

A Puppy and Her Old Man

The doorbell jingle-jangled. It alerted the old man that the package he had been expecting for the past few months finally arrived. All that remained was for him to fetch it from the porch, oil and load its contents, put it to the purpose he had ultimately decided upon, and all his troubles would be over.

He discovered that purchasing such an item in his pastoral and enlightened state isn't so easy to do. It wasn't for lack of effort. He had done his groundwork. The supply just wasn't there. And as time passed, his need for a solution was becoming more desperate. Each new day had brought increased urgency, and not only because of the destruction he was powerless to contain. The greater horror was that he could feel himself changing, losing self-possession and control. He felt like a broken leg, dragging itself day by day to the old men's burial ground.

Before his troubles he had regarded himself with a goodly degree of pride and self-respect: a young old man, possessed of vigorous strength tempered by experience that comes from well-lived age. He had dealt confidently with his challenges, was grateful for his joys, but victories and accomplishments had slowly, through bit-by-bit losses, faded, and with them the inner youth that had always sustained him. The spark that drove him flickered and his present troubles, always in background or fore, threatened to extinguish it entirely. He was just an old man now, mummifying. And while he still retained a trace of intellect, he knew he had to do something and do it quickly.

That is why he had finally resorted to out-of-state speakeasy types to supply his restricted need, and that's how the package, conclusive as the final bell, came to be on his porch. He had exhausted the limit of his tolerance- so he swore- and was not going to take the intrusion any longer. "Sorry, Vinny," he said to the chilly emptiness of the perfect home he had birthed from the sagging skeleton of an abandoned farmhouse, "We've had our moments. But it's time you found other accommodations."

That's the way the old man had felt in the beginning, when he first placed his order. And as for Vinny's mother, she could expect no mercy from him. As a parent and adult, she should have made a better choice than to leave her progeny alone with a stranger unsuited by age and attitude for that unwelcome responsibility. After all, the welfare of a mother's child depends on her wisdom, and as far as he could see, she wasn't displaying any. To her and her child's great peril, she had flippantly, recklessly misjudged him. Then again, maybe she thought that anyone who plays open-air Satie and Brahms as he gardens must be trustworthy enough to draft as a child's unsolicited caretaker, not that he would have taken on the responsibility had she requested the service. He had been drained of every parenting cell in his body. That season had passed and would never return. Done and all gone. He just didn't have that ambition anymore. With any child, even a baby angel.

And this one was hardly cherubic.

No, he asserted, neither parenthood nor unclehood were roles he could ever aspire to again. Those parts had been played and retired. He had lost the temperament for either position. And it was much too late- time runs out for long-term commitments by old men regardless how young they think they are.

But Vinny's mother could not possibly have understood him as she listened to Gymnopedie No. 2 drift through the fenced-in 2-acre utopia of his invention. No, her appetite displaced understanding and empathy with the subtlety of a chainsaw slicing birthday cake. She simply didn't have the capacity to

appreciate the perfect and polished details of the sculpted panorama, the superb specimens humble and exotic, the fanciful topiary and expansive gardens the old man had imagined in his gentlest dreams and molded with his cunning, now knotted and gnarly hands. Still, how threatening can a strange man- an artist living in paradise- be? How hazardous, deliveries to his gingerbread porch?

No, this land must have seemed ideal for her misguided purpose as she, unobserved, warily investigated a larder peaceful- and except for that 7-foot gap crushed by a fallen tree- secure. Satisfied, she had left the child with him, trusting this imperfect alien, as if his creation, this lovely setting, were the mirror of the soul she was incapable of sounding.

But then again, how can we truly understand her impulses? Perhaps she was just ignoring him as though he were a harmless butterfly minding his own business, flitting along with his watering pails, snipping peacefully with his polished and honed pruners, ignorant of her presence. How much can we know of the private lives of men- or deer? All we can do is observe, speculate and hope for the best.

Living on the edge of the deep, dark woods, you can expect visitors besides those we commonly encounter in the suburbs: the squirrels and rabbits, possums, raccoons, moles, chipmunks and gophers, mice and rats. Eventually, you can count on seeing snakes, turtles and toads, bobcats, coyotes, foxes, river cats, a yellow-spotted black salamander if you're lucky. Perhaps some sunny morning, if you've neglected your overnight locks, you might descend from your cozy bedroom to find a bear critically examining the contents of your refrigerator. None of this is impossible in the old man's rustic neighborhood. And the neighbor most likely to make his appearance and leave his pelleted calling card is the high-jumping deer whose long legs mock 4-foot chain link and every peaceful effort to displace him.

He was sitting on the back porch, showered and shaven, properly sanitary and as dewy fresh as an old man can be after a three-t-shirt morning of hauling water and sweat to a plot of zinnias, sunflowers and tithonia flowering beyond the reach of the 200-foot hose. He'd enjoyed the mandatory and ever-so satisfying daily routine of shuffle-hoe weeding, tying up stray wisps of tomato suckers and deadheading the butterfly bushes. He had potted up an especially fine lacy-leafed Japanese maple volunteer and capped off the drippy, sticky rapture of it all by sharpening his topiary pruners with a specialty wet stone in anticipation of next day's bliss.

It was after 2 o'clock, and he had settled back leisurely and comfortably on his favorite hard-backed patio chair, an icy glass of tea perspiring in the porch's shade within convenient reach, re-reading his favorite Raymond Chandler mystery for the 4th or 5th time, when he first spotted him. Well, not exactly literally: Vinny was spotted long before he had ever met him. He was born that way, as all baby deer are.

The old man had glanced up from his reading, alerted by a hummingbird feeding on the trumpet vines twining about the porch columns that framed a football field bounded on three sides by Crayola-colored island-gardens of annuals, perennials and roses, groupings of azaleas and rhododendrons encircling exotic and native trees. Mountain Laurel, Japanese Cryptomeria and Dawn Redwoods backdropped mature topiaries he had spent decades sculpting- the corkscrews of yew, cypress and spruce; that coiled rattlesnake in fine-leafed English ilex, its jaws wide open, a forked tongue protruding between fangs, so lethal in appearance that one could almost hear a hiss and rattle; a black Austrian pine that should have been 30 feet tall, its roots bound like a Chinese pleasure woman's foot, trimmed like a Hershey's Kiss dwarfed atop a thick 4-foot lollipop stick; light green clouds clustering about on

naked cedar branches sprouting geyser-like from a trunk some hungry bird had seeded; the peace symbol he had carved from a spherical yew. Halfway down the fairway, facing the sunniest side, was the picket-fenced vegetable garden with its formal, mint-hedged walkways, grape arbor entrance and 60-foot stone-edged boundary of zinnias and marigolds. Roses and daylilies flanked rows of tomatoes, cucumbers, squash and herbs the old man would share with his neighbors and friends. All this he could admire from the outpost of the porch, and the frantic mating dance of paired butterflies too; dragonflies scooting open-jawed like jerky biplanes within clouds of tasty and nutritious gnats; the feisty robin who dive-bombed the bunny Harry; yet another territorial hummingbird bully chasing off brash competitors, perhaps the one who sometimes hovered like a bee, mesmerized by the golden stream of the old man's answer to nature's call.

He took a breath, smelled the clethra and honeysuckle, the roses and peppermint, heard the songbird's solo. But this time he did not whistle a response.

That there were deer visitors to his garden was not a surprise: they had left clues not apparent from the porch but very evident from the kind of inspection one makes while wearing gloves. There were scattered piles of deer pellets. Sharp incisors had clipped daylily buds. Young rhododendron growth was reduced to stubs. A 3-year-old Japanese maple of promising beauty abandoned to three-leafed sorrow. These predators with their monitor lizard saliva had even eaten the young, budded stems of twenty or so roses as if their thorns were tragic dental flossers. The survivors looked as hang-dog dispirited as sea-sick landlubbers on their first stormy ocean cruise who suddenly discover their allergy to Dramamine. He had read the signs and was expecting deer, but he never anticipated a Vinny.

As it turned out, the old man made his initial acquaintance with the young doe who was grazing lazily amid the rhododendrons in the extreme way-back of the fairway. She looked so small- he could not have imagined her a mother until a runt pup on stilts pirouetted out from a cloister of azaleas and snuggled his nose against her flank- then he understood the mother and child connection. Vinny could have been only a few months old then, the doe's first born, still wearing his white dapples. He looked like a long-legged overblown football with a tiny, flat-backed Roger Stone head supported by a very flexible neck on one end, a powderpuff triangle tail on the other. His alert ears were shaped like upright walnut shells lined in soft white fur and although he appeared completely relaxed and contented munching tender rarebits, they made constant scanning motions. Vinny and his mother enjoyed an artful kind of peace. They were perhaps 300 feet away from the old man. He decided to interrupt their leisurely lunch.

He marched down the center of the fairway like a drill sergeant demanding respect, openly, making no attempt to conceal himself, his plan and object: to scare them off sufficiently to ensure they would not return. Ever.

"Hey you! You lunch-line loungers! I'm talking to you!" He began glibly, saving the thunder and lightning for a final, doubtlessly unnecessary, salvo, "Don't you know that filling up on too much azalea and rhododendron will give you a vicious bellyache? You're just looking to get yourselves sick! Variety. Variety," solid dietary advice was bound to sway them, "that's the key to well-being. You know... a little green. Some red. A bit of yellow- white and purple to round it all off."

He waited for that advice to sink in. When it didn't, he tried again, confident in his unimpeachable authority, "And speaking of color, I hear there's some freshly planted impatiens up the street!" Nor did this appeal to reason from inside 200 feet get him any response.

“Yeah- you!” he tried again, as if they would condescend to notice him, “with the eight legs and dopey expressions! Look at me! I’m over here! I’m talking to you! Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer something a little more organic? I just sprayed those bushes a week ago!”

Of course, he lied. This was war, and when one is under assault and diplomacy fails, deception, the least aggressive of all responses, is perfectly acceptable. The meal they were enjoying was 100% certifiably organic, pesticide and gluten free. And so were his lies. But they still ignored him as if he weren’t there at all. This was at 100 feet.

Feeling slighted, he reminded himself of the virtues of patience- neither Rome nor Xanadu were built in one day- girded the old loins and resolved to try again. He burrowed deeper into the pit of his gathering frustration and emerged with another time-honored intimidation ploy: the menace of a lurking hound.

“Didn’t you dummies see the ‘Beware of Dog’ sign- or can’t you read?” he berated them, still laughing to himself, a cynical, superior smirk to his lips, smugly convinced in this naïve initial encounter with them, well before he understood what intransigent forces he was dealing with, that he’d have no trouble at all sending them off on their own merry way. Soon they would realize that the seat they wanted was already taken. He’d see to that.

But despite his admonitions and the threat of a free-ranging killer chihuahua, there was still neither comprehension nor any change in their indifference as they placidly ground the rhododendrons he had been nurturing for 30 years between their rock-hard chisel teeth. At 50 feet, increasingly indignant at being snubbed, annoyed with his own silly and futile resort to levity, he flexed his fists.

“Chew this,” he grumbled to himself and boldly approached them, eager to pop the one closest to his weight smack on the snout.

“Perhaps you’d favor a cup of espresso with the entree- or would you prefer Darjeeling to go with your azalea? We have a very nice organic decaf selection and I’ve been told that’s the best part of any meal,” he recommended mockingly at 20 feet.

But deer do not have any appreciation for irony or sarcasm, so his comments passed them unnoticed- or maybe they thought he was just kidding them- or preferred sparkling water. Either way, they remained indifferent to his cynical proposal and barely twitched their tails.

At 10 feet, they began to take his intrusion more seriously and ran off in opposite directions, leaving him to decide which to wrangle. He chose Mommy- she was the head of the family, after all. If he could convince her he was a menace, perhaps she’d remove her offspring and never return. So, he chased after her with as much success as Sisyphus had with his rock until they came to the 4-foot-high chain link fence. There she came to a full stop, looked him apathetically in the eye, turned on her haunches and, from a dead stop, squatted and launched herself effortlessly over it, disappeared into the depths of the foreboding forest, leaving Vinny behind to the old man’s kind-hearted ministrations.

The old man went looking for him, but he too was gone- or perhaps he was learning to play his first game, hide-and-seek in the bushes. And that’s how the whole thing between Vinny and the old man started.

The old man made it back to the porch and the book and the now tepid, formerly iced, tea, frustrated by not finding him, annoyed that he hadn't taught that wayward mother of his any kind of lesson let alone a permanent one, disgusted that she'd abandoned a child who couldn't have been more than a few months old to a stranger with old man, theoretically Fox news, libertarian, get-off-my-lawn insecurity, and a potential taste for venison. Didn't she realize he could have been a desperate fellow, capable of mayhem and havoc, with deer the object of his meat-grinder mania? Some mother! These are the thoughts and emotions he took to bed the first time he met Vinny and his irresponsible mother.

Next morning, he was up and chipper by 7:00. It was an inspiring start to the kind of unimprovable day that must have encouraged Hannibal to get his elephants across the Alps, the kind that makes even suffering bearable and seem a worthwhile penance for all one's many sins. The air was still night-time cool, and he had awoken refreshed and anxious to tackle the day's upcoming chores. He decided to shut the windows before the warmth of the sun displaced the early chill with heat and humidity. His bedroom was on the second floor, and as he was pulling them down, he glanced into the lower forty and saw the two deer again, leisurely enjoying an early breakfast.

Trousers never skidded up a scrawny leg faster than they did that morning, and before you can say "animal husbandry," he was out on the lawn, repeating yesterday's invocations. The deer responded with a kind of indifferent amusement, as if they were trying to decide what game the old quack was going to invite them to play this time and whether it was worth taking a break from their appetizers. At 10 feet, they decided that perhaps it was, and ran off again in their separate directions. This time, the old man decided to get to know Vinny better.

Vinny gave him a sly peek and burned hoof into a circle of clethra that encircled a century-old Norway spruce, waited until he caught up, admonished the old man's dawdling with accusatory chestnut eyes, and dashed off again. Despite his youth, he ran like an Olympic-class sprinter, like the old man's English Setter Misky used to- but on far longer legs. They are the levers that give him superior torque, just like Archimedes said, and that's what makes deer such quick and nimble, graceful and efficient Vandals.

Vinny was up ahead, waiting for him in a thicket of slow-growing hybridized Mountain Laurel a neighbor had presented him as a welcoming gift 30 years before and helped him plant, a variety he himself had developed and of which he was very proud. The old man was hardly huffing and puffing when he caught up with the fawn. Vinny's ears perked up and rotated in his direction. The old man couldn't read those large dark eyes, but he could see they were not like Misky's. They looked spooked-the way kids' eyes look when they watch a horror film- spooked, but thrilled with uncertain anticipation, relishing the feeling of danger by suppressing the reality of actual peril. The old man thought that his own eyes might take on that look if ever he saw a UFO. Or God. Perhaps he was Vinny's first human, and those eyes were reflecting instinctive shock. He didn't know what the fawn was thinking as he approached, but he made his own feelings perfectly clear.

"Look at you, you glutton you, chomping my flowers like that! And you don't even care, do you, you greedy little bugger, as long as you can fill that sinkhole belly of yours. Aren't you the least tiny bit ashamed of yourself?" Upset as he was, the old man wasn't as angry as he imagined he would be. Even Misky had a few episodes while she was a puppy. But now he cherished those pinhole bite marks on the redwood armrest of his favorite chair.

Vinny's expression revealed no glimmer of enlightenment to speak of, nor did he express an atom of exculpatory regret. He nodded his head as if he were acknowledging his responsibility, then shook it vigorously side-to-side as if to say, "Just kidding!" But this wishy-washy response wasn't going to prevent the old man from trying to get his point across. Just a little patience and consistency, that's all it would take.

"And, by the way, Pal, why are you looking at me like that? Do you actually think I'm responsible for this mess? 'What's wrong with this guy? What's this nut got to do with me?' you're probably thinking. 'What's his problem? What's he want?' you're asking. Can't imagine why I'm upset?" the old man griped as he stepped closer to his 30- or perhaps 40-pound bulk. Yet despite his predations and aloofness, Vinny's charm was already beginning to affect him.

"Gad you're cute- for a Hun!" He allowed him that much. "But oooweeeeee dumb!" The old man couldn't decide whether to praise or upbraid him and caught himself doing both.

Vinny was watching him guardedly but attentive as he was, he failed to grasp the essence of the old man's complaint. Nor did he know how to take a compliment. He waited until the old man was 10 feet away, shook his head from side to side like a horse shooing flies, pivoted like a burlesque hooper and shot off in a spray of leaves and loose turf.

When the old man finally caught up with him, Vinny was waiting for him patiently in a small stand of enkianthus with what looked like a childish grin on his face, perhaps because his lower jaw was not aligned with the upper, giving him the goofy appearance of a camel chewing. The old man took several deep breaths, wiped the sweat off his forehead and eyebrows, peeled the first sodden tee-shirt of the morning off his chest and looked at him with the boldness of eye that comes of self-righteousness and a sudden spurt of adrenaline.

"We can do this all day long, Pal. All day long, and as much as you'd like. It's what time was made for. No need to rush this episode or postpone the good times. Let's you and I sip the experience like old brandy- Whaddaya say, Kid? I'm retired, in top shape as you can see for yourself and have nothing better to do. Besides, I like running around sweating, grunting and getting nowhere," he grouched, trying to convince both who the boss was.

Vinny rolled his eyes as if he considered that last commentary corny- and for a moment the old man thought they were beginning to make progress. But then his ears perked up in little points, twisted to the left, and his eyes shot past the old man's shoulder. The old man turned around and saw that wanton, in deer-years teen-aged and loose, mother of his passing her son some fine advice, probably concerning strangers and candy. He took it, and that was the last the old man saw of them that day despite a few walk-arounds and occasional observations from the porch and bathroom windows.

He spent the evening pondering what to do. He started by asking whether anything should be done at all, but on that issue there could be no debate. All his roses were a third of their former height and the surviving 6 or 7 inches reminded him of Dresden in 1945. There were no daylily buds left. The sunflowers that grow so tall had been champed by professional masticators. He reckoned these deer no amachewers. But even wordplay failed to console him. The magnificent tithonia- the floral pride of Mexico- would bear no clusters of small orange-red sunflowers this year.

"Ah- Sunflower!" He remembered with the sadness of precious loss, "Weary of time,

Who countest the steps of the sun...

Seeking after that sweet, golden clime

Where the traveler's journey is done..."

But there he stopped. He could not stomach yet more painful details of the destruction the deer had brought to his yard. He could not go on, difficult as unnecessary it was to list every excruciating point. The old man's counting days were far from over, and though he didn't know it yet, this traveler's journey was just beginning. He shook himself into lucidity- he realized that he had to do something and quickly- but what?

A taller fence was out of the question. A 4-footer is unneighborly enough and he was always a good neighbor. Liberty, Equality and Fraternity: the French had gotten it right. And then there was the expense of fencing in 2 acres. A physical barrier was out for social and financial reasons.

There was wolf urine powder he could mix like Kool-Ade and spread around the boundary of his 2 acres. He estimated he'd need 14 gallons of the nasty stuff to do even a light job, and the coverage would have to be repeated every 3 weeks or so, more in case of rain. Craving nurturing rain and dreading it simultaneously portended nothing comforting for his psyche. Same for the powders that were supposed to discourage all manner of critter. Not very practical, and of uncertain efficacy. Predators leave many signs of their presence, urine being only one of them. Dumb as they are at chess, deer are survivors. They can read those signs, and if they see only one, they begin to suspect that someone is pulling at their long legs.

Sound deterrence was also off the table. None of the embedded locals would appreciate a shotgun blast disrupting their composure every few minutes. And there were no bars of Irish Spring in the house to tie to the fence, their offensiveness to deer more legend than fact.

The duplicity of the carnivore is that he pets his steak while it's still alive. The old man accepted his hypocrisy- but hunting season or not, he would not snitch the two of them out to the neighborhood hunters. Gunplay would be an unthinkable brutality. No guns were allowed at the old manse anyway. Especially on poker nights with the boys when they all tried so hard to behave despite their tempers and testosterone, their political affiliations and losing cards. No Vinny bang-bang would be allowed. Nor, of course, any bang-bang directed toward his doting, protective mother, who, he reflected, despite her youth had turned out to be a wise purveyor of first-rate advice as well as an excellent judge of character.

And since the solution could involve no death, it could likewise bring no injury upon them, a barbarity that could lead to slow, torturous passing. A miserable horror of his making. He imagined a desperate Vinny chased by a rapacious gunman, attempting a leap over the crumbled section of chain link. Terrified, he doesn't make it; his hind leg catches in the steel web and the bone snaps when he desperately draws it out. The old man could not bear imagining the misery Vinny would go through with a broken leg until he'd weaken and a predator finally finished him off, perhaps eating him alive. He felt sickened, beating out the lurid, graphic details of these grim possibilities in his creative mind.

Of course, there was a real solution: another dog. But he had rejected this alternative long before meeting Vinny. When Misky was living with him, doing guard duty, loving it and him, the old man was her devoted, grateful and indulgent parent. He had doted on her, spoiled her without restraint. She

slept in his bed and accompanied him in his garden labor. They drank coffee from the same cup. She could read his feelings and offer solace or share the days' joys. She was happy by nature and offset his sometime brooding complexity. She and the garden. Now she was irreplaceably gone, and any parental node he might ever have had departed alongside her. He could no longer allow himself any ambition that would bind him to another ghost with eternal love and temporary co-existence. At his age, knowing what old men know, he couldn't imagine himself looking into a puppy's eyes with the uninhibited joy young people feel. In a dozen years, when he would be in his eighties, he'd have to watch her decline as they both approached their inevitable ends. How would he survive that sorrowful burden? He still cried when he saw Misky's smiling portrait on the mantle or visited her at her flowery gravesite. How could he bear such grief in the debility of extreme age?

And though he wished he could welcome his death as cheerfully and optimistically as Socrates had his own, he was still resisting- recalcitrant, un-Apologetic, kicking on a broken leg- and her passing would only serve to prompt more meditations of his own unreconciled waning.

And then- what if he should die first? What would she do then, the poor girl, without her lost devoted love? How would she suffer? Who would care for her in her old age? Who would rub the back of her head, nuzzle his nose in her soft ear and whisper what a good girl she is? How proud he is of her? How happy she has made him?

No, he knew what would eventually happen. Best to leave the puppies to families with happy children, where life and death are never lonely and unreconcilable. Better for him to solve this matter selflessly, without invoking another garden dog, another soul he'd love and lose.

There was one trick left, however: a sure-fire solution any child of his generation would have known. And, it seemed to him, it was psychologically justifiable, and almost ethical. The idea was to apply some superficial but histrionic hurt to the deer, to give them a sense of his sincere lack of welcome for them. Hurt was the operative word. Injury was out. Give the deer a bee sting. Where the bite will raise more drama than blisters.

And where would he find this bee? That would be easy. In his desk drawer. His old Crosman .177 caliber pump-up pistol. Two pumps sped the bb at 375 feet per second. Six yielded 600. And at 10 pumps, the bb would achieve maximum flight speed- almost 700 fps- and, force equaling mass times acceleration, far greater momentum for impact and stopping power, as cops euphemistically phrase it.

He could do very nicely with 2 pumps. And not directed at Vinny, of course; after all, it wasn't his fault that dopey mother of his had led him to the old man's eutopia. And to be honest with himself, he wasn't sure if it was Vinny or Vanessa he had been referring to. Vinny might have been a she for all he knew. At such a young age it was difficult to determine from a distance. Either way, shooting him- or her- would be to his eternal shame, the subject of unreconcilable nightmares. An infamita. He had no such qualms regarding Vinny's mother.

No sir, his plan was two pumps to Mommy's plump rump, a wonderfully fleshy target. To do no damage but to inflict dramatic, temporary pain and an accompanying, permanent lesson. A bee sting... a bee-bee sting that would deliver the message clearly and directly to the critter non grata. He reached into the drawer and withdrew his old pistol from its tangle of detritus.

The children of his generation knew their air guns- at least until they came to the responsible age of 12 that entitled them to their first .22. Their parents thought of air guns as a prelude to the real thing- as if snipers in combat had never used them in their lethal work- believing that growing up with one developed the proper familiarity all patriotic adults need to have with firearms. His generation had regarded an American without a gun with suspicion, had held his loyalty bona fides suspect. When did any of them ever see John Wayne unarmed?

So, by age 8 or 9, depending on how tightfisted their parents were, they'd be gifted their first Red Ryder or Daisy pump-up and instructed not to shoot at one another. This estimable advice would be followed by more wisdom: to select, if possible, non-living targets. To make certain that nobody whose eye could be shot out was behind or in the vicinity of the selected target. To always clean and oil their weapon. To mind windage and elevation. To keep the safety engaged until they were ready to shoot. They were supposedly learning self-restraint amid the gunnery practice.

The old man hefted the clammy thing, examined the breech, made certain the safety was on and gave it a very loose pump- and then he remembered: It would not hold the air pressure required to launch the bb. He and his friends had worn the old thing out plinking in his makeshift basement firing range years before, and he had retired it unrepaired and unlamented to his desk drawer, fitting company for the collection of rubbish he couldn't part with. He'd need a new Crosman- but where was he going to get it in this liberal state that plays conservative with air guns?

He tried Walmart. Nothing was available except for a few CO2-powered models that he rejected. He visited a few sports shops and got the same response: Crosman guns are out of stock almost as soon as they are stacked on shelves. The public knows that a target hobbyist can't do better than a Crosman for economy and performance- and the pistol only weighs a bit over 2 pounds- a manageable mass for a shaky hand or weak wrist.

The search was becoming exhausting from the futile run-around. He was not the type who enjoyed going out to stores, except perhaps to the local grocery and pharmacy where he felt at first-name ease. Big box stores made him feel like being abandoned on a raft in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. When small-box help arrived, it would be the same people he'd been trading with for 30 years. Those small shops had retained their humanity. But neither big box nor small had in stock what he wanted. He realized he'd need an online gun-drummer to get that pistol, so he made it home, turned on his computer and went shopping.

It didn't take long to find a dealer and place an order for an exact replacement. He was surprised that nothing about the gun had changed from the time he purchased his old one. What vanity it is, he thought to himself, to spoil perfection with unnecessary change! He took the pistol's immutableness as a sign of additional justification for the pending action he would otherwise have found repellant. The purchase pleased him. That he had a reasonable working plan that would cause no injury to deer or man comforted him. After all, he had a legitimate right to protect his property in a manner that conformed to his ethics and the laws of his state. Now all that remained was to await the pistol's arrival. In the meantime, he would continue the chase, assuming the deer hadn't gotten his hints. In a few days the package would arrive, and he'd show Mommy how he played.

In the evening, he found that his meal did not upset his stomach. He read without distraction and having found the calm that had been evading him, went to bed drifting into restful, contented slumber, certain his problem had been solved.

That night he dreamed of Vinny and himself tramping side-by-side in the shadowy mystery of the twilight woods. That they were lost, no yellow bricks to guide them, didn't seem to matter. The two of them had walked blindly many times before. The saffron sickle moon hung low in the warm summer night. The sky was almost cloudless, and stars glittered like the promise of peace. The cicada one-notes were all chirruping in the same key and somewhere in the darkness an owl hooted like a beckoning foghorn. Their foot and hoof steps crunched dried leaves and sticks; still air was sweetened with honeysuckle. The two were tranquil and content with the nurturing night and themselves.

"Do you know where we are, Vinny?" the old man softly murmured. "I'll climb this tree and have a look around. Maybe I can see what's ahead...and it's a funny thing- I can't even remember where we've been, but I feel as though we've walked here many times."

Vinny leaned his muzzle into the old man's ribs, caught the old man's eye and brayed a harsh whisper: "We're where we always are, Pop. It doesn't matter. Forget the tree. Just hop on my back, and I'll take you where we're going. You must be getting tired."

The old man was touched. He put his arm around the little fawn's neck and caressed his stubbly chin.

"You're a good boy, Vinny. Your offer is generous, but your stilts are awfully skinny. I'm three, maybe four times past your weight and I don't want to crush you," the old man whispered back. "Tell you what- let's take the Spyder instead."

The old man was certain they'd had this conversation many times before, but he couldn't remember anything clearly. Everything about his companion felt familiar- Vinny's enthusiastic confidence, his affectionate, generous spirit, his gift of guttural speech. But he still felt lost. Where were they going? Where had they been?

Vinny was adamant and persuasive. "I'm skinny but I'm strong," he softly rasped, looking at the old man directly with deep, innocent eyes, sincere as a child who had never heard a lie. "Besides- we won't be needing it where we're going," he gently growled, "and we won't get there by walking... Try me, Pop- and don't you worry. You can depend on me. I'll take care of it."

"This has happened many times before," the old man thought, "There's something I must do." He tried to remember the name of a place he'd promised to visit. If it came to him, Vinny would take him there. But his efforts were useless. Dementia must be like this, he thought.

Friends were waiting for him- he was sure of that- and the love he sorely missed. He could almost see their faces, hear them calling to him. But what were their names again? Where were they? Why couldn't he remember something so important?

Vinny sat on his haunches, dog-like, staring at him intently. His eyes were gentle, and his mouth was twisted into a grin the old man found ironic.

“What are you moping for?” Vinny asked. “Forget the Spyder. I’ll take you where both of us want to go.” He paused, and his grin became a warm smile. “When are you going to have some faith? We both know what we must do. Let’s get going!”

Vinny raised himself up from his seat. He stood up like a little boy, then balancing on his hind legs, tottered toward the old man. His front legs twined around the old man’s neck; he rested his head on the old man’s shoulder. “Come on, Pop” he gently growled. “It’s our time to go. Let’s not lose it.”

Of course, he’s right, the old man thought, we need to get moving. “OK, boy. I’m ready now. Let’s move it. While we’re young.”

Vinny grinned and lowered himself to four legs. The old man carefully swung a leg and mounted him as if he were a colt without a saddle. His legs dragged on the ground. He stretched them past the white fur of Vinny’s chest, so far that his feet extended past his hoofs, and once he was sure he was secure on his back, hands encircling his muscular neck, the deer-child lifted noiselessly into the night sky. The old man swaddled the magic fawn’s body like an NBA center astride a pony. Straight ahead they flew, Vinny’s eyes sharply focused, his alert ears rotating like radar antennae, just above the treetops of the nighttime woods, past rivers and across the glistening expanses of lakes shiny with the reflection of the moon and stars gleaming like the dapples of his coat, toward the welcoming sea, a journey the old man could not reconstruct when he awoke.

But he remembered his grandmother speaking to him in a language he had long forgotten, her words flowing like a spellbinding song. His shaggy-haired college roommate chuckling and sharing a can of Vienna sausage. A young blonde wife whispering of her solitary love, everlasting past death.

Upon awakening, he could feel the contentment and consolation of time spent with them linger. Peacefulness swept over him, nestled him like a warm quilt on a cold winter night. He remembered he’d been there with them many times before. That he would return again and again, that there could be no loneliness for him, that he’d lost nothing and never would. And so, when he rose in the morning, breathing deeply the cool morning air, refreshed and reinvigorated, the old man was fully ready to embrace the wonders the new day held in store for him.

He did his morning routine of dog-stretching in bed, the same workout he’d watch Misky perform every morning upon awakening, that kept her in top condition all her long life, the one he’d modified for his own betterment: Lying on his back, arms and legs, fingers and toes extended as far as they could go without causing injury; shoulder, pec and extremity muscles stretched and simultaneously tightened on the intake of his deepest breath. Then the hold, and more tightening and stretching until the release of air- and finally relaxation: the routine of yoga and isometrics that had given him an iron spine. Thanks to Misky, and her example. Then he hopped out of bed, curious to look out the window, hoping Vinny would be there, and hoping he would not be there.

In a bed of native milkweed that he had planted for the Monarch butterflies, whose precious seeds had been so difficult for him to obtain and whose germination had seemed so slow, he could see Vinny cuddled on his side, still sleeping peacefully. So, this is where the imprint he had noticed while watering the beds came from. This is why the plants were matted. He had made himself a pallet on the ground, milkweed his blanket. This is where he had been spending his nights, dreaming perhaps of flying like the birds, maybe, thought the old man, with some old guy on his back.

Well, the old man decided, let the kid get his rest. The damage was already done and not at all permanent: Those hardy milkweed plants were tough enough to tolerate his intimacy and would more than likely revive in time. The Monarchs wouldn't lose out; he didn't eat milkweed like Monarch caterpillars do. Not Vinny. He wasn't bothering anybody. Let the growing boy get his rest.

Generous sentiments indeed- until he caught Mommy chewing the four-o'clocks and the phlox and realized his own grinders would need to be polished later. The old man raced to the bathroom like Superman tearing to a telephone booth, took care of the basics, and rushed out to confront Mommy before the last flower disappeared down her insatiable gullet.

"Hey Trimalchio! Is this the only place that offers free breakfast specials? Or do you just appreciate the friendly and courteous service we offer here?" he yelled at 300 feet, not courteously at all. Mommy paid him no mind, but he could see Vinny begin to stir.

"See that, you inconsiderate tick taxi? See what you've done? You've woken the little bugger up!" he blared indignantly, putting the full force of blame on her. This, like a parental argument over proper child rearing, at 200 feet.

By now, Vinny was waking up and doing his own stretch. He gave him a resentful look the old man understood with perfect clarity: "Can't you give a body a chance to rest? Nobody ever cares how I feel!"

At 15 feet, he and Mommy ran off in separate directions. This time the old man chased after Mommy, herding her into a chain-link corner, forcing a leap over the fence and into the woods. Then he turned his attention to Vinny- but by this time he too had disappeared. Maybe he had crossed the crushed section of the fence and joined his mother- he was still too small to make a 4-foot jump. He searched for 10 minutes or so and gave up. The old man had no idea where they had gone, but by now the phlox and the 4 o'clocks were hopeless stubble and he had become frustrated and upset, anger and resentment replacing the contentment he had awoken with.

Good thing for that package he was expecting. That would teach them. A little bee sting and then freedom from these pests.

His was a formidable plan and justifiable ambition- and that night he got an email in his inbox that would postpone its implementation for weeks, if not months. Turns out the arms drummer he had contracted with had left out a salient detail when he was placing his order: the Crosman model he had selected was on back-order. He would be contacted just as soon as the shipment arrived from the factory. Sorry for any inconvenience- here the old man snorted- but not to worry: his credit card would not be charged until the gun was shipped, whenever that happened. They'd keep him posted. In the meantime, would he care to examine their other stock, viewable in a handy attachment...? They even left a non-working customer service number and a non-responsive email address for his shopping pleasure. They had thought of everything.

"G'rnysh!" He could hear his grandmother's voice complaining to him. Nothing at all, and lots of it.

A few weeks? Maybe months? The deer would clean out the whole yard and resent that there would be nothing left to eat, and then accuse him of being a middling, ungenerous host. The situation

was impossible. He was losing his self-possession; his cool could heat an igloo. What happened to that Buddhistic indifference he had aspired to? And on top of all that, he was starting to feel sorry for himself, like an unmanly dupe of why-me-ism, abandoned in his victimhood. With his gelding self-pity and toothlessness came a rising surge of exceptionally virile anger.

There was no Satie or Brahms in the air that day as he performed his ritual chores. He trimmed the corkscrew-yew without a chuckle. He hauled water cheerlessly. He weeded and dead-headed, sweated a river but found no relief for his anger, no joy in his work. He felt as forlorn as the last pick of a sand-lot ball game. It was a lucky thing for his unwelcome guests that they were not in sight: In his rage and frustration, he would have thrown a Buick at them.

That's the way the day passed- and even after he had showered and shaved, supped indifferently and found himself on his favorite hard-backed chair sipping fresh iced peppermint tea and reading the paper, he was still troubled and unsteady. Those deer were making a fool of him, and those gun-drummers were no better. He still hadn't been able to contact them, no thanks to their non-functioning telephone line that offered superlative customer service. And they were not responding to his emails. Self-control was vanishing rapidly; a feeling of helplessness was settling in.

He found himself re-reading passages in the paper multiple times, but he still couldn't remember the content. His concentration had abandoned him; he could not think clearly- his thoughts returning to Vinny and Mommy and his violated gardens and ego. He would need to be on obsessive sentry duty for weeks- or months- and by the time his package arrived summer would be over, and all his efforts would have resulted in nothing left to defend.

But this wasn't the first problem he had ever worked himself into sickness over. And like many men and women who ache, he had an outlet he could turn to, a distraction visceral and thrilling- a consolation that would take his agitated mind off his predicament, a mental and emotional break from all his trouble. So, he did what he always did when he was stressed- he pulled his 2,000-pound Spyder out of the barn, dropped its vinyl top, put on sunglasses and gloves, grabbed his helmet and went on a low gear cruise on the country backroad that led to the track- and succeeded in creating a high-speed diversion. By the time he arrived back home the fumes had cleared, and he was feeling almost human.

The racetrack had done much to revive his psyche- and it's a good thing that it had, because what followed could only have been understood by an empathetic spirit free of anger and frustration. Had he stayed home, stewing in his emotions, he might not have grasped the unexpected scene that opened on his arrival. But the seat-crushing pull of the Spyder, the screech of its Kevlar-clad tires and drone of the high-revving engine, the driver's cologne of burning rubber, race fuel and oily smoke, had almost unburdened him of his funk.

In the center of the fairway with the western sun shining, scattering light and shade just below the wind-blown tree-tops, he saw Mommy standing still and rock steady, patient with her head raised heaven high. And below her, to her side, was young Vinny, sucking her milk gently, contentedly, the way he sampled a field of flowers. Squirrels were chasing each other, zigzagging in the grass, and birds serenaded. The butterflies dipped and rose, seeking scarce nectar. The bees fed amid the leavings of St. John's golden multi-flora Wort, and the evening dragonflies had made their dinner appearance among swaying clouds of gnats. The aggressive robins who slam into their own reflections in the porch's glass entryway had given Harry safe passage to nibble the clover.

The old man had never witnessed a doe nursing a fawn. It seemed too elusive, too private an act for public scrutiny, like a benison best consecrated within a locked confessional. But here was the mother, generously sharing her most intimate act with him, revealing to him her most private gift, the best she possessed- offering it freely, selflessly. She was completing the master plan his art could never quite conceive, and in so doing, included him freely with trusting acceptance. There, amid the remnants of his tattered bushes and flowers, within the scope of his anger and frustration, she had, at last, completed his great work of over 30 years. Rembrandt could not have supplied a finer final stroke to perfect the old man's vision. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

The summer wore on, the days getting shorter, the nights longer, and as he waited for his package during the weeks that followed, the old man tried his best to cultivate a friendship with Vinny. He'd greet him in the morning with his pails as the growing doe lay huddled in his milkweed bower. He'd leave him apples and carrots, hoping he'd appreciate the source. Each day he'd fill Misky's old bowl with fresh, filtered water, much to the poor girl's distress had she known he'd committed such treachery. If he saw Vinny during the day, he'd approach casually, addressing him in a gentle, caressing voice. He did not reproach him for his predations. He encouraged them. He spoke respectfully well of his mother, never sardonically, and treated her with affectionate consideration. As he and the deer converted his lead into gold, the old man, like a child on summer break, willfully repressed the inevitability underlying his present satisfaction- that time would come to settle unfinished business between them.

And every evening, Mommy would return to feed young Vinny.

But try as he did, the old man could never get closer than 10 feet to him. At 11 feet, the fawn would stare at the jabbering old man, but if he offered a treat from his hand, Vinny would run. That's how they spent the remainder of that summer- and playing hide-and-go-seek every day, maintaining that uncomfortable social distance. The old man never managed to make him a pet. Vinny never looked at him with Misky's warm, affectionate eyes. He could inveigle a chickadee into the palm of his calloused hand, but the best he could get from Vinny was the back of a cloven hoof.

By the time the package arrived, Vinny had bulked up considerably and his dapples were becoming less defined. Mommy was still leaving him in the old man's care, returning in the evenings to check in and perform her motherly services. The gardens were staggering, but the old man was unworried now, tolerant of what he once could not accept, confident they would bounce back for the better.

Then one day, an eternity, it seemed to him, from the urgency that had demanded it, the package appeared on the trellised porch. A repugnant magnetism drew him to it. Like a loathsome preamble performed with the septic horror of an Inquisitor's instrument of torture, the old man brought it into the house and unwrapped it. The gun-drummers had been thorough if not expeditious: the pistol, oil and ammo were all present and poised for grim service.

He removed the pistol from the package and examined it carefully. It was just what he expected, familiar as the one he'd worn out. He oiled and loaded it. He made certain that the safety was on and gave it two tight pumps. Then, robotically, like a frozen tin man, he brought it outside and set a can on a stone ledge about 30 feet away. He decided to give the gun another pump, checked the treetops for wind, adjusted the sights and released the safety. The ugly mission hanging over him like a shroud had finally come to pass. He filled his lungs and held his breath, aimed eagle-eyed, then satisfied, squeezed

the trigger with a steady finger. The gun cracked a muffled report, and the dented can careened a violent somersault into a gathering of decapitated cactus zinnias like a bowling ball smashing 10-pins, slamming a row of them ingloriously onto the ground.

That was enough practice. The old man set the safety, loaded the breech with a flat-headed pellet, pumped it twice. Then he set off looking for Mommy. With the pistol in his hand.

The familiar gun felt wrong, as though the grip were neither left- nor right-handed, designed to fit a claw instead of a human hand. He felt as if he were walking with mismatched shoes on his feet. He kept the pistol low, clasped to his side and hoped no two-legged visitors would see him in this shameful, sneaky limbo. He was past rationalizing his decision even to himself- he only knew that ugly things that must be done must be done. So, he kept the damned thing low and smothered against his side, straining not to imagine himself the type who'd shoot a mother.

Mommy never made an appearance. It was nursing time- but she was nowhere in sight to do the duty she had always performed so regularly and punctually. He looked everywhere, waited with hot impatience. She was solidly departed. But Vinny wasn't.

Vinny had been playing hide-in-the-bush and finally decided to let the old man join in the sport. He hopped out from behind a cluster of viburnums, pirouetted in the style the old man practiced with his Spyder, and suddenly stood icepack-still, staring at the old man. But his look was different this time, as if a special moment he'd want to preserve in his matchbox memory for all time had finally arrived. His eyes flashed with exuberant joy, like the thrill a passenger gets when he's about to board a trans-Atlantic luxury liner at the beginning of a first-class world tour. The old man hoped it wasn't the Lusitania. Because the gun was still in his hand.

But Vinny paid to it nothing of the little mind he possessed. To him, it was as harmless as the watering pails he associated the old man with, the same old guy who'd chase him around making funny noises. And leave him sweet delicacies to nibble, and clean water to wash them down. The same old man who'd wake him up when he'd rather nap.

Something about Vinny had changed. There was something else on his little mind. The old man could read it clearly: a joyful expectation, like the expression Misky would wear whenever he said, "ice cream." Vinny was up to something. For the first time since he'd made his appearance so many months before, he was talking to the old man. And those new eyes: They were Misky's.

He anchored his two front hoofs solidly before him, leaned his head toward the ground and looked up playfully, teasingly, bowing with his rump way up in the air. He was doing the stretch, showing the old man how clever he was. Then he leaped like a trout pouncing on a mosquito, a good 3 feet into the air, spun out another donut, landed in a wobble, wagged his head and snorted.

The old man was still standing there with the gun in his hand. Vinny paused from his gyrations and looked him in the eye, demanded praise and admiration, innocently unaware that his playmate was playing a more consequential game. Then Vinny made a leap of faith: a trustful high jump the old man had patiently hoped for, with no certainty he'd ever make. Vinny began to walk toward the old man, slowly but with resolve, like the first time Misky had come to him of her own volition, shyly, without being summoned, for her own pleasure and comfort.

Vinny had made the leap. The little dervish wanted the old man to pet him. He wanted to be rewarded with an apple from his hand. He would have welcomed a rhinestone collar for his growing neck.

The old man came to a decision as well. At 3 feet, he approached Vinny with the weapon and began the last game the two would ever play.

The old man knew he couldn't depend on Vinny's intellect or experience to recognize a pistol or understand the damage one can do. And what about the hunter's first choice, a long gun- a rifle? As far as Vinny knew, it might be just another gardening tool, another innocent toy his harmless friend always carried. He'd never be able to know what a firearm is or be able to anticipate what it- or people- are capable of, until his head decorated a paneled wall. But there was another way to keep him out of danger, an unpleasant lesson that the old man's own lack of foresight had boxed him into.

If the old man could not depend on Vinny's brainpower to save himself, the only alternative he could see remaining was to ignite his innate fear of all men. Vinny would have to rely on the instinct that had preserved his species for thousands of generations, the one that was now failing him and leading him into lethal temptation. The old man's dodgy pet needed to understand the high cost of befriending any man, especially one with a pruner in his hand: he'd be hanging off a bumper in the fall if he trusted humanity freely.

The old man had spent the summer teaching Vinny the wrong lesson- and cruel betrayal was the only way he could correct it.

Vinny approached him closely. Like Misky, he waited to be petted and spoken to gently and lovingly, just as the old man had hoped so patiently to do. But knowing the work that lay ahead, he had neither the heart nor right to fool Vinny any longer with a final show of affection. Hands at his sides, he faltered. But Vinny didn't. Vinny bowed his head and rubbed it against the old man's chest. Then he looked up, expecting reciprocal trust. "Go on, scratch my ears; I'll let you," his eyes seemed to say, "We're pals, after all- right?"

So, the old man stepped back, swallowed the phlegm in his throat, and shot Vinny in the meatiest part of his rump. Vinny yelped and scattered. The old man knew he had both succeeded and failed: he'd never see mother nor child again, and Vinny, betrayed by his first human friend, would lose any faith he ever had in mankind.

The old man shuffled wearily back to his house. The day had tested him. Training Vinny to trust him had been a vain and dangerous exercise. Betraying his childlike faith sickened him. He thought perhaps he could find some peace sitting on the back porch, reading a good book in his comfortable hard-backed chair, sipping iced spearmint tea amid the reinstated order and tranquility of the gardens whose restoration he had been blueprinting all summer long.

So, he wiped his feet on a mat that could only rid them of dirt and entered his office. There, to the side, stood the teachers' old-school blonde-oak desk with the drawer that had promised him the bee sting he thought, so long ago, would be the answer to his troubles. He pulled it open with a quick jerk and tossed the pistol inside, pushing evil salvation as far away from himself as he could. Then he stumbled to the kitchen sink and tried to scrub the guilt from his hands, but no matter how long he washed, the scent of oil lingered.

The house was quiet and still. In his solitude, he felt the loneliness that had followed the passing of his wife many years before. He remembered sweet Misky, who had remained with him and his children and later, just with him, after the kids had flown to make their own families, inevitably, as he always had known they would. That is the nature of things- that's how living flows and ends. Bliss, then the inescapable conclusion.

Like nausea, despair curdled his gut, crept ratlike up his chest, cramped his neck, blocked his reasoning. Nothing seemed familiar anymore. The house so bare, so silent now- even his memories seemed to have fled it, like heat out a window.

How cheated is man to be given so much only to have it taken away. And how terrible the helpless inescapability of knowing that joy will need to be paid for later by Nature's most cruel lay-away plan, the one that inevitably plants him and his beloved six feet below the ones next in line.

And in the meantime, what could he do? No matter what one plotted, despite our best-laid plans, nothing is a sure bet, nothing comes with a guarantee. You struggle and pat your own back, satisfied with your own genius, and then shoot yourself in the leg.

The old man managed to pour himself a glass of tea, but it tasted sour. He emptied the glass in the sink. Time will heal; time will heal, he chanted- but there was no relief in the moment. The inevitable, inescapable loneliness was all there was. There would be no way out in a solitary garden walk, a binge with a bottle or a pipe, a low gear run in the Spyder.

But oh, if only for a few hours, to sleep it away. To rest, if only he could. How kind the relief would be! Sleep, sleep's the comfort, sleep's the escape he needed.

There was a bottle of long-expired sleeping pills his wife would use sometimes. He found it in the bathroom cabinet and washed down two pills- a double dose. Then he lay down in his bed, exhausted and drained, closed his eyes and waited.

He was at the edge of an open field. Islands of Queen Anne's Lace and wild blue asters dotted the knee-high grass. Butterflies had paired off and whirled in their frenzied love dance. Hungry dragonflies buzzed among gnats like dogfighting biplanes strafing each other. Songbirds sang to their mates and fed among the flowers of the Franklinia tree blooming well out of deer reach.

The air was still but the old man could see a roll to the grass, like the motion of water, as if a steady wind were blowing the leaves. He looked closely. Like a dolphin leaping through waves, he saw a dappled fawn prancing through the flowing grass. And following him, rising and dipping, an equally young but much smaller head of a hurdling pup, her ears flapping, her dripping tongue hanging over her lower lip.

The old man reached in his pocket and found an apple and a cookie. He held one in each hand and whistled a lullaby his wife would sing to their children when they were first born.

The fawn and the puppy saw the old man then; they heard his call. With simple, unrestrained joy they ran to him, eyes glittering, tails, one short, one long, wildly wagging, ecstatic to claim their treats and lick his hands in rapturous gratitude.

Vinny had not left the old man without a parting gift.

Next summer came and the gardens and plantings rebounded. The songbirds still sang, and the old man whistled in response. The butterflies returned to their lovemaking, the dragonflies to their feeding. Harry had become a father, but the disrespectful robins still bullied him when he nibbled his clover. The hummingbirds darted among the flaming orange trumpets clinging to the porch columns, feeding on the nectar as they always had.

But the old man's neighbors noticed something new and unexpected: the old man driving his Spyder with the top down, a standard apricot poodle not yet a year old sitting in the passenger seat, tongue flapping loosely, long shock of hair streaming in the breeze, eyes aglow with contentment and a joy, that, like love, mushrooms when it is freely offered.

During those summer afternoons, after their serious work is done, Asta's head shares the old man's lap with a good mystery book, and each morning she hugs his side as he lugs his pails and pruners. He's teaching her to carry and fetch and she is a bright, willing student and ready assistant. She plays endlessly and demands his participation. Rocks, leaves and sticks are her favorite toys. She's already 60 pounds of hard muscle- a rat tosser by nature and a smoocher by inclination. He can almost forgive her those dead river rats, and the poor snakes she ferrets out and kills. But once, in her mouth, she proudly brought him Harry's baby bunny alive and perfectly unharmed. She hasn't caught a bird in flight yet, as Misky would do- but she will, and release it in the old man's hand for him to set free.

Gene Burshuliak

October, 2023

