trek. The dog sensed something amiss.

"C'mon! Let's go!" he said, his voice so prickly with annoyance that instead of bounding ahead she only looked up at him as if confused. He tried again, harshly now as he swung an arm up the trail, "Tasha! Let's go!" Obediently she loped ahead, but stopped after ten feet or so, forcing him to stop as well to avoid running into her. "Tasha! Let's go! Wheeeeeeee! Yeeha!" he said. The fake excitement in his voice didn't fool the dog, who now stared at him, a mixture of forlorn guilt and stubbornness clouding her liquid brown eyes.

He stepped around her and headed up the trail, figuring she'd follow eventually. He looked back several times to see if she had started after him, but saw her merely sitting on the trail, eyes fixed on him, making no move to continue the walk. The man called out each time he looked back, to no avail. He even called out to her a couple of times after he'd rounded the first curve atop the hill and could no longer see her, then finally gave up when it became apparent she wasn't coming along.

The man at first took the dog's refusal to accompany him as defiance. A sour pulse of resentment welled up, and he looked for something to kick in retaliation. But the irritation had begun receding almost as soon as it appeared, replaced incrementally by a sense of relief from the vigilance walking with the dog always demanded. This affected his pace, which quickly relaxed to follow

his whims, dallying at a patch of shy green tendrils that reached up from a winter's nap or pausing to study a tangle of fallen branches he'd not noticed before. He often found random shapes intriguing, especially if their proximity to one another suggested a pattern of some sort. The surprise of wildflowers always delighted him, although he seldom bothered to look at them closely.

But now, with nothing else to tug at his attention, the man stooped and inspected a spray of tiny yellow blossoms affixed to a branching purple stem several feet from the ground. The pale flowers perched in groups of about a dozen each in multiple clusters on thin green stems above collars of leaves that seemed to emerge randomly from the branches. As he drew closer, the man saw that each cluster contained seven groups of the flowers. Spellbound by their beauty, he thought to pick a sprig of the flowers. Instead, he straightened up, took a ballpoint pen and a small spiral-bound notebook from his jacket and noted the find. He jotted down what he'd seen as accurately as he could in the hope of being able to learn the plant's identity when he returned home. He felt pleased that after glancing at these little flowers on previous walks from a distance he'd finally made the effort to look at them closely. He continued up the trail, buoyed by a surge of energy that offered maybe an antidote to the gloom in his spirit that he knew loitered too near.

It was about then he caught the sour sweet odor of rot that he knew was from the buck that had died some months back, during winter, back off a side trail that he and the dog were avoiding. The man intended to wait until decomposition was complete so that Tasha would no longer be tempted to rush upon it and roll with delirious joy in the putrid mess. He had stopped her at the brink of doing just that when she'd discovered the corpse as the two were taking this detour around part of the main trail. The dog had dashed into the underbrush, bounding with the sort of excitement that only another animal -- a rabbit, most likely -- could rouse in her. Glancing ahead of her to see what she might be chasing, his eyes caught the gray mass that quickly came into focus as the deer's upper torso and

heavily antlered head. It wasn't responding to Tasha, who had drawn to within about ten feet before the man could shout for her to come back. So unusually loud and harsh was his voice that Tasha instantly stopped, turned and trotted back to the trail. The man's insistence was so firm that she followed him dutifully to the main trail without once swinging her head back toward what must have struck her at the moment of discovery as El Dorado.

The man was proud of the dog's discipline, then and throughout the winter months when their walks would bring them to the side trail's juncture and Tasha at first would swing her head persuasively, tail wagging fiercely, as if to will them down the inexplicably forbidden path. On the innocent days before they'd stumbled onto the dead buck the two would play a little game when they reached this juncture.

"Should we go down this path today, or should we go straight," the man would ask, and most times the dog would eagerly lead them down the side trail. Sometimes she'd forget about it and plunge right past as if in a hurry to get home, but mostly she'd choose the diversion. Their game ended, of course, after the grotesque discovery. Tasha invariably would pick up the rotten scent long before reaching the side trail, and, although she'd be sniffing breezes with the refined attention of a Sherlock Holmes, she soon caught on that the path to rapture was no longer an option. The man liked to think it was partly dignity that eventually kept her from embarrassing both of them with a scene when the temptation beckoned.

He looked up over the trees where the corpse lay, finding it curious again that there weren't vultures, either circling overhead or lurking in the high branches. It had been so all winter, not seeing vultures near the site, which should have been a mecca for carrion feeders of all kinds. He'd seen vultures on the walks, but never near the dead buck. He mentioned this once to his neighbor, and added, "Maybe they think it's a decoy."

"Yeah, too good to be true," the neighbor had said.

Today, when the man reached the head of the side trail he considered checking out the buck just to see how far along the decomposition had come. He decided against it, in part because he still wasn't sure the dog wouldn't change her mind and come along, but more probably because his curiosity wasn't enough to prevail over the bleakness he expected to find. Thus he barely paused before continuing up the main trail.

It took him another twenty minutes to reach the far end of the trail and the clearing where he and the dog always rested. It seemed to him that he'd made better time today than usual, but after thinking about it he allowed that this impression might be a result of his simply being unfettered of having to heed the dog's distractions, her following scents into underbrush and having to be called back to the trail. He recognized, too, that without the dog on his mind he could follow his own interests and whims, and that this would naturally accelerate his sense of time.

And yet, now that he was ready to rest, he acknowledged that he did feel a bit alone as he began the rituals that came at this stage: hanging his walking stick on the branch of a small holly tree, tugging the straps of his small backpack from his shoulders and hanging the pack on the other side of the tree on the stub of a branch he'd clipped off with his knife for that purpose, then unzipping the pack and removing the aluminum camp stool, unfolding it, planting its three legs on the ground and lowering himself to the netting seat.

Because the dog wasn't with him, he left the small plastic bowl he carried in the pack for her water, and he also left the two plastic bottles of water in their netting pockets on the sides of the pack. One of the bottles was for him, but he wasn't thirsty.

Sitting on the stool, he glanced over to where the dog usually lay, under a pin oak, eating the chlorophyll treat he always brought along for her and which now remained in his shirt pocket. He groped at the pocket and took the cellophane-wrapped, bone-shaped treat out and looked at it, and was suddenly struck by a sense of grief that amazed him. He felt as if Tasha were dead. He wanted

her to come bounding up the trail into the clearing. He even called her name several times, hoping that she'd just been lagging behind. He crinkled the cellophane wrapper on the treat. That at home could bring her to him from four rooms away. She loved these treats. He called her name several more times. Then, as suddenly as it came, the terrible sensation he felt -- almost a seizure, it seemed -- passed. Whew. He tried to celebrate with a chuckle. His abdomen lurched a couple of times, feebly, but no sound came from his throat. He managed to pull in a deep breath and release it in a pursed-lip sigh. Not yet out of the woods, he thought, and made another unsuccessful stab at a laugh, this time to acknowledge the pun.

A wave of fatigue washed over him. He decided that a drink of water would be good, and he started to rise from the stool to retrieve one of the bottles from his backpack. But the fatigue overcame this effort. He slumped on the stool. His thirst could wait.

At this point he began to sweat, and a dreadful alienation crept into his bones. It was like nothing he'd ever experienced. It started visually. Opening his eyes and seeing his jeans, he found them unfamiliar. They were his, he knew, but the cut and the fabric -- even the color -- were strange. Not at all friendly. With considerable effort he leaned back and lifted his head, which had been hanging loosely, chin against his chest. He lifted his head enough so that he could see the bushes and trees in front of him. Again, unfamiliar. Somewhat recognizable, but not comfortably so. They seemed to be staring back at him as if he were intruding, as if they didn't want him to be there. They appraised him coldly, on the verge of anger.

The sky might offer some reassurance, he hoped, and tilted back some more, rolling his eyes to see above the frightening treetops. The sky was clear and blue. He knew this should make him feel better, but it didn't. The sun was behind him. He wondered if the sun would make him feel better if he turned around and looked at it. But he knew he wouldn't be able to rise from the stool. Despite

the sun and the lack of clouds, the sky intimidated him. This frightened him more than anything yet. There were no vapor trails from airplanes. There was always at least one vapor trail, usually two or three up there whenever he looked. He'd always found something reassuring about seeing evidence that other people were up there, giving the sky some dimension, some humanity. The only other time he could remember seeing the sky devoid of vapor trails was the day after the Twin Towers attack. He and a friend were in the parking lot of a pancake house, and they looked up and noted the eeriness of a sky that reflected a nation frozen in terror. The man shivered, and then he and his friend went inside and ate a hearty breakfast. That terror passed.

The man dearly hoped now that this terror, too, would pass. He searched the treetops for birds, even the vultures, as he yearned for anything alive that might deliver him. If there were birds, he couldn't see them. If they were singing or calling each other, he couldn't hear them.

Flat on the ground beside the stool, he couldn't remember how he got there. He didn't remember falling off. He might have tried to rise and simply been too weak to do so and even too feeble to sit back down on the stool, and then simply curled up in the weeds, stones and twigs next to the stool, which, when he twisted his head slightly he could see was still standing, which was an indication that he hadn't fallen, or the stool likely would have collapsed next to him.

He was now shivering and drenched in sweat, trembling actually, trembling violently. Even his legs were shaking, boots making little kicks in the dirt. Oddly, the shaking and shivering ceased when his mind came around to the thought that he might have been lying there, in the same position, for a long time. He knew that his sense of time had become skewed and that whatever he might be thinking about the duration of his predicament was probably too subjective to be reliable.

He was forgetting to breathe. He felt his sense of control over anything at all leaving him, that, if he wasn't already there, he was devolving toward complete helplessness. He took a certain comfort

in knowing this, a certain “to hell with it” sense of giving in to whatever it was that was taking over. Then, at what seemed the penultimate shift to oblivion, something deep in his mind that still rebutted surrender made it's desperate plea:

“Help me.”

His words were not spoken, but the words he heard next most definitely were. They were uttered by a female, whether young or old he couldn't tell. He didn't recognize the voice, yet it sounded familiar and deeply stirring. The voice, speaking gently but firmly and with a tone that carried a sublime urgency, instantly banished the darkness that was devouring him. As the three words were spoken and without any context other than the immediate, they meant nothing literally to the man. Yet, despite their inscrutability, in concert they stroked him as if a bolt from Genesis.

“We love you!”

There was an incredulity in the voice that came through as an emphasis on the word “love.” As if the word “love” were where the power lay and that if he couldn't see this and hadn't known he was loved by whomever was speaking then woe be unto him if he allowed himself to slip away without a fight. And woe be unto him if he didn't get his ass up off the ground right this instant and get his shit together. We love you, dammit!

But it was something more than this. There was pain in the voice that also cried to him that his recognition and acceptance of the spoken love was vital to the speaker. We love you! Please, please believe this! A frail upturn of the word “love” touched him with a deeper, dearer plea: It breaks my heart to think that you might not know this, or that you don't care.

“Where are you?” he blurted aloud, moving his head and trying to get to his knees. His voice came stronger now: “Come here! Let me see you! Help me get up!” Nothing. No response. No more voice. He'd imagined it? Not a chance, it was as real as anything he'd ever known. Someone nearby had spoken aloud. He hoped it was to him. He knew it was to him. But why?

And who is “we,” he asked himself, almost thinking who the hell is we, but biting his mental tongue in time. It didn't matter. The more who loved him at this moment the better. He burst into tears and wept. This went on seemingly for an eternity. His weeping grew in intensity until it reached hysteria, and he pounded the ground with his fists and kicked his legs, and when he finally was finished, when he'd thoroughly used up whatever reservoir of energy he'd had and he lay on his side, spent and dazed, he became aware that he had urinated in his pants, and this made him laugh. But he was too tired to offer more than a few gasps and choking coughs.

He wobbled to his feet and stood, swaying and taking deep breaths until he felt strong enough to take a step. This he did, unsteadily, but he remained upright, and then took another and then another.

The return trip down the trail seemed interminable. Weak as he was, he had to stop and rest several times along the way. After the first such break, he didn't bother to put the folding stool back in his pack, but simply carried it in the hand he didn't use for his walking stick. To his mind, the day had turned from a black and white film noir to a Disney in Technicolor. The birds were back, chattering, zipping around overhead and perched in bushes and on tree branches. Wildflowers he'd barely noticed before seemed to pop up at his feet all along the trail. Yellow blossoms of different sizes and shapes, tiny purple violets, masses of delicate bluets and one tall wine-colored lupine spike that he'd taken the trouble to identify once because it looked so unusual.

He felt as if he were striding through a gauntlet of merry well-wishers. He proceeded cautiously nonetheless, understanding that treachery could be lurking anywhere, hidden or merely waiting patiently in plain sight to be recognized. He strained to regain the sound of the voice that could be his talisman. We love you.

Oh, God, yes, thank you. Thank you.

Stepping out of the woods into his back yard brought practiced patterns quickly into focus. He saw the dog, lying on her mat on the back porch, looking his way. Slowly he walked to the porch.

"Tasha," he said gently. She stared at him, not moving, her eyes tentative.

He stopped at the foot of the steps.

"I'm home, Tasha," he said. Catching sight of a meager wag of her tail, he reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the chlorophyll treat in its crinkling cellophane wrapper. He heard the dog's toenails dance across the porch as he tore open the wrapper and extracted its green-colored prize. Then, treat in hand, the man looked down to find the dog looking up, tail flapping frantically, eyes filled with eager forgiveness, mouth open to receive her reward.

*This story is included in the collection **If The Woodsman is Late***

