

The Dog's Familiar

by Sam Samhines

"Ain't that a damn shame," Rickey said. "Now ain't that a damnshame." Damnshame had become something solid, you see, as if it were something lumpy the dog had left over in a corner.

"I seen them Muslims do that," Rickey said. He kicked a crumpled paper off to the side of the porch. "Wrapem up—the whole fam damly—put him in mah-so-lee-um."

"Those were ancient Egyptians, Sumerians, the first of modern man's civilizations. Islam is a recent religion, about as old as Catholicism." I hoped that my Wikipedia knowledge was enough for him. I looked it up later. "Some say Islam is as old as Adam. Others say it began in the seventh century."

Rickey said, "But ain't Egyptians Muslims?"

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. Now you want to help me with this damnshame?"

The county sent two crews, one to get Mr. Meyers, the old shut-in, tall and affable, but quiet and bent, like a crooked coat rack with a porkpie atop, the other for his dog, an english setter whom he shadowed like a familiar. I say he was the familiar and not his dog. Mr Meyers never drove his mint '78 Buick Regal straight to the grocery store, only on the way to the dog park. He did not walk down Walnut Street to church, but walked with his dog down Mercey Street to sniff at the stray bitches; he only stopped at his dog's favorite smells and trees. Mr. Meyers did not believe in the salutatory effects of physical activity. He walked when the dog wanted him to walk, and not a step more.

Mr. Meyers resided at 38 Walnut for most of his natural life, save his enlistment and the Korean war, but it seemed the dog had lived there longer. This observation, strange as it was, felt right to everyone who knew the master and the owner, because the dog seemed to live a richer life. The dog boasted of life in subtly ostentatious ways. His blue speckled skin rose through his white fur, his finely worn leather collar and his elegant carriage of a beast with

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a pedigree cleaner than European royalty. He ate real cuts of meat, fresh from the red hands of James, the town's butcher. He was never neutered. Sadie, Mr. Meyer's younger, voluptuous neighbor, tried to get Mr. the dog to breed with Blue, but I don't think that Blue was good enough for either the man or the dog.

Mr. Meyers canned tomatoes and preserved pasta sauce in old mason jars that he handed away in the late summer when his tomatoes swelled like the breasts of country girls. It seemed to be his only pleasure besides tending to his dog. The local families threw them out fearing upset palates rather than botulin. His yard was cleanly manicured and edged in the front, but a tangled mess of weeds in the back. The mullet yard, Sadie called it. Sadie and I went around to Saturday service together. We met up when I returned from my own war, and she liked for a time that there was a trained killer to keep her warm at night. Her children spent the weekend with their father "upstate", as if that were the name of the city where he lived, and I would make her roll her "r's" she claimed as we lay together swaddled against the winter, "like a Puerto Rican."

But Mr. Meyers had a "mullet yard." Sadie's yard stopped getting tended soon after she realized that I was serious about devoting my life to catching dogs. I like dogs; I liked the easy way they said "hi" and the quick way they'll try to bite you if they don't like or trust you. I could always get a dog to trust me because I trusted them. I am, what you might call a "dog person." I had a dog once, Blue was her name. She would come right when you called, and sometimes, if the world were humming right along, she would come some time before. So I sympathized with Mr. Meyers as Rickey could not. Rickey did not become a dogcatcher because he liked to keep people and dogs safe from humans and each other. Rickey needed a job and that was one of the few he could qualify for. He was neutral about dogs before his job, but now he hated dogs more than any American had the right to.

"That's one sick puppy," Rickey quipped, when his heart should have gone out to the two deceased. The dog had tried to claw Mr. Meyers to get away. Scratch marks from frantic claws lifted skin as

dry as onion and the blood was a brown stain on the grayed collar. Mr. Meyers had caught the dog and had held him while his body stiffened. The dog, a spotted beauty of an English Setter, blue and gray and speckled all over with teeth as clean as a dentist's finally had curled up between the rigid arms and slept until it starved. Blue was the same, and I suspected of the same batch — some breeder mixing them until the offspring would lose the function of being dogs, more like wind up toys to put on shelves. Not to hunt, not to lie at the foot of the bed at night. Not to smell danger before danger smells you. Blue was different, and I always suspected that Mr. Meyers' dog was different as well. Or else why did Mr. Meyers love it so much? Why did he want to force it to die with him, to accompany him to the next world?

Rickey's large black hands pointed the coroner's office techs towards the back of the old cape cod. The old house was a brilliant testament to the ability of mankind to survive almost any calamity. An old velvet sofa with arched backs like Sadie after a little wine and cheese. The sofa was filled with mold and a slap sent the little animals scurrying. Old newspapers piled on top of one another up until last Sunday's edition, most wrapped in bundles as if waiting for delivery. An old stove that was filled with dishes, and a French bread pizza molding in the toaster oven, a last meal.

"No dog shit, hey?" Rickey said. "He ain't all that crazy."

"Wasn't all that crazy." I corrected. "He isn't anything anymore. He's in the past."

"Don't correct my grammar like you know something, boy. We both high-school grads. You don't know as much as your smart white ass think."

The coroners had followed us into the back, and now that we all were there, we didn't know how to proceed. Should the animal control try to remove the dog first and then permit the body to be respectfully carried away, or should the body be carted out, enveloping the dog like a lover until the coroner decided to stretch the rigor mortis arms and let the dead dog fall out? All of a sudden I remembered patches of my former life, secrets that I was too

ashamed to even admit to myself. A young couple, eyes squeezed shut and grasping each other in the dark. The couple was a thing now, not two people. I could see it in the dark with my goggles, it was crying. I lowered my M-4 and began to roughly lift the man part of the couple, but my words were soft, however terrible.

Rickey, the coroners and I stood around like two sides at a dance, waiting to be called to the floor.

We all looked at the floor, some more than others. I looked a bit more than most, and I noticed that what looked like the dog scratching the old man looked more like the old Setter was placing his paw in a comforting gesture to a frightened man. Mr. Meyer's face was not a face of peace at his final days, or determination to keep the dog with him until the dog could no longer escape. It was one of almost revulsion. His face was turned from the speckled paw, and the dog's snout was placed almost to his as if trying to elicit a kiss from a young, unsure lover.

Nick Simms, that young brute from the farmhouse nestled in the swamp, with shoulders as wide and solid as a church pew said it first. "Looks like the dog's the one keeping him there, and not the other way around." A few of the techs grunted a noncommittal agreement, and Rickey snorted. But I looked up at Nick and he had a gleam in his ice blue eye like a look of knowing just for a hot minute before he dulled down again. "That's some hardcore shit," He concluded. Rickey grew impatient and pried the dog loose. That's when things got less right than they were a few seconds before. The dog's belly was full, yes, but we thought it was bloated from the gas. When Rickey picked the dog up as if were about to toss some luggage, the dog exhaled and defecated on the floor.

Now, I'm not saying the dog was alive. It didn't breathe, and it didn't just decide to take a dump. Just that it had one more breath in it, and apparently one more meal as well. The feces was still wet and it stank worse than a thousand things I can think of save a few, the smell of getting your head dipped in gear oil, those of soft rotting horrors piled in with the garbage and burned like so much waste in the glowing hills of Kabul. And there was another terrible smell. Mr.

Meyers did not stink much more than normal, he was a little emaciated in fact, dried out like Rickey's Egyptians.

"So much for no shit," Rickey said, and then he spat right there on the dusty hardwood.

"Goddamnit, Rickey, just do your job and shut your goddamn mouth."

"I don't stet no trifling fools. Don't nobody disrespect me like that. You lucky I don't pop you in that damn fool mouth of yours. You ain't my supervisor. You ain't in charge here."

"Just do your job or I'll report you. No spitting, no disrespecting the dead."

"You just keep telling yourself you in charge," Rickey said. "Keep thinking that." But he wrapped the dog in plastic and took him out to the van.

* * *

Rickey sometimes took the truck home after work, and though it was against county rules, the county didn't mind much because he would pick up strays on his way to the pound in the morning. I didn't mind because I still lived inside town and Rickey would drop me off nights. This time, Rickey drove straight past my house, Past Walnut and Mr. Meyer's house until the town lights got dimmer and we hit a 'shine still on the county road. It was no more than a shack with a row of benches, wood rotted against another bar of rotted wood held up by old steel drums, the kind you see with trash burning in them in the movies. Oil drums, burning orange and black. The still was clear full of the tonic and men sat quiet on the bench stooped and hunched like convicts. There was a place to spit your chaw, but the packed ground beneath their feet was sticky with depleted tobacco.

"Blue-eyed Nick Simms was there and Rickey and I called him over after ordering a cup of the tonic. Nick stood, spat twice, wiped his chin and walked over.

"It's a simple thing," Nick said, "But I've only seen it happen once before. Only it wasn't a dog. It was a man and a horse. My grandpa. Used to love his horse. Used to say that the *horse* wanted to go for a

ride in the country, not that *he* wanted to go. Used to eat after the horse ate, sleep when the horse was comfortable.”

Nick spat quickly to the ground, a quick squirt of chaw, then took a deep gulp of the shine, coughed and spat some more.

“Ma used to say he loved that damn horse more than his kids, more than Grammaw.”

“Ain't that a damnshame,” said Rickey.

“I don't know about, that,” I said. “What about all that? What about that dog and that horse?” I was sloshing my shine around and getting excited. The small talk around the still got even smaller.

“What if *we* were the dogs, and *we* were the horses?”

“Sit your fool self down. You getting too excited,” said Rickey, tugging at my shirttails. I hadn't noticed, but I was standing up. I could feel my head swimming from the shine.

“But what about it? What if the county was our master, or just thought it was, what if the Army—what if this shine, what if—what if—we were really the masters, what if we were like that? Like Mr. Meyer's dog and your Grandpa's horse?”

Nick and Rickey did not say another word, but I could tell they were thinking it, thinking and ashamed that they believed part of it, but they drank some more and pushed their thoughts down. But the thought became a part of me, and I would not let it go. I got up and started walking back to town, five miles out.

I walked back to Sadie's house, and stood before it. Mr. Meyer's house was next door and as quiet as a mausoleum. I knocked on Sadie's door. I knew she would answer. Her children were in Upstate.

“I'll be a dog, then” I murmured as I buried myself into Sadie's neck.

“What's that?” She cooed as she led me upstairs. Her hips were rolling in a sheer nightgown that just touched the top of her thighs.

“Nothing at all,” I said, but I was more sober than I ever was, and I dreamt that I went to the big city up state. In my dream I was leading Sadie around as she yanked on my leash and I chuckled as she tried to make me heel.

