

Hubert Hit a Dog

By Harrison M. Starrett

On the point of impact, Hubert felt the dog's death first in his toes. A jolt of quick vibration that shot up his calves in a scurrying panic, leaving a soft tingle in his inner thighs. He wasn't sure if he had even blinked, or if his eyes had actually registered a small blur of black and tan or if that was just an afterimage inserted into his memory by his brain for lack of something more reasonable or efficient. Visual memory is funny like that, a process half-fortified by instinctual speculation. The physiological, though, that's permanent, audited. He'll feel this shaking in his toes for years, even when he's lying perfectly still.

He let his 1990 Chevy Silverado coast about fifty yards after the impact before applying pressure on the brake. It wasn't out of patient cordialness for passersby pretending not to gawk at the fate of man's late best friend, wondering if they truly were friends if this is how they were treated — no, it was a quiet road on a quieter morning. Even the bump of the dog's death had been rather polite, as if it had been embarrassed about dying — it lacked a thin guttural whine or even a surprised yelp. Had Hubert not felt the collision in his toes and then thighs, he may not have even noticed its occurrence at all. But he did, and now he was pulling over on the roadside, not bothering to throw on the hazard lights. A dead dog couldn't be much of a hazard anyway, not as much as a living one.

He pulled to a stop and more or less tumbled out of the vehicle, grunting hoarsely as he thoroughly decimated all of his wife's careful steamwork. With an inconvenience such as this, this early in the morning no less, suit and dry cleaners be damned, even if his was his doting wife. Then again, some degree of doting should not be rewarded — how else could one expect to learn the fullest potential of another's love?

Hubert approached the small heap with caution, turning a one-minute walk into a two-minute crawl. In his head he appeared leisurely, respectfully nonchalant about the whole ordeal, but to the pair of black buzzards circling three-hundred feet above he looked strange and nervous — they mewed with each other in joint frustration, but Hubert didn't hear them, nor had he taken notice of their presence at all. His eyes were fixed on the dog, its body bouncing in rhythm to his heavy steps, giving the sickly illusion that it was stirring, which would mean it was still breathing, which would mean it was still alive. An image of it springing up on him flashed before his eyes — so sudden was the vision that he faltered in his steps and nearly fell. The buzzards laughed, and at this Hubert took notice, squinting between the sun and his sweat to see their winged forms hovering above him slow, methodical, waiting. He quickened his step.

The dog had fallen very courteously on the side of the road. It was splayed out on the hot asphalt right outside the white line, head facing the wide field of grass that Hubert assumed to have been its destination. There was nothing of note in that direction, no houses, no businesses, just an expanse of dull green with some feeble trees to serve as a weak barrier between it and another equally boring piece of land. Maybe there had been a squirrel or a cat, or maybe there was something in the air that his nose couldn't detect, but looking out there he saw nothing, heard nothing, smelled nothing. His complete inability to ascertain the dog's need to run in that direction frustrated Hubert, for Hubert had somewhere to be, somewhere he was needed, somewhere he would undoubtedly be late to. But this dog didn't. It didn't have any real need to be here, to be on this road, *and to especially be hit by my goddamn car, I mean, what the fuck were you doing?* And then he looked back at the mess of a dog, its front paws tangled in its intestines as if they were what had tripped it up in the first place. He quickly looked away, feeling an overwhelming need to spit.

“Oh Jesus.”

And he watched the long grass sway and sigh in the languid breeze.

Then he heard it. His stomach tightened.

“No.”

An abrupt gust of air. A smack of heavy lips. A soft thump and swish. He heard it.

“No.”

He heard it and he told himself he didn't because he didn't. Sure, his ears ignited — his wispy hair would catch fire any moment, he could already smell the pungent smoke. Sure, his skin tugged at his bones, begging for him to turn, please, Hubert, please, turn and see, won't you come and see? But he didn't hear it. He didn't hear a faint scratching. He didn't hear a sputter of heaves. He didn't hear a gross major chord of bodily notes that clearly translated to that four letter word. He didn't — *help* — he didn't hear — *help* — he didn't hear it because he didn't — *help* — *because what the hell am I supposed to do? 'Cause what — HELP*

“The fuck am I supposed to *do*?”

And then he turned. And he saw.

The dog's head was reared toward him, one murky brown eye open like a beached flounder, wide and trained on him, screaming. Its tail jerked against the ground, collecting crumbs of asphalt like ticks. Its belly shook in a simmering seizure, intestines sliding back and forth across their exit as if indecisive. Its ears were pinned back, sticky with blood. Its —

“Oh God.”

Hubert heaved, forcing him to bend over and try to calm his own innards that squirmed in excitement from seeing another's ousted, wanting to join the fray. He took two heavy breaths and wiped the sweat from his brow. The buzzards cackled — they were closer. He didn't need to look up to see that.

Composed as could be, he braved a closer step to the dog. Its tail quickened, its claws scratched. He took a knee and was about to lower his left hand across its cheek until his wedding ring blinked at him in the sun. He paused, strangely nerved by the flash of gold, then pulled the ring off and shoved it in his breast pocket. Then he petted the dog as lightly as he could, almost non-committedly, as if any of these feeble strokes could be the last, because they *were* its last — last rites given by its killer, guilty and shaking. Nonetheless, its brown eye thanked him. Even when Hubert lifted his right heel and settled it firmly atop its matted throat, it stared and it thanked him.

After it was done Hubert fell back on his haunches and returned to watching the leaves of grass wave in the wind. He held the dog's rear right paw in his hand, rubbing his thumb across its leathery pad like a child on his mother — something self-soothing disguised as soothing another, an especially transparent gesture when the other is dead. *Ay, there's the rub*, and Hubert smirked and then remembered the ring in his pocket. Still holding the dog's paw, he pulled out the ring and held it in his open palm. A thick cloud passed over, extinguishing the gold's shine. Then his phone rang. Looking at the time, he was fairly positive who was calling him. He placed the ring on the asphalt beside him and answered the call.

“Yes?”

“Good morning, this is Attorney Reginald Hoover's office. Is this Mr. Hubert Grant speaking?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Great, I'm calling on behalf of Attorney Hoover to see if you still plan to attend your 8:30 AM appointment?”

“Yes I apologize ma'am, I was on my way but ran into, um, some car issues. I may need to reschedule for later today, depending on how long this takes.”

“Completely understandable, Mr. Grant. I will say that Attorney Hoover is nearly fully booked today unless, let's see... yes, it looks like he could see you later this afternoon, maybe 4:15 PM? Does that new time work for you?”

“I... yeah, yeah I believe so. Could I maybe call you back to confirm that time? I need to uh — ”

“Of course, Mr. Grant. Take the time you need.”

“Thank you.”

“Good luck with your car. I absolutely *hate* when I run into problems with mine.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Talk soon.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

She ended the call. Hubert carried on rubbing the dead dog's paw. The golden ring burned on the blacktop beside him. He sighed.

“Oh Charlene.”

He looked down at the limp paw, gave it a squeeze, eyed the trees leaning frail in the distance. Leaves hung sparse on their drooping branches like old forgotten ornaments.

“Oh Charlene, old girl... what are we gonna do?”

A light laugh and a thin smile. He imagined her brown eye smiling, too, under her now closed eyelid. The pair of buzzards landed in the grass thirty feet off to their right.

“This isn’t my first appointment, you know. No... you must’ve known. You’ve always known much more than you’ve let on, haven’t you, Charlene?”

The buzzards preened — their turn to appear lackadaisical. It didn’t fool Hubert either.

“Hard times are a-comin’, Charlene. You can see it anywhere you look.”

He leveled his eyes at the black pair, thought about shouting something, then turned his gaze back to the trees, kept on his rubbing.

“No, I met with him about a month ago. Maybe two, it's uh... it’s hazy, time... the uh, the roll of it has felt lopsided to me, like a boulder too heavy on one side so that it almost rolls in circles but doesn’t... teetering back and forth back and forth in a long sweeping wobbling pattern that yes goes down hill but for how long, you know?”

He made a vague gesture with his left arm to the field before them.

“Nothing but flat land here, though, probably for — ”

The wrinkled hem of his sleeve, freshly adorned with a speckling of carmine, stopped him short.

“Oh... well shit. I’m sorry, old girl.“

He brandished the sleeve in front of him, considering the damage, then dropped his arm beside him atop the now scorching ring only to whip it back away from its sting. It left a semicircle sear on his palm, bright red against his rather opaque skin.

“Hmm.”

He studied the ring then, its bright form contrasting the pitch road cartoon-like, like dropped photoshop missing a watermark.

“I’ll tell you what, Charlene, it’s just that you move too damn fast all the time. I’ve never moved faster than I needed to in this life. Haven’t needed to, haven’t gotten myself mixed up in things that could change that. Nope, I keep it steady, like that grass you see right over there, leanin’ with the wind. That’s it, and that’s all it’s gonna be.”

He nodded in agreement with himself.

“You pepper me. You run me into the ground with your, your *ceaselessness*. I swear, you’ve steamed this shirt alone five times this week. Just because I made one comment that one time that this was my favorite shirt *doesn’t* mean I don’t have other shirts, I wear *other* shirts. I mean good lord, Charlene, you done fixed up my favorite meal for me so many damn times that I don’t know if it’s my favorite at all. And I love steak and potatoes.”

He smacked his lips.

“And I love you. I really do, but sometimes, sometimes all I want is for you to just stop. I’m not gonna love you anymore if you steam my suits, or if you cook my dinners, or if you shine my shoes wash my car cut my hair or massage my feet. I’m gonna love you just the same if you don’t or if you do and that’s that. This is what I got.”

The grim couple meandered a little closer, sashaying between the grass.

“It’s been different since the kids have gone. I know it has. Empty nest and all that. We had them so young, didn’t we, Charlene? So very young, and now it’s their turn to be young like we were and it’s our turn to... well that’s it, ain’t it? I just don’t know.”

A whiff of iron tickled his nose hairs — he snorted, looked down the empty road, a straight black line cut across the fields just for him, incomplete without him, younger than his oldest by only a couple years.

“We really do live in nowhere, don’t we... I think it did something to you, made you clingy, made you wanna hold on tight. And I can’t have that. I can’t live with you under my feet. I might move slow but I don’t stop, not for nothin’.”

Hubert let go of the paw and struggled to rise to his feet, stretching past several aches with a long groan. He placed his hands on his hips and arched backward to enjoy two cracks in his back, then wiped his dirty hands against his sides.

“I do love you, Charlene.”

He pulled his phone out and made the call. It rang once.

“Attorney Hoover’s office?”

“Yes, ma’am, this is Hubert Grant. I’m just calling to confirm my 4:15 PM appointment.”

“Yes, Mr. Grant, it’s actually great timing that you called, the appointment that was supposed to follow yours just canceled, so if you’re available now you can come by? Or you can keep your 4:15 PM.”

“You know what, now is perfect. I’ll be there shortly.”

“Lovely! See you soon.”

And without a final glance at the dead dog, he ended the call and began his walk back to his idle car, his stride now firm and decisive. He reached the ajar door in half the time and settled into his seat, checking his mirrors in one perfunctory movement. Then he was driving once again, past the buzzards, past the dog, past the fields of grass that stirred ever so slightly in his wake. It was twelve miles down, about ten minutes later, when Hubert caught sight of his naked left hand, white knuckles held tight against the thin steering wheel. The gold ring sat forgotten on the road in a quiet heat, equally unnoticed by the pair of buzzards as they began to have their way with the dead dog's flesh.