

THE END OF THE WORLD AND A LITTLE BROWN DOG

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Everyone was dead except me and Dog. As the Bible forecasted with its fearsome Book of Revelation, the end times came and went but forgot to take us with it. Father Jacobs used to preach about it now and then. He loved fire and brimstone. Once he told his congregation the skies would open up and spit out devil toads if they didn't stop masturbating. When the sickness first started and the realization of doomsday came to a head, I wondered what Father Jacobs's thoughts were. Did he praise the anti-vaxxers and their selfish views? Maybe.

Suppose it doesn't matter now because he was probably dead just like Mom and Dad, brother and sister. Wiped out with what they called the Croa-toan sickness. It came fast and hard, sweeping across the east coast and then extending its fingers westward. People tried to run. Some of them stayed like

us, thinking it wouldn't dare touch our little town in the heaven of the Ozarks. But it did, the four freshly dug graves a testament to the fact. Two weeks ago I had been reeling over a breakup. Now, I found myself living in the apocalypse with the only family I had left: Dog.

My little brown Dog was old. He had cataracts in one eye that made it look like a sphere of milky glass on sunny afternoons, while rocks of cancer ran along his spine. He'd been in the family longer than my sister, and he was my best friend and I was his. On cold winter nights, he slept on my bed and no one else's. On spring mornings, he followed me to the creek where we would fish for smallmouth until they stopped biting and then just enjoy the sun and each other's silent company. Sometimes when the morning was too early, we would nap on the bank, his head on my chest or curled into my belly. I fed him scraps under the dinner table; brussels sprouts wrapped in bacon was his favorite. When I cried after burying our family, he was in my lap, and when I walked into the creek to die, he pulled me out with barks and whimpers on the bank.

I carried him back to the farm after that, telling him that I was sorry, I would never leave him, I wasn't sick, only selfish and stupid. The house was suddenly too big, too quiet. I wanted to be with my family, so I built a big

bonfire around their graves and sang. Dog joined in, turning his old beautiful face to the moon and giving a couple of howls. We sang until our throats hurt, and Dog laid his head in my lap, anchoring me to the here. I sang some more, far into the night, with the cicadas and crickets, bullfrogs and owls. I stretched out along the fire's edge and Dog curled onto my chest. We fell asleep stargazing.

I woke to a low, guttural growl vibrating my body. Dog had curled himself in a tight ball against the crook afforded by my fetal position—a pleasantly familiar feeling—and if it hadn't been for his insistent growl, I might have pulled him closer and fallen back asleep until our stomachs or the sun woke us.

I had just opened my eyes when he bolted away from me. I was too slow to catch him. He was a brown missile cruising through the grass towards a big black bear looking at us from the far tree line. The bear slapped the ground with its paws and bellowed a meaty growl, but Dog didn't care. He launched himself through the air. The bear reacted, pawing him away with a single swipe. I shouted as his little body bounced off the ground. The bear sniffed him and then casually trampled back into the woods, ruthlessly uncaring of his crimes.

A gap had opened up on the side of Dog's belly, curved like a bloody crescent moon. But he was still breathing, trying to raise his head to look at me, confused and afraid with whimpers of pain accompanying each breath. Gently, I carried him inside while giving him words that were nothing but gentle. The gash was too wide and ugly for Neosporin. It probably needed stitches, but who was I to know? I carried him to the upstairs bath, trying not to cry childish tears when he rolled his head and licked my hand. I set him down on the bathmat and told him he was a good boy, the best boy, and started to run water over him with the detachable showerhead. His body was rigid, his eyes rolling back to see what I was going to do next. I lathered the wound with soap and started to sing a song my mother sang to me when I was a child, a gospel song with plenty of soul, not unlike the one we had sung together the night before. I dried him off with towels once dear to my dear mother and carried him downstairs to his bed in the corner of the living room. He licked my hand; I kissed his warm button nose and told him I'd be right back with the medical kit. But when I found it in the downstairs bathroom, it had already been raided, perhaps by my sister, maybe by my brother. Maybe their ghosts had come back in the night and stolen it all away.

Fighting panic, I gathered all the toilet paper and paper towels and returned to him. I was able to cover the wound enough so he wouldn't lick it, but it felt like throwing water on a grease fire. What about the possibility of infection? What about his pain? Dogs weren't supposed to have aspirin, and I knew we didn't have anything in the house for him except a bag of foul-smelling rawhide. There really wasn't a question of what had to be done, so there wasn't a decision that had to be made. The bear and mother nature alone had decided for me. I sat next to him and covered him with towels. He wagged his tail and I stroked my fingers under his chin on the spot he couldn't get enough of until his eyes closed, falling into what I hoped was a painless sleep.

I bid him a gentle goodbye with a kiss on his head. Quietly, I pulled on my boots and tiptoed through the back door. He knew the sound it made, so I left it wide open. Besides, what if something happened to me? I loaded the Gator with my break action and filled my pockets with slugs.

Only one county road led from our farm into town, and it was deserted, save for the old doublewides and impromptu trash dumps that would outlive even eternity. The sound of the Gator felt foreign in this land of demise, and I wanted to turn it off, but instead, I stomped the gas harder, wanting to get this over with so I could get back to the safety of home and Dog. The doublewides

soon morphed into the brick and mortar of well-kept subdivision entrance-ways with names like Brook's Hollow and Forest Fields. I sped past, sparing only a glance at the still and solemn homes. Did the occupants flee from the sickness like so many others? Or did they stay and defend their castles with futility, perishing inside, holding their lover's hand while their child's head rested eternally upon their chest, until they all turned into the ethereal dust of the embodied universe of which we all eventually contribute?

The town came upon me fast, marked by an old muffler store that hadn't seen business since Jimmy Carter. I slowed the Gator to a crawl, navigating the silent roads of my hometown. If anyone was alive, they didn't come out.

The echo of the Gator's engine thundered against the old brick buildings on Main Street, leaving me with a feeling of vulnerability. I decided I would walk the rest of the way, parking between a Ford F-150 with missing hubcaps and a sticker-blasted Nissan Miata.

I walked along the main artery of town known as Highway A. The animal hospital was located in a strip mall, wedged between a GameStop and Le Nails Spa where my date for prom went last year and forced me to wait the three hours with her as she got dolled up. We didn't work out.

A few cars had been abandoned in the middle of the road, their doors wide open like metal wings. I looked in the first few for bodies. There were none. Various stores had been burned to a crisp while others remained untouched, as if the flames had simply jumped over them.

The bank where my family's life savings had been kept was no more, but the Waffle House next to it was perfectly fine, except for its spray-painted front window. *Matthew 4:17*, it read. Further down, the town's only bookstore was still smoldering, as was the Verizon store next to it. Yet the Payless Shoe Store was doing well, minus the cryptic *Mark 1:15* painted on the window in the same handwriting as the Waffle House verse. My palms grew sweaty around the shotgun, and I started to jog.

I made it to the strip mall in a daze of fear and excitement, the shotgun lighter than a feather with my adrenaline-soaked muscles. The sun had set, casting the old Ozark town in a plaster of bronze that I had always thought beautiful—but not anymore. Now, it looked like everything was on fire with golden flames.

I stepped onto the parking lot and aimed myself towards the animal hospital, having to navigate through cars and trucks sitting like forgotten Lego

blocks. My boots crunched glass from a broken window, and my heart hammered in my ears. When I heard the distant rumble, it took only a moment to realize it was the sound of approaching motors. I immediately crouched behind the husk of a Chevy Cavalier, holding the shotgun in the meat of my shoulder.

An R.V., the gas-guzzling type rich people buy in retirement, navigated through the abandoned vehicles, followed by an envoy of motorcyclists sporting big beards and bold tattoos. Handguns hung from holsters, and long rifles were strapped to backs, but that's not why my mouth felt like it had been suddenly filled with sand. On top of the R.V. was a wooden cross with a naked man nailed to it. When the convoy came to a stop, the crucified man raised his head with a gargantuan effort, looked around, and then lowered it, defeated. The men on the motorcycles dismounted and stretched their muscles while the R.V. door opened. A balding vicar stepped out; his face was obscured from the reflection of his thick frames, but I already knew who he was from sitting at his sermons every Sunday until very recently.

Father Jacobs.

I twisted my hands over the wooden stock of the shotgun as the father and his new flock gathered around the front of the R.V. He opened what was no

doubt a Bible and started to read what was no doubt a passage from the Book of Revelation.

Slowly, I backpedaled away from the safety of the car towards the animal hospital, using a half wall filled with thirsty perennials for concealment. I slithered like a snake on my belly with the chants of the mad encouraging me forward. Still prone, I reached for the door handle and pulled.

Locked.

Panic threatened to squeeze the air from my lungs as I imagined myself on the cross screaming in agony as Father Jacobs drove down the I-55, headed for the promised land. I forced myself to think of Dog. If his little heart could be filled with enough courage to fight a bear, then I could get my stupid feet moving and my even stupider brain working.

I crawled to the salon while Jacobs's voice grew with gusto and fervor. He was loud enough to hear now, but I chose not to, filling my head with a song that came from the wedge of memory that forever belonged to prom and the girl that wasn't meant to be: "Night Moves" by Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet Band.

Le Nails might have disappointed me before, but now it saved my life. The door was not only unlocked but propped open enough so that I could crawl in

without causing a disturbance. I cast the group a final look. The father and his flock were turned towards the man on the cross with bowed heads and crossed hands, their mouths moving in prayer.

The salon was no different than before, except for a wicked smell that burned my nostrils with each breath. On my feet, I moved forward like a shadow, hoping my reflection in the mirrors didn't give me away to a wandering eye. There was a door at the back of the salon, one the ladies would use to smoke and gossip between appointments. I knew this because I had accidentally mistaken the door for a bathroom, and overheard a stylist complaining of her hemorrhoids.

The back of the strip mall flanked Gamble Road. It would take longer to get back to Main Street but would hopefully be void of apocalyptic prophets. With the sense of palpable relief that came with an exit strategy, I jogged to the back door of the animal hospital and gave a silent prayer for an unlocked door. I pulled, it opened, and I slipped inside only to be slammed with a putrid smell that sent me staggering against a far wall. My eyes watered, and I used my shirt as a makeshift respirator that helped dull the stench. I shouldered my shotgun and started walking through the dark corridors.

There were no windows, and without electricity, I could see nothing except for the vague images that my eyes gave to me: a water fountain on my right, a door on my left. I tried the handle. Locked. I crept forward, my only companions the beating of my heart and malodorous air. I swept the shotgun in front of me as a sort of walking stick until I came to an intersection. Left, or right? I chose left for no reason at all.

This hallway was shorter and led to what I knew to be a surgery room by the touch of a cold metal table at the center and massive surgical light hanging above. My fingers found a toggle, and I prayed once more to that unknown entity to hear me above the chatter of madness. I said amen. I flipped the toggle. I was blinded by the sweetest light I had ever known, filling my eyes with both tears of relief and suddenness.

I believed in God only because my parents did, and my Sunday school teachers said that I had to or else I would belong to Lucifer's army. But up until this point, I had never felt the hand of divine intervention guiding the path before me. I had never been in a car accident that should have killed me or been visited by a transcendent being in the middle of the night with a Godly order to give to the poor and feed the hungry. But standing in the surgery room

before a glass cabinet filled with orange medicine bottles and packs of bandages, I knew an unseen force of good was behind me. I used a lab coat as a makeshift bundle, taking everything on the shelf and then tying it off by the arms. It would be awkward going with the bundle in one hand and the shotgun in the other, but I could not complain. I gazed around the room one more time for anything useful, spying a surgical headlamp on a table next to a dead computer. A relieved grin spread across my face at the thought of light in this tomb of darkness.

I moved to place the shotgun between my body and arm so I could reach for the headlamp, but in doing so, the barrel smacked a computer monitor onto the floor. The sound was equivalent to an exploding bomb. I froze, mouth ajar, blood pumping rivers through my body, heart beating like a jackrabbit. The sound echoed, and that's when I heard the chorus of unmistakable whimpers.

I was slapped with nonsensical and irrational childhood fear. I imagined monsters with slobbery teeth and yellow eyes crawling on all fours through the dark corridors, seeking me out to drag me back to their lair and eat my flesh bit by bit. The truth was far scarier and more likely to get me killed, for I knew what the whimpers were, and part of me hoped that it was monsters

instead. But how could I leave them, the souls of the innocent? I couldn't... I couldn't.

With light guiding me, I backtracked through the hallway, following the pleas of the needy, aware that Father Jacobs and his unsavory flock could be on their way to investigate. I hefted the shotgun.

I found what I never wanted to find behind a chain-linked door. Its rusted hinges creaked when I pulled. The dogs whimpered more. I was in a long room with cubbies on both sides, blocked off by smaller chain-linked doors. There were twelve cubbies in total. The smell was tremendous. The sight was odious. The light swept over each cubby as I walked on legs of granite.

A yellow Labrador pleaded with its eyes, too weak to stand, whimpering through its nose. A Rottweiler with lifeless eyes, its chest unmoving. A Beagle gathered its strength to stand and greet me but failed and collapsed, yet still tried to give me love with its flickering tongue. A German Shepherd whimpered and scooted forward on its belly, nose poking through the gates to sniff me as I passed. A small mixed breed with white fur and black spots lay dead with a chewed paw. A Pomeranian looked at me with glassy dead eyes. Another mixed breed with a black body and white head gave a rattling breath and then nothing more. A pug that was nothing but bones, dead. A mutt cried

weakly, begging for help. Only nine of the cages were occupied, and out of those, four of the biggest dogs still lived. In every cage was a mountain of dog food, a bucket of water that had been too tall for the small dogs to drink from. Someone had the idea to supply the dogs with necessities, but not unlock their cages.

There had been a large van in the back parking lot with the animal hospital's logo on it. I needed keys. I needed more time. I shushed the dogs like a worried mother and promised I would be back. The building took on a new light, and I ran, throwing myself into every room. The first door opened to the front waiting room. Night had fallen, and the R.V. was still there but not the Father or his followers. I cursed and continued. An exam room next, a closet with musty mops after that. On the fourth door, a cat darted out with a hiss, almost giving me a heart attack. It fled down the hallway and took a right towards the surgical room. I steadied my breath and entered.

It was an office, but I hardly noticed it. The man hanging from a coat hook behind a desk demanded my attention. His bluish tongue dangled out like a dead fish, and his bulging eyes watched me as I crept forward to search his desk. There was a folded note perched on top of a desk calendar like a paper bird. I brushed it away. He did not deserve to have his last words heard. I

cursed the cruel man when there were no keys and even more when I began to check his pockets. The flesh on his neck had been nibbled, and his ears had been whittled to nubs in what I liked to think of as feline retribution.

I found a key ring in his coat pocket, and before I shut the door to entomb him forever in darkness, I grabbed his backpack and a book lying on a shelf titled *Saunders Handbook of Veterinary Drugs*.

I crept through the back door and jogged to the van, churning the semi-fresh air through my lungs. My body was running on adrenaline, my heart working overtime to compensate for the fears crashing inside of me. Fears for Dog, fears for the dogs, fears of myself becoming crucified by Bible-wielding crazies. I had no choice but to start the van, and I hoped my deity was watching down on me from that seat of sacredness.

It took no more than a few seconds to reverse the van to the back door, but the engine sounded like a sputtering machine gun. I waited, and when I heard no sounds of concern, I ran back inside, having no choice but to leave my shotgun in the passenger seat.

I moved methodically, unlocking every cage first in the instance I was discovered and subsequently crucified. I tended to the Labrador first, a female, and overcompensated for her weight; nothing but a bag of bones. Yet she was

breathing, and she licked my hand all the way to the van. I moved each dog with diligent care, despite the nerves flooding through me. In the end, the back of the van looked like a fleshy pile of breathing fur. But they were alive, and I intended to keep them that way with every ounce of my being. I made two more trips, carrying bags of dog food I had discovered in a closet, along with the backpack, book, and treasure trove of medication.

I started the van, killed the headlights, and pressed my foot on the gas pedal with care not to rev the engine. One of the dogs whined, and I told them we were all going home.

That's when I remembered the cat.

The goddamn cat.

I threw the van in park and sprinted back inside towards the surgical room. It wasn't there. I ran through the hallway whispering *here kitty-kitty* like a lunatic, my voice rising with each *kitty*. It wasn't in the kennel. And it wasn't in the exam rooms or closets I had left open. My time was up. I would leave the back door wide open for the cat's escape so it would have a fighting chance where it did not before. Resolved, I turned to leave but stopped in mid-step.

From behind the door of the waiting room came a subtle meow.

I fought the urge to scream in frustration as I threw open the door and saw it sitting diligently on the floor looking out the front window, bushy tail wagging like the hand of a grandfather clock.

It meowed again and leaped to its hind legs, pawing at the glass, oblivious of my presence. I scooped it up without observance and was clawed for my efforts. But I didn't feel it. I didn't feel anything but raw terror as two men with crosses on their foreheads looked at me through the front glass. The three of us stared at each other until the cat clawed me with more fervor than before, and I started to run.

I made it to the hallway when I heard the front glass shatter, followed by the growl of men's voices demanding I come back to them. The cat answered them with a vicious meow and followed it up with a claw to my cheek. I skidded around the corner of the hallway, almost losing the cat in the process, and vaulted out the back exit, slamming the door behind me. I jumped into the van and tossed the cat in the passenger seat. It hissed discontentedly.

The door exploded outwards as I keyed the van to life, slamming the gas pedal to the floorboards. One of the men started shooting. Rubber squealed, bullets flew, smoke billowed, dogs whined, the cat hissed, and I yelled, but we were out of there, bouncing across the grassy hill towards Gamble Road.

My sweaty palms greased the leather steering wheel as I maneuvered through parked cars and random debris, allowing myself to go only so fast for the sake of the dogs. A glance behind me, and I saw they were scared, nervous. The Labrador was pressed against the back door, the Beagle rolled on top of her. The van reeked with the fetid odor of dog and the nerves leaking from my body by the gallons.

I took a left on Columbus Street, hoping to avoid the main roads. This would take me away from the center of town, but I couldn't remember where it ended. In a panic, I reached for my phone and remembered it stopped working about the same time my brother died. But as long as we were away from gun-slinging Bible lovers, we would be in the clear, and I could manage to navigate back home, back to Dog.

It was slow going, as I had to weave the massive van through the mess left behind from fleeing townies: cars, trucks, an overturned school bus. I saw the first body, a woman slumped over her front porch steps as if she were taking a nap.

We were going too slow, the street too narrow and congested to floor it for the hills. The van started to grow heavy with the smell of dog breath and shit-caked fur, so I rolled the window down for a sweet breath of summer air.

That's when I heard them. The rumble of motorcycles not far behind us. I slapped the steering wheel and pressed the gas pedal, nosing my way through cars with a fly of sparks and a crunch of metal. One of the dogs started to cry, and the cat took the opportunity to jump on the dashboard and meow his displeasure at my erratic driving. We hooked a right around a bend, the sound of the motorcycles approaching like a thunderstorm. I might have been able to outrun them, but the van started to spit and sputter, a mechanical death rattle.

Up ahead was the Dollar General, sitting dark and dead. I floored it to the parking lot, stopped, and squeezed the steering wheel as if wringing out a wet towel.

I could flee into the darkness never to be seen again; these dogs weren't my problem, Dog was. But one look in the rearview mirror stripped that option from my heart when three of them were looking back at me with desperation, as if they knew what I was thinking. Could I abandon them again, their fates sealed in an even smaller cage? Who would be the first to look upon the flesh of another and take a bite? I prayed to that unseen force, for the animals I had rescued, for myself. For Dog.

I ruffled the matted fur of the mutt, cooed a soothing word to all of them, and grabbed my shotgun. I had no choice but to shut the door.

The plastic thump of shotgun shells accompanied the scrape of my boots as I jogged half-crouched across the parking lot to the side of the road, burying myself in uncut grass. The shotgun lay underneath me, my cold-barreled lover, and the grass blades drew paper-thin lacerations down my arms, my neck, sending tear-sized droplets of blood splashing into the dirt.

Three motorcycles rounded the small bend in the road. One of them pointed to the van. They stopped and dismounted, killing their bikes to silence the night. They were perhaps forty yards away, close enough for the slug to touch but too far for accuracy. Their leather holsters swooshed as they gave up their guns. All together they began to march, crossing the embankment towards the van.

Their left shoulders were to me, and without the light of streetlamps, I was nothing but a murky shadow rising from my bed of grass. Twenty yards away, they fanned out around the van. Their muscles were rigid with desire or nerves or both or neither. I crept across the grass, across the pavement. A ghost. Thoughts flew across my brain like an old film reel. Could I kill these men?

The squawk of a radio squealed greedily, and the one on the left and in front of me jumped. The guy on the right looked over, displeased by the display

of his companion's unprofessionalism, perhaps. The radio was on his shoulder, and he spoke into it with movement that reminded me of a police officer in the time of ago, his pistol held out before him like a compass needle.

I pointed the shotgun at the one on the left, intending to make a sweeping motion as though I were reading a book. Would it be justified self-defense? If I killed them in the middle of a Dollar General parking lot and no one was around to hear it, would it still be murder?

The radio squawked again, and I recognized the hellfire that was Father Jacobs's raspy voice. He said something that sounded like *where art thou* and I knew there would be no reasoning with these men.

I became the thunder.

The guy on the left blew forwards with the force of the slug's impact slamming into his lower back. I turned on the one in the middle and froze. I was aiming at the van. From this distance, the slug would tear through the thin metal and no doubt hit one of the dogs.

I dove ungracefully to the left towards the man I'd just killed. The pavement rushed up and smacked my chin, slamming my teeth together on my unprepared tongue. Blood flowed; pain throbbed. I rolled on my back, shotgun pointed through my feet. The middle man pointed his gun at me, and for a

moment, we both froze as if we suddenly realized the chaos of the situation. Maybe he was an accountant in the land of before or a pediatric dentist who was recognizing me for the child I truly was. I didn't give him time to wonder at the moral complexities of the current apocalyptic scenario. I didn't let him think about what it meant to be a good Christian man in these end times. Was he wondering about the next seven years? Would the sun turn him to fire, or would he wake up with painful sores covering his body? If not tomorrow, the next day? Would nailing me to a cross prove his love for Jesus and stave off these possible atrocities from happening? Or maybe he was scared shitless because he was peering into the rapturous eyes of a twelve-gauge shotgun.

Whatever it may have been, my seal had been broken whereas his had not, and from my angle, I had a clear shot at him away from the van. I pulled the trigger of the left barrel. It slammed into his chest. He staggered (a drunken dance if I hadn't known any better) and then fell over dead.

One more.

I ejected the two spent shells over my shoulder, swallowing blood and possibly part of my tongue. A sharp ring sounded from all around me, and my head swam with the notion of what I was doing. I fumbled two more shells

out of my pocket, dropped them, and dug out two more knowing I was probably going to die, Dog was going to die, and the dogs were going to die, and the cat was going to die. I slammed in the shells right as the last guy appeared from the back of the van, using it for cover. He saw the black eyes of the shotgun and quickly concealed the better part of his body, sacrificing his arm to shoot blindly. Bullets flew all around me, peppering the pavement like drops of rain. One slammed into the top of my foot, another in my shoulder. I forced myself to roll to the front of the van for cover, all the pain and fear vanishing with the mad rush of death's adrenaline.

The man's pistol clicked empty. When he stepped back to reload, I saw his boots move from underneath the van. I wedged the shotgun out from beneath me, pointed, and shot. He went down with an inhuman scream as his foot separated from his leg. For Dog, dogs, cat, and myself, I took the time to replace the spent shell. His gun had gone scattering across the pavement, and he was crawling towards it, a beacon of life. But when I clicked the barrels in place he stopped, and we locked eyes. I could only see the whites of them when I pulled the trigger of both barrels, sending him to the seventh layer of icy hell.

The silence was overwhelming in the sudden stillness. It was too much, so I started to sing. My shoulder was probably broken where the bullet struck

bone, and my foot felt like it had been plunged in fire. But I was alive, and I called upon my deity to keep the blood in me for a little while longer.

Using the shotgun as a crutch, I limped through the mess of dead men to the van's back door. Four pairs of eyes glowed back at me and I heard a meow from somewhere in the depths. Alive. All of them. It was more than I could have hoped for. I shushed them and let them lick my hand, trying to think through the adrenaline. We needed to go before Father Jacobs and his crucifix showed up, but they were too weak to walk, and I couldn't carry all five of them.

I gathered two shopping carts and began to load my cargo. It wasn't fair to them after what they'd been through, and I could sense their agitation as I crammed them together. The Beagle and Labrador in one cart, the German Shepherd, mutt, and cat in the other, the feline riding content in the child's seat. I put the backpack holding Dog's medicine in one cart, the shotgun in the other, the bags of food underneath. It was awkward going, and I imagined I looked like the world's most pathetic Dollar General patron limping across that dark parking lot that was forever a graveyard. We made it around the back of the building and through an alleyway when I heard the first motor, quickly followed by many, many more.

Proclamations were soon being made on a Biblical scale. The Father's preaching—screaming—to his flock that this was the price of admission for Christendom in the Revelation. Satan was at work, but first, let us pray.

Maybe I was delusional, maybe I had lost more blood than I thought, maybe I was tired, maybe it was because I knew where the crazies were and I realized now that I only had to cross three or four streets to loop around to Main Street where I'd parked the Gator. Whatever it was, we made it without panic in our hearts or fear in our blood. I loaded them into the Gator, two dogs in the back, two in the back seats, and cat on my lap. We made it home without trouble.

I drove right up to the porch steps and stumbled inside.

"I'm here," I told him, falling to my knees. "I'm here." He didn't move. And when I ruffled his ear, it was cold. I kept petting him and telling him it would be okay, that I could help his pain go away now. I told him he could wake up whenever he wanted, but if he wanted to keep sleeping, he could do that too. He deserved rest, lots and lots of it because he was a good boy, the best boy, who pulled me from creeks and protected me from bears. My dog, my Dog. My fishing buddy, my source of warmth on cold nights. Who slept with his head on my chest to keep me tethered. I ran my palm along his snout

and told him it was his turn to look after me, even though he had never stopped. I buried my face between his head and neck and cried until it hurt, until the wound on my shoulder opened and started to weep with us. I cried until I couldn't and then wrapped him in the comfort of the towels. I would have laid next to him all night as he did for me if it weren't for the clicking of nails across the wooden porch.

Standing in the moonlight on shaky legs, the four dogs and one cat stood looking at me through the front door. I hugged the bundle that was Dog's casket and hobbled to my feet.

I worked by the light of oil lamps until the brilliant rays of morning sunlight washed the interior of the house in a golden glow. I didn't finish until midmorning when the air was hot, and the humidity was thick. Each dog was bathed and medicated according to my best interpretation of the *Saunders Handbook of Veterinary Drugs*. I gave each of them a bed that once belonged to a human and let them sleep with the doors wide open, sunlight pouring through the windows on top of them. There was an even number split between male and female, and eventually, I would get around to naming them. I had decided on a name for the cat, who was already taking to the farm, slinking

around the porch as big as a mountain lion, apparently undisturbed by the recent events.

Only when they were resting did I turn to myself. The bullet had struck the steel toe of my boot, leaving nothing but a nasty bruise on the top of my foot. My shoulder was a different story. The bullet hit the meaty part of it, leaving behind a fleshy hole that I could no longer ignore. I could see the brass and knew there wasn't an option. Using tweezers and a rag soaked with Wild Turkey, I began to dig. I pissed myself from the pain and passed out but only just for a second.

With a quiet house and closed wounds, I turned my attention to Dog. I buried him next to my sister in what I supposed was our family graveyard. I gave him a big rock for a headstone and did not pray when I was done. Instead, I stroked the fresh dirt like I would his fur. Underneath the maple tree, surrounded by family, I wanted to stay but knew I could not.

Instead, I loaded my shotgun, fueled the Gator, and told each dog that I would be back because I still had work to do in all those houses down the street and the ones in town. If these five could live in blackness, then there could be others. And beyond that, there would be strays and runaways, unsure how to scavenge for food, unsure how to live in the evil of the apocalypse. Scared and

dying. Helpless. Maybe the last innocent beings on the earth, and I would do everything I could to bring them to sanctuary.

The Father and his flock were aware of my presence, and they would be hunting me with what they thought of as justified faith because I was now their Satan. But I wasn't afraid because, unlike them, I knew who my deity was, and he'd protect me. He'd protect me.

My little brown Dog.

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