

Interval

4800 words

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In the morning they'd showered and found a breakfast joint and were in the motel parking lot ready to plow on forward, when there's this little dog poking around in the open field between the parking lot and the freeway.

Not even a field, more like an empty lot with weeds, and some scatterings of litter and probably a few broken beer bottles.

Some patches of ice as well. It looked like it hadn't snowed in a while, but that was worse, because the ice was rock hard and slick and real dirty.

"Aw," Rosie said, "he's limping."

"Appears to be," Pete said. "That's a tough one."

"What do you think happened?"

"What I'm hoping--probably wishful thinking--is someone let him out? Their room maybe? Or a car? And then ran next door to get gas?"

“I’m afraid not,” Rosie said, and there sure wasn’t much evidence of that theory, no one standing around, no open motel doors, no vehicle at the gas station that looked like it was missing a pet--not to mention no apparent collar around the guy’s neck.

Not only was the dog walking poorly--favoring its right front leg--it was pretty clearly looking for food--which all dogs do, but this poor thing was in some trouble.

Without saying anything Pete and Rosie got out and approached the dog, a black and white mix, a pretty extreme one, no breeds you recognize, furry in the front and around the head, less so around the body. Scrawny tail sticking out kind of funny.

Rosie bent down and held her hand a certain way and said something high-pitched and welcoming, and the dog cautiously approached, and stopped five feet away.

“Do we have any snacks?” she said.

Pete thought of some iced cookies left in a bag in the back somewhere, and a can of mixed nuts, and neither of those seemed optimum, so he hustled over the to the

convenience store at the gas station . . . and that wasn't much easier--and *dang* we have a lot of processed crap in this country, he was thinking--and he figured he'd have to go with Ritz crackers, but then he found a small travel section in back, and they had these emergency packs of Purina Beneful, and Pete bought 5 . . . and added a pack of paper plates, and then thought better make that paper bowls, and he threw in a couple bottles of water.

When he got back the dog was not exactly in Rosie's arms, but his 5 feet distance had narrowed to 2, with Rosie sitting all the way down now, and Pete stayed out of it and let it happen, and a few minutes later she was petting the poor little guy . . . and then yeah, he *was* in her lap.

"You can say hi," she said. "He's not scared of men."

"How can you tell?"

But before she tried to explain her intuition Pete couldn't help it, he was down on the ground too, and yeah there was broken glass around but you didn't think about it, especially when the little guy came to you now as well, and best he could, started wagging his tail.

“Sheesh,” Pete said.

“I know,” Rosie said.

Pete opened up the food and dispersed it, and filled a water bowl, and they watched the guy go to town.

“What do you think?” he said.

“I think his name is Bo.”

“Fine. I was more asking . . . what do we *do*?”

“What do you *want* to do?” she said.

That was a good question obviously. Both of them thinking the same thing, do you just scoop him up at this point and lay him in the backseat, and he’s part of the deal now?

Pete unfortunately forgot about a phone call he had to make, and he told Rosie sorry about this and called the guy. Before he wrapped it up he asked the guy about *his* dog, Melvin, who Pete realized he hadn't seen in the apartment last time.

"He's fine, why?" the guy said.

"Thank God," Pete said.

The guy said, “Don’t take this personally, but you sound off, bro. You *sure* everything’s under control?”

Pete said, “We found a mutt out here in Ohio . . . and sorry but my mind started running away, did something happen to *your* dog.”

“Well he goes to Doggie Daycare 3 afternoons a week. He looks forward to it. That’s why you missed him.”

“Oh . . . but even with you working at home? That’s necessary?”

“No, strictly optional. But he has his social circle there. I’m limited in what I can provide.”

“I just thought . . . man’s best friend, and all.”

“Yeah, but they gotta mix in. Goes way back in their genetics, before domestication.”

Pete understood--the pack--though if *he* was the guy he’d be thinking screw *that*, I like you with *me*. But it made sense . . . Melvin wasn’t going to tell you in so many words, but yeah, you *could* picture the reaction when he got dropped off with his buddies.

“There were some odd pieces to that conversation,” Rosie said.

“Huh?” Pete said, coming back to the here and now.

The dog had finished gobbling up the food, and capped it off with three intermittent efforts at the water bowl, and was now back on Rosie's lap.

"Look at that," Pete said. "That's the thing, makes it so dang tough."

"I know. All his struggles, the poor sweetie scared to death half the time, they vanish when he finds a good human."

"Like nothing was ever wrong . . . I wish *I* could adapt that ability."

"I think you meant adopt," Rosie said. "There's a difference in meaning. You adapt *to* something."

"Right, I screwed that up," Pete said. "What about Bo, as you refer to him?"

"Do they have, like a shelter around here, do you think?"

Pete was wondering the same thing, though you'd assume Zanesville was big enough to maybe have a *couple*.

"The problem there," he said, "would be, does he *make* it?"

"Something to consider, it sure is," she said.

And what neither of them were blurting out was, this was not a particularly attractive animal, bordering on ugly, to get technical, and who's going to choose him?

If a potential adopter got to know him, and they're down on the ground and he's on their lap and so forth--then fine, they get the picture, what Bo is all about.

But chances are it wouldn't come to that. He'd be in his little kennel like all the others, and the adopters would keep on walking.

Nonetheless, much as you were tempted, you couldn't throw him in the Subaru and start a new life with him. Too much going on, getting in the way, for you to be a faithful parent.

So Pete took out his phone and started searching.

"Looks like they got a city one," he said, "and a private one, on Bell Street, up toward their Walmart Supercenter."

"Let's try the private one," Rosie said, and Pete was thinking the same thing.

On the ride there, still on Rosie's lap, the poor little guy seemed so dang comfortable, this was going to be even harder.

It was a modest white wooden structure, it looked like a house out of the 1930's, and you could see a couple outbuildings in back. Pete and Rosie took a collective deep breath and went inside.

"I'm Jefferson," a young man said right away. "What can I help you folks with today?"

He was a red-haired kid, a lot of freckles, neatly dressed, khakis and a flannel shirt, work boots. A couple tattoos, which Pete had never gotten used to on young people, but what could you do. The kid did seem on the ball and capable.

"We found him," Rosie said. "Over by the interstate."

"We gave it a while," Pete said. "We're convinced he doesn't belong to anyone."

Rosie was holding Bo, and without missing a beat Jefferson squats down and sticks his face right in Bo's and starts scratching him under the chin, just right, and

Jefferson says, “Yeah . . .you’re a *good* boy, *aren’t* you there buddy? . . . You *are*.”

Pete and Rosie looked at each other.

In a perfect world, this guy takes him.

When Jefferson straightened back up Rosie said, “You have quite a way with animals. That was beautiful to watch. I can feel the love oozing out. We *all* can.”

Pete looked sideways at Rosie, thinking where did *that* come from, that’s a bit over the top. But at the same time, yeah--not so melodramatically--you had to agree.

Pete said to Jefferson, “So what would be, like, the procedure . . . If we were to turn him in.”

“Do you have to say it like that?” Rosie said. “Like we’re turning in the rental shoes after we just finished bowling?”

“Well the big difference,” Jefferson said, “us and city facility. We charge higher fees. Not to you, but to the adopting owner. What they do receive though, for their extra money, is a thorough vet exam and a written set of recommendations, up front, from an independent veterinarian.”

“The city shelter doesn’t get them checked the same?” Pete said.

Jefferson grimaced slightly. “More questionable,” he said.

“What do you think might be wrong with his leg?” Rosie said. “Could that obstruct him from being adopted?”

Pete was thinking, there’s a lot *more* that’s going to stop poor Bo from being adopted, besides an issue with his leg. Again, you could unfortunately picture family after family coming in on weekends, excitedly tromping through the back buildings where you assume the kennels are located, and Bo looking up at each one hopefully, and then getting passed right by.

It killed you to think of.

Rosie was trying to be upbeat. She said, “And as far as someone providing him a good home . . .”

“Just give me a moment please,” the kid said, down on a knee again, this time gently cradling Bo’s right leg in the air.

And he was dutifully trying to figure out what might be wrong with the leg--and Pete wondered, like with horses, if it is *really* screwed up, would that be *it*?

Jefferson finished his informal exam and said to excuse him a moment please, and he headed behind the desk into a back room, and son of a gun, Bo tried to follow him.

Pete and Rosie laughed, a little. You couldn't relax and enjoy yourself. Jefferson closed a door to confine Bo to the main waiting room, and a minute later he returned with a middle-aged good-natured woman, who was wearing latex gloves and carrying some medical stuff.

“Meg is my trusty assistant,” Jefferson said, smiling at her.

Meaning the kid, all of about 22, was running the show already. Maybe not the whole show, if there was a non-profit group and board of directors behind the scenes or something, but certainly the part that was presented to the public.

Meg laid out a large paper mat, and she sat down with Bo the way Rosie had in the parking lot, and he

came right to her, and she put on a pair of glasses and got to work.

Jefferson said, “What I saw--what I’m hoping all’s it is--he’s got a thorn in that paw.”

“Oh thank *God*,” Rosie said.

“*Really*,” Pete said.

“The caveat,” Jefferson continued, “there could be an additional problem higher up. Those are difficult to diagnose without x-rays. What I recommend, whether you leave him with us or not, give it three days and re-evaluate. If it was only the thorn, he should be bounding around like *nobody’s business* by then.”

Jefferson no doubt figured Pete and Rosie were wondering about the cost of what was going on right *here*, whether they were going to get hit with a \$300 vet-like bill. Which Pete *wasn’t* worried about, that wasn’t even on his radar, but the kid added: “No charge at all for this, by the way. It’s our pleasure.”

“Well fantastic,” Rosie said. “And thank you so much. We’re keeping our fingers crossed.”

“My guess?” the kid said. “What Meg’s doing right now, tweezering it out of there--then disinfecting the wound with old fashioned peroxide--that may do it.”

“Pardon me for jumping around,” Pete said, “but where’d you grow up? Here?”

“Mostly, yes. Before that, until I was 10, we lived in Hanover.”

Pete was wondering, could he mean Hanover, *Vermont* . . . but don’t conclude that and embarrass yourself . . . so he said, “Ah. Where’s *that* now?”

“Hanover? No big deal. You know where Krylon Lake is?”

“Sorry,” Pete said.

“Doesn’t matter. You run 146-North out of town, and then a little ways west on 12 you’re in beautiful downtown Hanover. I probably wouldn’t recommend it, unless you had your own reason to be stopping there.”

“Why did you have to be nosey?” Rosie said, “interrogating him on where he’s from.”

“No worries,” Jefferson said. “I enjoy talking about myself, when people ask.”

“That’s a good quality,” Pete said. “The best part, you *admit* it.”

“I agree with that,” Meg said, from down below working on Bo. “Too many cagey people out there these days. I tell my kids, just be yourself. But they don’t always listen.”

Pete said to Meg, “How about dogs? Do you have any of *those*?” Letting that one hang, praying it resonated with her. Or with Jefferson.

Meg shook her head. “My hubby’s allergic. Along with my middle one, my 8-year old. I know it sounds wacky, with me here 40 hours a week.”

“Sometimes more than that,” Jefferson said. “A *lot* more.”

And that wouldn’t be surprising at all, that not only Meg, but Jefferson too, would be working way overtime when it was required, and unlikely telling anybody about it or getting paid a penny for it. Just doing it.

Pete said, “I’m going to blurt out something here, at the risk of sounding maudlin. You’re very decent folks, both of you.”

“Well thanks,” Jefferson said, “that makes our day.”

“*You’re* not kidding,” Meg said, just about finished with the Bo paw now, closing up the peroxide and pulling some moleskin-like material out of a box, along with a pair of scissors.

“How did he *do*?” Rosie said, anxious. “How does it *look*?”

“Oh, your little guy’s amazing,” Meg said. “Flying colors. You notice he didn’t even barely flinch when I doused it?”

“He trusts you,” Rosie said.

“Big-time,” Pete said. “And Jefferson, the only reason I asked where you’re from, you threw out an expression--*like nobody’s business*. My grandfather used to use it, and it filtered down to my dad . . . Can’t say I’ve heard it too many other times.”

“Especially from someone under 25, you’re saying?” Jefferson said. Big smile, the kid caught on quick. “My grandpa too, that’s where *I* got it. It’s a small world, I guess.”

Pete was tempted to ask where the grandpa was from, he was always interested in that stuff, picturing how someone’s family roots might play out, but he

figured that'd be going too far, and didn't want to further irritate Rosie.

Meg was finished and you heard the water running at a sink in back, her washing up.

Bo was moving, like he knew what was going on, stepping lightly toward Rosie, tenderly sampling the repaired paw. *Dang that tail's wagging*, Pete couldn't help thinking.

Pete said to Jefferson, "So what about you? You involved with anything else?"

"*Peter*," Rosie said.

"Entirely fine," Jefferson said. "Well it's a pipe dream--I know--but I want to be a veterinarian."

"Tremendous," Pete said.

"What a perfect fit," Rosie said.

"It's a long shot," Jefferson said, "I have no illusions. There aren't a whole lot of vet schools in the United States . . . and statistically, actually harder to get accepted into than med school. At any rate, I'm taking the plunge, part-time for now, but doing the science requirements over at Zane State."

Pete thinking: the heck with *this*. If they don't let *this* kid become a vet, we've gone completely down the tubes.

He filed it away, and vowed to do something about it, if and when the time came that the kid was applying to vet schools and getting turned down. He dug around, found an old business card.

“Wow,” Jefferson said. “San Francisco. It's on my dream list to visit.”

In small print the card had Pete's address, not a discreet one like a PO box or mail drop, but the apartment in the Marina district.

“Jeez,” Pete said, “you come out on vacation this spring, you could almost stay in my old place. It's a subtlet these days, I live in LA now.”

“So how could he stay in your *old* place?” Rosie said. “You're making no sense.”

“Well it's vacant, currently. A friend of mine in the neighborhood, he's trying to carefully land me a new sub-tenant. Which means a better caliber one than the last guy, who decided to stop paying the rent . . . But

Jefferson . . . thinking out loud here . . . you really *can* stay there. I'll hold off on the new person. Why not?"

"Gol-ly," Jefferson said. "I can't quite believe your incredible offer. And I'm going to have to respectfully decline. Unfortunately I can't walk away from my couple things just now."

"I hear you," Pete said. "It's not realistic. That said, when you *are* free . . . why don't you come out to LA? Meg too, bring the husband and kids."

Rosie didn't say anything, and she tried not to be obvious about it, but you could sense her thinking, *okay it's good you're trying to be a nice guy--but are you out of your mind?*

Pete was in one of those moods, probably because he'd become unexpectedly fond of these people in a hurry. It was a *life's too short* thing . . . like that time on Amtrak there was mechanical trouble and the train was stalled in a small town, and he and another passenger found the Main Street bar. The other guy gets everyone's attention--like walking into a saloon in the old west--and announces all drinks are on him.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Pete said to Jefferson, and Meg now too, who’d come back in the waiting room and was listening to this. “The accommodations. How will that work? Don’t worry, we got you covered.”

And this of course was another hypothetical, way unlikely to ever happen . . . though one thing for sure about good Midwestern folks such as these--if they ever *did* tell you they were coming, you could take it to the bank.

But back to reality. Pete asked Jefferson if he had any pets.

He said he had two cats and two dogs, and that was pushing it, but luckily they were a harmonious bunch. He pulled out his phone, obviously happy to show photos of them all.

Pete and Rosie took a look and nodded, and Meg leaned in for a peek as well.

“How do you think *this* guy would get along with cats?” Pete said.

“Bo? Oh, that’s a slam dunk.”

“You can tell? . . . Don’t you have to introduce ‘em and stuff?”

“Sometimes, sure. I’ve seen a lot canines come through here though. This little guy’s friends with *anyone*.”

Pete felt himself tearing up. He said, “So can you *take* him? . . . Please, I’m begging you.”

Rosie was crying now too, trying to disguise it, and she had to turn away and open the door and go outside for a moment to compose herself.

Meg and Jefferson were looking at each other. You had the impression this wasn’t the first time--not even close--that they’d been put through this.

Jefferson hadn’t said anything yet, he was trying to phrase it right, how he’d have to turn that down, and Pete felt awkward that he’d made the kid stumble around on his behalf.

So Pete said, “What does food cost, by the way? A guy like Bo.”

That was an easier one and Jefferson was relieved to deal with it, and he said, “Well, *premium* dry food, which is what we recommend . . . let’s see, guy his size,

we're talking a 30-pound bag every month and a half, two months . . . So, I'm going to say, 25 dollars per bag, ballpark, and on the average, 8 bags per year? Let's go 10, to be safe. So what's that, 250 dollars a year."

"You can do better even, you watch the sales at PetSmart," Meg said.

"What else would he need?" Pete said. "What other expenses?"

"Not a lot," Jefferson said. "We make sure shots are up to date before we adopt him out. You should factor in the occasional vet bill. Leashes. Collars. Training sessions if you want, but you can get those cheap at the senior center. You don't have to be a senior."

"Don't forget toys," Meg said.

"Oh yeah right," Jefferson said, smiling a little. "Lot of options out there. You *do* get into it, when you see them respond. You always want to buy more."

"So a thousand total for the year?" Pete said.

"Rounded off?"

"Oh that should be *way* high," Jefferson said.

"Unless there was a dire circumstance with a vet. Not seeing it with this guy though. He looks great, despite

what he's been through. Not to mention, heavily mixed breeds like *he* is, they're the heartiest."

Pete thought of something else. "How much does it typically cost to take care of a dog? Like when someone comes in."

"You mean a pet sitter? That depends, there can be a range . . . We have a dependable one . . . Meg, what's Janna charge these days?"

Meg said, "I think she's at \$55 for 3 hours, \$125 overnight. There *are* cheaper ways to go."

"But you don't want to fool around too much there," Jefferson said.

"No," Pete said.

"You don't," Rosie said.

Pete was trying to make some calculations on the fly, and you could tell Jefferson and Meg were wondering by now if a decision had been made about leaving Bo here.

Fortunately an older couple came in. They had a big dog, bounding around friendly, looked like a rottweiler mixed with something a lot tamer, maybe a golden retriever.

For a moment Jefferson and Meg seemed concerned, since the couple had recently adopted the dog and now were back with it.

But all it was, they had a few questions, they were perfectly thrilled with their new household member, and Jefferson, in that special way he had, addressed all their issues, giving everyone the impression that he had nothing but time and theirs was the only thing that mattered.

Pete and Rosie retreated to the waiting room bench, and Bo tried to get up on Rosie but couldn't quite make it and she hoisted him on to her lap, and the poor guy almost fell asleep, the events of the day plus a wave of contentedness overtaking him.

Pete was speaking very softly to Rosie, "So, a hundred twenty-five a night--what's that, 9 a week . . . so 45 grand a year."

"Huh?" Rosie said.

The point was, you weren't going to match that kind of rate, not even close, so how much a pet sitter would charge had been a moot question.

Pete wasn't clear on how much cash he had on him at this point, and you didn't exactly want to count it up. "You have a pen and paper?" he said.

Rosie fumbled around in her purse, came up with a pen, and grabbed a flyer advertising a local charity crab feed.

Though you couldn't help wonder--*crab feed* out here in *Zanesville, Ohio*?

But forget that, come on.

This was going to take a few minutes to piece together, since you'd have to re-create a few things, but luckily Jefferson--and now Meg--were fully engaged with the couple with the questions.

"You're scribbling," Rosie said. "Not sure if there's a method to your madness. But I won't ask."

"You want something, but the way?" Pete said. "Little market across the street. Anything? Ice cream sandwich? Popsicle? *Real* sandwich from somewhere?"

"Sweet of you," she said. "I'm watching my weight. Plus, if you remember, we just ate breakfast."

“Yeah, but that was at least an hour ago,” Pete said. Rosie was awfully good humored, being tied down on a trip to someone like *him*, he had to admit.

They'd met four days ago in a wine bar in Tribeca. Pete was in New York doing a slightly dangerous favor for a friend, seeing a guy in Yonkers. Rosie was a little down on her luck. Pete said why not ride cross-country with me, have an adventure, and here you were.

It didn't take long, and he had a handle on it.

He'd started off with 25 grand, on account of the Yonkers thing, not knowing how it might play out. There'd been a couple unexpected side issues, but when the dust settled he should still have 13 and change on him.

Twenty minutes went by, and Pete half-dozed off and half-scratched Bo under the chin in Rosie's lap--and she was dozing off too, and *dang*, don't *drop* the guy.

The older couple was at the door now, thanking Jefferson and Meg and shaking hands all around, and they left with their new big dog, who'd been very patient through the visit.

“You’re a jack of all trades,” Pete said. “I overheard some of that. Part of your job is obviously dealing with people’s anxiety. Not just the x-y-z’s of pet care.”

“I was impressed,” Rosie said.

Jefferson gave it an *aw shucks* shrug of the shoulders, but you could tell he was happy things ended on a good note.

Pete was going to ask Jefferson to step outside for a moment, but then he figured why keep Meg in the dark, that would be kind of rude, so he took a quick deep breath and said to Jefferson, “I’ll give you ten thousand dollars to take him until the end of the year.”

Letting that baby hang there. Stopping everyone in their tracks. *Praying* . . . that it would work.

No one asked Pete to repeat it, how people typically do when something outrageous is entered into the discussion with no warning . . . where you assume you misunderstood it.

Jefferson was too smart for that, he knew what he heard, and you could see the wheels turning, him piecing it together, the logic behind it-- though not

knowing much about this man and woman standing here with the dog, when it came down to it.

“You’re processing it,” Pete said.

“Yeah I am,” Jefferson said. “You threw me a curve ball there.”

Pete didn’t want to be a jerk and start pulling out cash a little at a time, counting it up in front of the kid, unduly influencing him, and likely embarrassing him. He wanted the kid to embrace the concept, plain and simple.

Pete said, “What it would be, we’re at the end of February right? Where *are* we exactly?”

“Today is the 2nd,” Meg interjected. “March.”

“Dang,” Pete said. “Where’s the time go?” Saying to Rosie, “Wait a second, we only started off yesterday . . . that was Thursday, correct?”

“Yep,” Rosie said. “March 1st.”

“I apologize,” Pete said to everyone. “I *did* know that.”

“What’s the difference,” Rosie said. “Why are you making a big deal?”

Pete said, “The actual date *doesn't* matter. What I'm getting to, once the year's up--around New Year's Day for example--we'll talk again and figure out a Plan B.”

“Wow,” Jefferson said.

“That way,” Pete said, “Rosie and I have complete and total peace of mind, right through the holiday season.”

“That would be *amazing*,” Rosie said.

“I know,” Pete said, “and a year's a long time. Or 10 months or whatever it *is*. A lot can happen. If it does, we can rest assured that one aspect is stable.”

He was rambling, but it felt like the right thing to do, give Jefferson more leeway, don't put him on the spot with silence all around the room.

Jefferson crouched down and looked over at Bo, and in a voice that was as sincere as an angel, he said, “Come here boy!”