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Tom Mayer

Dead Dog

IT MUST HAVE BEEN HIT IN THE MORNING sometime and then wandered around before it picked my doorstep. The way that leg was broken, though, it couldn't have wandered very far. I found it about two-thirty when I went downstairs to get the mail. The box was empty and I thought maybe the mailman might be coming up the hill, so I opened the door to look and the dog was lying there against the wall.

The first thing I noticed was the eyes. It was a pretty dog, white, with long soft fur, sleek looking and not knobby-boned and emaciated the way most of them are down here, but at first I didn't notice that or the way it was breathing or the leg, just the eyes. They were deep and hot and sad, but not yet filmy. Then I saw that its breathing was labored, and that there was blood dripping out of its nose. Every third or fourth breath a little bubble, lung-pink and transparent, would form and pop, and dribble on down the muzzle. The fur on its side, just below the ribcage, was crusted and matted with blood and its left hind leg was broken above the joint. The bone ends had pierced the skin, splintery and gray, and there was some dried blood there too. Clusters of green-black flies were buzzing in both wounds. Somebody had put a dish of water near its muzzle. It looked at me steadily with those hot sad eyes, but never made a sound.

I began to feel queasy and at the same time very tired and a little angry that it hadn't picked some other doorstep. I looked down the hill, but nobody was coming, not even any children. It was hot, one of those blank blue afternoons we get here before the rainy season begins, and I felt a light sweat break out on my forehead. I wanted to go back inside, to shut my door and forget the whole thing, but there it was, with the splintered bones and the flies and the blood bubbles, and I couldn't. I knelt down beside it, and, not wanting to touch it, pushed the dish of water closer. It couldn't drink, or didn't want to, and its eyes followed my face. The fur on the side wound was too thick

and matted to tell much, but the leg was beginning to fester. I looked away and got hold of myself, scooped my hand in the water and patted some on its head.

Then I stood up and looked around. The second-story windows of the house across the street were open, and I yelled, "Juana." A couple from Berkeley, Vernon and Laura Schwartz, were renting the place—he was taking a degree in painting at the Instituto and they'd been there since January—their *criada's* name was Juana. "Juana," I yelled again. I was really sweating now, the heat came up off the cobblestones in waves, the back of my shirt was wet and my face was running salt. I wiped my face on my sleeve and shouted a third time.

Laura came to the window. She was a breastless girl, with a too big nose, who wore tight pants to show off her legs. She didn't look at me, but instead at my door.

"What happened?" I said.

"I don't know," she said. "I can't look at it."

"How long's it been out here?"

"I don't know. Since I came home for lunch. I had Juana put some water out for it."

"It can't drink," I said. "Have you called the police?" The house had a phone.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I didn't think of it," she said. She was looking down the hill. "I was waiting for Vern to come home."

I glanced down at the dog and it was still staring at me. I scooped some more water on its head and patted. The blood at its nose gathered, began to expand like a balloon, the walls stretching transparent and tissue-thin and the color washing, popped, slid away in separating drops down the black muzzle skin between the white hairs.

I straightened up, and a man and a burro were coming up the hill. The burro was piled with *leña* and the man was walking with his head down so that his hatbrim hid his face. They came up the hill steadily, the burro's unshod hooves making a regular tocking noise on the cobbles, until the man saw me and the dog. Then he slapped the burro on the neck with a rod to move it over to the other side of the street, and stopped. His huaraches were old and mud-colored; some of the leather cross-strands had snapped and curled back and I could see his split, dirt-black toenails; his pants and shirt were so patched that the original material was unrecognizable; and his left eye was blind and

rolled up into his forehead with only the white showing. The burro stood twitching its ears and tail at flies.

"Buenos días, maestro," he said. "Quiere leña?"

"No."

"La vendo bien barato."

"No." I said.

"Y la señorita?"

"Ni ella," I said.

"Bueno," he said. "Con permiso." He tipped his hat, whacked the burro on the rump, and started on up the hill.

"What did he say," Laura said.

"He wanted to sell his wood. He said he'd sell it cheap."

"None of them care," she said. "They don't have any feeling for animals at all. When I came some little boys were throwing rocks at it. They ran when they saw me."

I could feel the sweat sliding down my forehead and cheeks and throat.

"I'm going up to Biggs's for a minute," I said. "Maybe he can think of something."

"I can't look at it," she said.

I started up the hill after the leña man. For a moment I was dizzy. I wiped my sleeve across my face again, but the sleeve was too wet to absorb much. I caught the leña man and passed him, and he tipped his hat again. I came to Biggs's place and banged on the door. Nothing happened and I banged again.

"Quién va?" he yelled.

"Me."

"Who's me?"

"Jack, for Christ's sake."

"O.K.," he said. "Come on in. It's unlocked."

I pulled the plastic cord and pushed open the heavy door into the patio. It was cool and green, with a pale green tile floor and banana trees and a jacaranda and potted palms and rubber trees. Watery sunlight filtered through in irregular oblongs and patches. He was sitting in a wicker chair under one of the rubber trees reading a paper.

"What's new?"

"Not much. Can I use your phone?" I had thought of using Laura's, but hadn't wanted to.

"Sure," he said. "Then sit down and have a drink. It's my day of liberty. Madeline's gone over to Celaya."

I went in the living room and cranked the phone. I could see him through the open window reading the paper. It was the *Des Moines Register*. I told the operator to give me the police and there was some static, then someone said, *presidencia*. I said I wanted to talk to the inspector and the voice said the inspector was out. I told where I lived and said there was a dog dying and could they do something. Certainly, he said, they'd send somebody up at five o'clock. Couldn't they send someone sooner? He didn't think so. Why not? The inspector wasn't there. Couldn't he personally send somebody? For a dog, he said. Yes, I said, for a dog. At five o'clock, he said, without fail. I thanked him and hung up. I went outside. Biggs put down the paper and said, "Is it rabid?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," I said. "Somebody ran over it."

"That doesn't mean anything," he said. "When they get rabid they lose their heads and do all sorts of things. You'd better be careful."

"I will," I said. "Where's your shotgun?"

"I loaned it to Enrique." Enrique was his gardener. "But he went with Madeline. You'd do better to leave it to the cops."

"You heard," I said. "The sonofabitch wouldn't send anybody."

"Is it frothing?"

"No," I said. "I told you it was run over."

"Sam has a gun," he said. "You could use it." Samuelson was one of the painting instructors at the Instituto.

"I hadn't thought of him," I said.

"Watch yourself," he said. "Be careful you don't handle it."

I went out into the heat. It engulfed me, like stepping into a steam room. I got to my place and the dog hadn't moved. Its eyes locked on my face. Laura was gone from the window. Samuelson lived way down the hill, almost to the Jardín, and I thought it would be quicker to drive than walk. Also cooler. I went inside and into the garage. It was dark and I stood a minute, letting my eyes adjust and feeling the sweat begin to dry. I thought that I could go back upstairs and maybe it would die, or I could wait an hour and maybe the inspector would be in. Or maybe its owner would come by. It was too nice looking a dog not to have an owner. I was angry with Laura for not having done anything, and I was angry with Biggs for not helping, for just sitting there with the *Des Moines Register* telling me to be careful, but the last thing I myself wanted was to be involved, to be responsible. I felt

sorry for it and I did not mind calling the police, but I did not want to have to kill it. What I wanted was to go back upstairs to my terrace. I had just about decided the whole thing was no business of mine, to hell with it, when the dog yelped twice, and howled. I pulled the bar out and opened the big double doors and went out into the heat again.

Vernon Schwartz was beating the dog's head with a rolling pin. It had gotten itself turned around and was trying to drag itself down the hill, and Vernon was swinging away at its head with the rolling pin. The dog tried to get to its feet, but its hind legs wouldn't work, the broken leg dangled uselessly and the other one kept buckling, so that it had to drag itself along by the forepaws, howling and yelping, and Vernon's arm rising and falling.

"What the hell are you doing?" I yelled.

I must really have shouted, because he straightened up and turned around right away. He was short, an inch or so shorter than his wife, and he always dressed neatly, with a jacket and usually a tie, no matter how hot it was. He wore his hair long and also had a beard, which he kept neatly trimmed.

"This dog's hurt," he said. "Nobody would do anything. Somebody had to do something." He looked at the rolling pin. "The police won't come."

"I know," I said. "Put that thing away."

"Now wait a minute," he said. Sweat glistened like hot dew in his beard.

"You stupid shit," I said.

I walked past him to where I could see the dog clearly. It was moaning and the blood ran out of its nose now in a steady stream. The eyes were the same, though, hot and deep and clear, and when it saw me it stopped moaning.

I went back in the garage and hunted around for the ax. When I came outside Vernon hadn't moved. I looked for the water dish, but it had been turned over, and I went to the dog, leaned down and patted it. I held the ax behind me. I straightened up, stepped behind the dog's shoulder, where it couldn't see me, and took aim at the top of the skull. But for a minute I couldn't swing. Maybe it was more than a minute. My anger at Vernon had carried me that far, but now it was dissolved away, and I stood there with the ax in my hands and the sweat running down my face and into the corners of my eyes and my eyes were stinging and my knees were liquid and I couldn't swing. Then I made myself do it and the back of the ax-head hit the skull

with a sound like dropping a ripe watermelon on pavement. The dog moaned and writhed and I waited for it to be still and Vernon said, "Don't, please." It was still writhing but I hit it a second time and the watermelon sound and one of the eyes popped out and hung beside its jaw by a thick white thread like damp spaghetti and it stopped moving.

I turned away and walked back toward the garage. The skin on my face felt tight and cold, even though I was sweating, and the ax blade was bloody and the handle and my hands and forearms and shirt were spattered. Vernon was walking beside me, still carrying the rolling pin. I went in the garage and propped the ax against the wall and shut one of the doors.

"I'm a dog-lover," he said. "I've always loved dogs. I can't stand to see them suffer."

I picked up the bar and started to shut the other door in his face. I did not know what to say to him. Before I had wanted to take the ax to him, but now the dog was dead, the thing was done, and he was the one who had had the courage to start it. Then he shifted the rolling pin from one hand to the other and I began to get mad all over again.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Upstairs," I said. The skin on my face was cold and my throat was dry tight and my stomach was churning and flipping, as if I were a frightened child on a roller coaster. "I want to wash."