

Lost and Found

By Barrett Shumaker

The old man was dead.

The dog lay beside the old man on the truck's threadbare bench seat. The shiny thing lay in the man's lap, still clutched in his hand. The dog had seen the shiny thing only once before. He knew it made a loud noise and scared away strange people, but he didn't know it would hurt people. He didn't know it could make them dead.

The old man reeked of death just like the strange people that wandered past the old man's truck from time to time. They staggered around uncertainly among the abandoned vehicles littering I35. Occasionally they would stop walking then shuffle off again in a new direction.

The dog was lonely.

The dog lifted his head and rested it on the old man's thigh beside the shiny thing. The old man didn't move. He hadn't moved for days. He hadn't moved since the shiny thing made the loud noise.

The dog remembered the first time he saw the shiny thing. It was when he and the old man went to see sweethart and the goddamsonuvabitch. The old man had been really mad. On the long drive over to sweethart's house he kept patting his pocket where the shiny thing was and saying that the goddamsonuvabitch was not gonna touch muhbabygrrl ever again. The dog didn't know what the goddamsonuvabitch or muhbabygrrl were. He knew sweethart, and she was where thuhgrrls were. They gave him food so he was happy to go.

But right now the dog wanted to be petted. He nosed the old man's hand. Same as before: nothing happened. Instead the old man's hand slipped down his thigh to rest on the bench seat. His fingers were black and smelled of decay. The dog wanted to lick them. He wanted the old man to wake up, but the dog had learned a lesson yesterday: don't lick black fingers. They will make you sick.

The dog couldn't stay any longer. It was time to go.

He didn't want to leave the old man. The old man was his pack leader. But the dog was very hungry. He had to move on. He had to find food. They had been going to sweethart's house when the truck stopped. Sweethart had food. Maybe she could be the leader now.

Reluctantly the dog jumped down from his seat beside the old man to the road below. He trotted away, letting his nose guide him to sweethart and thuhgrrls.

The smell of death was everywhere. It permeated everything. It was so thick at times that death was all the dog *could* smell, having driven all other scents from his nose.

The roadside was littered with clothes, trash and overturned coolers of spoiled food. Near one cooler the dog found a plastic-wrapped ham. The ham was too large for the dog to get his mouth around, and its shape made it impossible to hold still. It rolled away when he tried to pin it down with one paw. Holding it down with two paws made it roll past his elbows and under his chest. The dog gripped the ham between his forelegs

and pressed his chest against it, holding it firmly in place. He then craned his neck back and scraped his jaws on the ham's slippery wrapping until he managed to get a tooth through the thick plastic. The dog had just torn a hole in the ham's wrapper and was savoring its salty taste when a shadow fell on him.

The dead stranger lunged at the dog from between two cars. The dog sprang away, narrowly avoiding the stranger's outstretched arms as the stranger crashed to the ground, landing on top of the ham. The dog skittered around at a safe distance, tucking his tail under his belly as he kept the dead stranger in sight. Ignoring the ham, the dead stranger crawled toward the dog, clicking its teeth together as it picked itself up off the ground. The dog paced a wide circle around the dead stranger, hoping to steal the ham back. The dead stranger stumbled to its feet and lunged for the dog again. Seizing his chance, the dog darted in and snatched the ham. He had turned to dart away when he noticed the taste.

It was terrible. The dog had never tasted something so bad before. The ham wasn't salty and meaty and good anymore. It was noxious.

The dog tried to escape with his prize, but the flavor was just too awful to bear. He had retreated nearly a foot when he gagged the ham from his mouth. It was smeared in some disgusting fluid. The dog coughed a wad of phlegm up from deep within his throat, pulled his lips back from his teeth, dipped his head and vomited. The dead stranger lunged again, catching the dog by a back leg. The dog tried to jerk free but couldn't. The reek of death rolled off the stranger, assaulting the dog's senses even further. It pulled the dog's leg toward its open mouth. Before it could bite him, the dog attacked. Snarling, he spun around and bit the dead stranger's head. It released the dog's leg and grabbed for the dog's throat, allowing the dog to break free. He ran away through the grass beside the road, up over a hill and was gone.

No amount of grass the dog ate could get the disgusting taste out of his mouth or make his stomach feel better. He ate grass and threw up, ate more grass and threw up again, until the sun went down, the sky grew dark and his stomach finally settled.

The dog's sleep was fitful.

He remembered riding with the old man in the truck.

He remembered the wind in his face and all the smells it held.

He remembered thuhgrrls putting things on his head and wrapping feathery things around his neck then bringing him to sweethart or the old man. Thuhgrrls and the old man and sweethart would laugh. They would give him a treat.

He remembered thuhgrrls giving him food under a big table and the old man making him get out from under the table and go OUT.

The dog remembered finding a treasure under the couch at sweethart's house. It was a crinkly plastic thing with chocolate and peanut butter on it. It was just like one he found once before, but this one had more tasty stuff on it. The old man made him spit it out. The old man told sweethart that thuhdawg almost choked to death on a wrapper last week. The dog didn't know what thuhdawg was. He just wanted his treasure back.

He remembered the old man holding sweethart after the shiny thing had boomed and scared the strange man away. Sweethart was crying. Thuhgrrls were crying. The old

man was quiet. Thuhgrrls cried, “Mahmah” and sweethart and the old man gathered them up and carried thuhgrrls away.

The sky got bright again, and the dog woke up. He was thirsty. He was starving.

The dog got to his feet and sniffed around. He still smelled death in the air, but he also smelled grass and bushes and trees. He felt good when he smelled good things. Natural things.

Nose to the ground, he went in search of food. Many sniffs later he smelled urine. Mouse urine. He followed it to a hole under a bush and dug. A small mouse sprang from the enlarging hole and the dog caught it immediately. Two quick chomps killed it. The dog swallowed it whole.

A lizard came next. It ran out in front of the dog as he searched for more food. The lizard didn't taste as good as the mouse. Neither tasted as good as the food the old man gave him: crunchy, meaty things in a shiny bowl. That's what the dog wanted most of all. Crunchy, meaty things that smelled and tasted like crunchy, meaty things and not like mice or lizards.

The dog searched for more food.

No matter where the dog was, he could smell the road. The wind blew its stink everywhere. The stronger the stink, the closer the road. He nosed his way through bushes and trees and back to the road all the while thinking about the shiny bowl and the meaty things the old man filled it with.

Things were burning everywhere along the road. Black smoke gushed out of burning cars. Grey smoke drifted out of the ones that weren't burning anymore. It was all stinky smoke.

The dog didn't like stinky smoke.

The dog liked smelly smoke. The smoke the old man would make in the fireplace at home was smelly smoke. And when the old man burned leaves outside when it got chilly, that made smelly smoke too. Smelly smoke smelled good. It smelled right.

Not like stinky smoke. Stinky smoke was bad.

The dog watched dead strangers walk in the stinky smoke. Some of them were on fire. They didn't notice.

The smell of the burning strangers was intoxicating to the dog. They smelled like bacon. The dog LOVED bacon. But there was another smell under the bacon smell. A bad smell.

The dead smell.

He couldn't go to a dead stranger for food. They would try to hurt the dog if he got close to them. From the smell of it, every stranger walking on the road was a dead stranger. None of them would feed him. The dog would have to find a stranger that wasn't dead.

Suddenly the dog remembered! Sweethart and thuhgrrls. He was looking for them. They would know where his food was. They had other food he liked too, and they had the crinkly stuff.

The dog skirted the roadside, trotting along with renewed purpose. He followed it from a safe distance, beyond the reach of the dead strangers.

Sometime later he found water. It was little more than a puddle. It smelled bad, but it was wet. It tasted like the smoke that cars puffed out in traffic. The dog was too thirsty to resist it. He drank the bad water. He even licked the mud when all the water was gone. Later when the sky was getting dark, the dog ate grass, threw up, ate more grass, threw up and lay down until he stopped feeling bad.

The sky went dark and the big white ball was in the sky again. As he lay on the ground the dog could hear other dogs howling in the distance. He sat up and joined them, his belly grumbled in protest. The dog didn't feel so alone listening to the howls of other dogs as their voices echoed in the night. They howled back and forth until the dog got sleepy and lay down.

The old man was sitting in the truck, mumbling angrily at the cars surrounding him. Nothing was moving. Strangers got out of their cars to shout at other strangers. Horns honked. Strangers got into fights with each other.

Many of them were angry.

Many of them were scared.

Fear's bitter aroma mixed with the warm spice of fresh blood wafting through the truck's open windows. The dog smelled it in the air as easily as he smelled the old man next to him.

He growled low in his throat as a pair of strangers started fighting in front of the truck. Other strangers walked over to try and make the two strangers stop fighting. All it did was make the fight bigger. The air was electric. It tingled with anger. The dog raised his hackles. The strangers' anger had become his own.

The wind changed. A breeze blew through a stand of trees up on a hill and across the road. Something bad was in the air. Something wrong.

Again the dog smelled blood in the air, but it was old blood, not fresh, and mixed with it was another smell.

The dead smell.

Suddenly lots and lots of people came through the stand of trees on the hill. They poured over the hill like ants. These strangers smelled wrong. They smelled like death.

The dog heard people shouting. People screaming. He saw people get out of their big trucks and little trucks and cars and run away. The dog smelled urine and feces on many of them as they ran past him. He sat in the truck with the old man, watching and waiting for his leader to do something. The old man just sat and looked ahead. The dog saw strangers grabbing other strangers. Strangers biting strangers. Strangers knocking other strangers down and eating them. Strangers reaching in other stranger's cars, pulling them out screaming and bleeding.

The old man leaned over the dog. The dog thought he would get petted, but the old man reached past the dog and opened the door instead. "You be a good boy," the old

man said as the battered door screeched open. He gave the dog a pat on the head and a scratch behind his ears. "Now go on. Get out. You gotta make your own way now." The dog looked at the man, searching his eyes for a command, something that would mean he could stay and not go OUT.

The old man smiled sadly at the dog. The dog recognized the smile and replied in kind, wagging his brushy tail. "Oh no. None of that, now. Out. Go on. OUT," the man commanded.

The dog didn't understand why the man wanted him OUT. The dog thought he must have done something the old man didn't like. Reluctantly he turned and hopped from his seat, down to the asphalt road. The dog turned around and looked up into the cab. He waited for the old man to call him back in. All he could see from the ground was the seat and the truck's headliner. He heard the old man take a deep breath and say, "I'm comin', sweetheart."

That wasn't what the old man said when he wanted the dog to get in the truck. That was kummown. But it was close enough for the dog to get excited that the man wasn't mad at him anymore. The dog wagged his tail and crouched down, gauging the distance so he could jump back in. A loud noise boomed inside the truck and hurt the dog's ears. The dog ran a few feet away and turned back to look at the truck, but he didn't go back to it. Not yet. That loud noise scared him. He didn't want to get close if it was going to happen again.

The dog could see the old man from his perch on the gravel shoulder. The old man was sitting in the truck, but there was blood all over him. Its steely smell was overwhelming. The old man didn't move. He didn't call for the dog to kummown. The old man's head was tilted back and his mouth was open. The dog knew the old man wasn't asleep.

The dead strangers came. The dog ran away.

The dog came back when it was dark. There weren't any strangers around. He jumped in the truck and lay beside the old man. The old man didn't pat the dog on his head. He didn't scratch the dog behind his ears. The old man was dead.

The dog wandered the road for a long time, straying from it only when it failed to provide food or water. Once his needs were met, the dog resumed his journey, following the road as it meandered through the world.

Frequently he would catch a whiff of food, animals, even other dogs as their scents rode the wind. If the smell was fresh and strong he tracked them down, at times traveling great distances from the road.

Sometimes his nose led him to dead animals. They were often torn apart, the pieces of their bodies scattered on the ground. The dog scavenged every bit of nourishment left from the remains. Nothing was spared. He even chewed the bones, gnawing off the ends to get to the rich marrow inside.

Bright skies and dark skies passed overhead in endless repetition.

The dog traveled with other dogs he encountered. They hunted and scavenged together, keeping one another company in the desolation that surrounded them. But eventually competition for food would force the dogs to fight. The fights left wounds on the dog that bled, then wept and finally closed. The wounds left scars, but they left him stronger than he was before.

He followed the road and his nose as they guided him to food, company and something else. Something he had forgotten but knew existed. Something he was searching for but was lost in the strange world he now found himself in. It lay somewhere along the debris-cluttered road, if only he could remember where or what it was.

The days grew longer and hotter. The trees and bushes at the roadside smelled of sap and earth and pollen. Soon the air was filled with the chirps of birds and the chirring of bugs.

The soft pads on his toes became thick and rough. The layers of fat beneath his coat melted away, replaced by lean muscle. The dog began to win more fights than he lost. His hunting skills grew stronger. He killed his prey more swiftly as the muscles of his jaws thickened. The dog no longer had to chew the ends of bones to extract their marrow. He shattered the bone to pieces in his powerful bite, devouring marrow, cartilage and all. The comforts of his life before the road dimmed in his memory. Instinct replaced them.

The road was his territory now, and he marked his passing on cars and trees and asphalt. Howling at night announced his presence to the world. He ate what he could catch. He took food from weaker animals, chasing them away and claiming it for his own. And when they stood their ground to defend what nourishment they had, he fought them for it. The dog and his life before the journey slipped away, and the animal within guided him.

It rained throughout the day. First it was a steady drizzle that beaded on the dog's thick, oily coat and ran down his flanks to the asphalt below. At midday the dark clouds gathered, blocked out the sky and brought down a torrential storm. Fierce winds whipped around the dog. Thick raindrops pelted him from above. Even the dog's dense fur couldn't keep the rain at bay. Water wicked through his coat and clung to his skin, chilling him to the bone.

Cold, tired and hungry, the dog crawled beneath an abandoned delivery van for shelter. It kept the rain at bay but not the wind. He curled himself into a tight ball and shivered. Eventually the dog fell asleep.

The dog dreamed of an old man scratching leaves up into a pile with a long stick. The old man smiled at him.

The old man was familiar. Comforting. The dog felt a sense of purpose when he looked at the old man, as if his place in life was to be at the old man's side.

The old man began to speak. The dog didn't understand what the old man was saying, but his voice filled the dog with joy. Anxious energy jolted through the dog as the old man reached into the pile of leaves and withdrew a stick.

The dog wanted the stick. He *needed* the stick. He knew the old man wouldn't give it to him freely. The old man would make the dog work for that stick, and the dog

welcomed it. He rose to his feet. His muscles tensed with anticipation. His legs quivered with excitement. The old man leaned back and hurled the stick into the air. The dog bolted after it.

The dog's toes dug into the earth as he ran. The crisp, cool air and rich smells filled his nose with every breath: the damp loamy scent of rotting leaves, the sodden stink of puddles gathered in yellowed grass. A wave of peace washed over him. His anxious energy burned away with every stride. The stick fell to the ground only seconds before the dog snatched it up. Stick in mouth, the dog pranced ecstatically back to his master. He gnawed his prize as he returned, savoring the bitterness of the bark on his tongue.

The old man struck a tiny stick of wood against a small box and dropped it into the leaves. A curl of white smoke lifted into the sky almost immediately. The old man beckoned to the dog to come closer. The old man wanted the stick back.

Just before the dog reached him, smoke from the burning leaf pile billowed out around the old man. The dog couldn't see him anymore. The smells of nature, of life and the dry chill of winter traveled within the smoke. The dog breathed deeply, savoring each and every nuance of this perfect place with the old man.

The dog awoke with the smoke's aroma lingering in his nose. It was still raining. Still dark. And the wind continued to blow. It stabbed at the dog in cold, rain-dampened gusts.

The dog tucked himself into a tighter ball, trying to retain as much body heat as he could. He looked out at the grey, wet world from the relative shelter of the van and sighed.

Lightning flashed in the dark sky, briefly revealing the world around him before plunging him back into the inky blackness of night.

He closed his eyes and tried to sleep as another gust of wind buffeted him. For an instant the dog smelled smoke. Not the stinky smoke that reeked of rubber and plastic but the smelly smoke of burning sticks and leaves. The dog sniffed the air again, but the smell was gone, replaced by the clean aroma of lightning and the heavy scent of water-laden air.

The dog tucked his muzzle against his side and stared blankly into the night. Thunder boomed in the distance, shaking the earth with its might. The wind shifted and whipped under the van.

Smoke. Smelly smoke! Faint but real. The dog lifted his head and breathed deeply, drawing the fading scent into his nose. Yes, it was definitely smelly smoke. It was nearly undetectable, but it was there. The wind changed direction and took the scent with it.

The dog didn't want to lose it. Not so soon. Smelly smoke meant people. People meant food, and the dog wanted food. His empty belly rumbled with hunger. The smoke aroused his palette. The dog's mouth watered with anticipation.

As soon as the dog crawled from beneath the abandoned van, rain pelted him mercilessly. He trotted into the downpour, testing the air for smoke with every step. Powerful, turbulent winds robbed him of the scent one second and inundated him with it the next. The dog was certain of one thing: the road was leading him closer to the smoke.

A flash of lightning briefly illuminated an overpass before him, and the dog headed straight for it. The scent of smelly smoke was coming to him intermittently, but as he drew closer to the overpass, the smell grew stronger.

The dog trotted through a veil of water cascading from a gutter on the bridge above. The runoff splattered noisily on the road beneath him. Once through the soaking waterfall, the dog found himself in a cold, dry void of darkness. He shook himself dry, nose to tail, and pressed further into the abyss.

Claps of thunder boomed outside. Flashes of lightning lit up the darkness as if it were day, then plunged the dog back into the black of night.

The dog tested the air again, huffing lungfuls of it into his sensitive nose. The smoke seemed to waft down to him from the bridge above. On either side of the road, large hills of cement rose steeply to the underside of the overpass. There they met large grey beams of metal that spanned the sky above him from hill to hill. The smelly smoke smelled stronger to his left, so he trotted to the concrete slope and began to climb.

As the dog climbed, catching whiffs of smelly smoke in his nose, a memory flashed in his mind. It was of an old man raking leaves; suddenly it changed. The old man was sitting by a small fire in the darkness. Three small people were around him, chattering excitedly as the old man stabbed something white onto the end of a thin stick and held it over the flames. The small people – no, that wasn't right. They were called something else. What were they?

The white thing in the flames began to smoke, and that smoke smelled wonderfully sweet, so sweet that the dog began to drool. The old man held the white thing on the stick out to the small people. Small people...small...*thuhgrrls!* That's what they were! And suddenly the white thing was smeared on their fingers and around their mouths, and the dog was licking the sticky sweetness from their fingers as they giggled.

The dog reached the top of the hill and found that it was flat with a short wall. The grey metal beams sat on top of the wall and in between the beams were small recesses. He trotted along the embankment's top, poking his nose over the short wall, testing the air of the recesses for the smoke. He finally found the source at the far end of the hill.

The dog didn't smell anything sweet like the white, smeary, sticky things, but he did smell smoke. Maybe *thuhgrrls* were up there. Had he found them? Did they know he was looking for them?

Sitting on his haunches, the dog could just poke his nose over the wall. He huffed a snout-full of air from the recess above and heard a gasp and whimpering. Fear roiled out of the recess, falling heavily on the dog's nose.

Someone was up there, but it wasn't *thuhgrrls*.

Thuhgrrls smelled like sweetheart and the old man and the goddamsonuvabitch who left because the old man showed the shiny thing to him.

The dog wagged his tail in greeting. The thick bush of it drug across the concrete like a straw broom and was nearly as loud.

No one answered his greeting. *Thuhgrrl* didn't reach out and pet his head. The dog thought that maybe *thuhgrrl* couldn't see him so he propped his front legs up on the ledge and looked inside.

Thuhgrrl screamed. Her eyes were wide with fear. The dog pulled his ears back to soften the blow of her high pitched shriek. Although her scream hurt his ears, he stayed where he was.

She held a short, shiny thing that ended in a point out in front of her. It looked nothing like the shiny thing the old man had. This shiny thing had a little black handle thuhgrrl gripped in both of her trembling hands.

A little pile of glowing embers lay on the floor between thuhgrrl and him. In the dim light the dog saw thuhgrrl lower the shiny pointy thing to the ground, still clutching it tightly in her small fists, and begin to cry. Saltwater streamed from her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

The dog dropped back down to the hill's flat top and readied himself to jump. He gauged the distance and gave his back legs a pump, rising up on them to determine the force he would need to get to the top. With a grunt and a scratch of his toenails, he leapt up into the niche, nearly landing in the hot embers.

The dog stepped over the small pile of glowing coals, wagging his tail so thuhgrrl could see how happy he was to see her. His tail made a soft thump, thump sound as it struck the walls of the tight space. Thuhgrrl sat back on her feet, dropped the shiny pointy thing and wrapped her arms around his neck. Her hands, lost in the dog's thick coat, gripped him with all of her strength as she laid her head on his back. She cried deep racking sobs that shook them both.

Thuhgrrl made the same sound over and over again: mahmah. And each time she said it, thuhgrrl would shake and cry and grip the dog tighter. The dog remembered that sound and immediately got excited. He remembered that thuhgrrls made that sound a LOT. Thuhgrrls made sounds all the time, unless they lay down and went to sleep, but the mahmah sound they made to sweethart constantly. The dog looked around anxiously to see if sweethart was near, but he couldn't smell her anywhere.

Thuhgrrl cried for a long, long time. The dog had never experienced this before. Even at sweethart's house thuhgrrls never held him like this. Still, the dog let her hold on. He remembered that when thuhgrrls were sad, they would pet him, and they wouldn't be sad anymore. They would laugh when he licked the salt off of their faces. And sometimes they would scratch his hard to reach spots and laugh even harder when he tried to help them by kicking a back leg or two. He loved a good scratch, especially when he didn't have to do it himself. The dog hoped thuhgrrl would scratch his hard to reach spots.

After some time thuhgrrl stopped crying. After a longer time she let him go. She sniffled and wiped the tears from her face. The dog licked her cheeks, hoping to get some of the salt before she wiped it all away. Thuhgrrl started laughing through her nose, just like thuhgrrls did. The dog wagged his tail again, remembering thuhgrrls and how happy they made him, but it was only a half wag. He was very tired. He wanted to lie down.

The niche was small and barely gave him enough room to turn around in, but the dog managed to get himself settled, flopping to the ground with a grunt. Thuhgrrl lay down behind him and draped her arm over his chest.

Bright and dim white lines danced through the smoldering embers, bathing the dog and thuhgrrl in a gentle glow. Thuhgrrl stroked the top of his head, lazily drawing her hand down to his left ear and tugging it through her fingers. She started scratching behind his ear – a good spot – and scratched lower to the back of his neck – a REALLY good

spot. The dog was kicking his rear leg to help her scratch harder when her fingers struck something hidden beneath his fur.

The dog was enjoying the scratch so much that he didn't notice her sit up on an elbow, slip a finger underneath the thing and tug, dragging it around to the back of his neck.

"Rusty," she said after a moment of tugging and scratching at the thing with her fingernails. The dog perked his ears. That sound was familiar somehow.

"Your name's Rusty."

The dog remembered the sounds: ruhs-tee... rustee. Yes. Yes, he knew that sound! It was his name! It was the name the old man gave him, the one sweetheart and thuhgrrls called him by when it was time to play fetch, the name the old man shouted when the dog stuck his head in the trashcan looking for goodies!

"Nice to meet you, Rusty. I'm Jenny."

Rusty wagged his tail at the sound of thuhgrrl saying his name again. She lay back down beside him and wriggled closer, enjoying his warmth.

Rusty found thuhgrrl and thuhgrrl found his name. Sleep quickly found them both.