

JACK
STERN
AND THE
WHISKEY
TANGENT

ADAM FULLER



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DEDICATED TO

moms & miatas
dads & danes

THE PART WITH THE QUOTES

Always carry a flagon of whiskey in case of snakebite. Furthermore, always carry a small snake. – W.C. Fields

*But the poor Dog, in life the firmest friend,
The first to welcome, foremost to defend,
Whose honest heart is still his Masters own,
Who labours, fights, lives, breathes for him alone,
Unhonour'd falls, unnotic'd all his worth,
Deny'd in heaven the Soul he held on earth.
While man, vain insect! hopes to be forgiven,
And claims himself a sole exclusive heaven.*

– Excerpt inscribed on Boatswain's tomb, larger than Lord Byron's, who wrote the epitaph to his dog, a newfoundland, in 1808.

FUN FACT

In 1939 a Great Dane was officially enlisted in the Royal Navy. “Just Nuisance” earned his name by lying at the top of the gangplanks at a South African dockyard.

Nuisance generally stayed ashore, and his record shows that he went AWOL, lost his collar, and was found sleeping in a petty officer’s bed. But his faithfulness eventually earned him a promotion to Able Seaman, and he was even “wed” to another Great Dane, producing five puppies that were auctioned off in Cape Town.

He was discharged in 1944 and buried later that year with full naval honors, and he’s remembered today with an annual parade of Great Danes in Simon’s Town.

– Greg Ross of futilitycloset.com

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1

THE BLACK NOTEBOOK

“You know, Jack Stern, you have a Great Dane next to you.”

“It’s even wearing a seatbelt for you, Amash,” Jack Stern replied, from the driver’s seat of his car. He opted to forego the sheriff label, despite the large lettering on the car that had appeared, red and blue emergency lights flashing, in his rearview mirror just moments ago. The driver of that vehicle, Amash, stood to Jack Stern’s left as if about to give him a speeding ticket. To his right in the passenger seat sat a large dog. He had buckled it in, more to keep it from interfering with his driving than for its own comfort or safety. The long-legged thing had woken from its induced sopor less than an hour ago, having survived unconscious self-suffocation from its thick and sagging jowls.

Neither man spoke. Their recent phone call had been the only words spoken

between them for years, and it had ended within seven minutes. The sun moved closer to the tree tops. Both Amash and Jack Stern, not knowing what else to do or say, looked at the dog. It was sitting upright, its posture humanlike and its expression blank. It tilted its head, and not for the first time did Jack Stern realize the creature in the seat next to him sat as high as he did. He had been compiling a list of facts about the animal and was reminded of the second one: Great Danes are big. Loading the unconscious creature into his Miata had been like moving a body, a dead and drooly body.

Sensing the attention, the dog's panting stiffened. Two large canine eyes met four human ones, and soon all six were locked in a visual stand-off. Jack Stern, not unfamiliar with the more lethal variants, found himself squinting. He heard gravel crunch beneath Amash's boots, the man was shifting his weight, settling in for a protracted bout. Towards his other periphery, he saw the dog's head cocked sideways, large formless ears finding a linear shape as if a puppeteer

was pulling taut on the strings, giving the creature a sleek but dimwitted expression. A string of drool escaped its mouth and was making a run for it. Amash spit. The string became a rope.

Jack Stern turned off the car, crossed his arms, and waited. His time with the dog, though brief, had been enough to know it wasn't going to lose this either. Hell, it was probably happy to sit and stare at everyone else staring at it. It was a damn dog. The rope of drool vibrated with each laborious pant and crept closer to the car's laser-measured rubber floor mats.

Minutes passed. The sun brushed the leaves of the tallest tree.

Amash exhaled, losing. "You know, I thought I had the wrong car. I'm sure somewhere else someone else drives a red Miata, but not around here, and not with a Dane riding shotgun. Right on time, too." He played with his chin while he waited for a response, but Jack Stern said nothing. The less he said about the dog, the fewer questions Amash would ask, and the better it

would be for both — *all three*, he reminded himself, hearing the dog panting nearby — of them. He didn’t have the answer anyway. It had been an impulsive decision, taking the dog, and one he would have regretted if he hadn’t struck that emotion from his personality long ago. “I don’t remember you being much of a dog person,” Amash added.

“I’m not. It just woke up. It’s—”

“But then it all made sense, because things with you never do,” Amash said over him. “You’re trying too hard, Jack Stern, but the world wonders, to what end?”

The dog barked. Head and ears still cocked, body leaning backwards; it hadn’t realized the game was over. Amash flinched, then chuckled. “You could train that thing to be a horn! Someone tailgating you? Have the dog bark at them a few times. You’d finally get some respect on the road.” Amash punctuated his sentence by kicking the driver’s side front tire.

Jack Stern, legs aching and back sore, refocused the conversation. “You said you wanted help. The dog has a part in me

helping you. Your timing couldn't have been better, at least for me. Yours too, it sounds like. We always had good timing, didn't we?" It was Amash's turn to not respond. "What's the deal?" Jack Stern asked.

"Deal?" Amash asked, grinning. "Why didn't you say so?" He leaned forwards, boot on tire, elbow on knee, and a setting sun behind him. Jack Stern could see Amash's empty holster and shook his head. While Amash believed guns complicated things, Jack Stern felt they simplified them. He hadn't seen Amash's Smith & Wesson 9mm since...

The dog barked again, louder. Its brain, still trapped in the earlier stand-off, had further pulled its posture to a cartoonish extreme. A modest shove would send the animal sprawling, boney ass and scrawny tail, over the door. Intelligence had not yet made it to his list of Great Dane facts, and seeing the dog now, Jack Stern doubted it ever would. *Maybe we've bred it out of them*, he considered. The dog looked cramped and

uneasy, so he unclasped the seat belt and watched its long legs slip on the leather as it fell into the seat. From its large mouth emerged a larger tongue that licked Jack Stern's right forearm. He regarded the slobbery mess netted in his arm hair. Great Dane facts four and five: loud barks and buckets of drool. He shook his arm towards Amash, who dodged left as the stringy remnants flew past him and hit the pavement like fat rain drops.

“Not a dog person, you were saying?”

“Not a dog person,” Jack Stern answered, shaking his arm again.

Amash dodged again. “I won’t even bother with the follow-up, huh.”

Jack Stern snorted. “Rather have a dead dog than a living cat.”

“Now that, Jack Stern, that is why you have trouble keeping friends. It’s also why...” Amash stopped himself. It had been a long stretch since he had seen the man in the Miata, and he didn’t want him to drive away just yet. *Not before he helps you*, Amash reminded himself. *He owes you, and don’t you*

forget. He changed his posture alongside his conversational approach. “You know, a cat’s purr, I was reading, is physiologically beneficial. Literally good for you. Your joints respond to the frequency. It makes them heal better. Quicker? Don’t ask me the science of it.” Amash tilted his head at the dog, who mirrored the gesture. “Bit quieter too, I reckon, is a cat’s meow.”

“And what does the cat get?”

Amash rivaled the dog’s earlier bark with a loud and singular laugh. “And here I thought it was a new Jack Stern that has a dog — a dog’s dog — next to him. I would have asked for its name but it...”

“Doesn’t have one,” they both said at the same time. Amash’s smirk became a smile. Jack Stern’s grimace a frown.

“So, what’s new? What. Is. New?” Amash asked, keeping the smirk-turned-smile on his face.

Jack Stern brought his palm past his eyes and over his face. He looked up. Amash was still there, waiting. Eight years had not been enough to dampen his disdain at Amash’s

more annoying habits. One being that he talked too much. If you asked him, as Jack Stern had once mistakenly done, Amash would say his tongue bent towards his loquacious cheek, which explained his lopsided smile. And if you didn't stop him then, he would quick-draw from his wallet faster than any gunslinger a roll of family pictures and begin an index-finger led genetics lesson tracing those in his lineage who shared his asymmetric affliction. Jack Stern had a different theory. It wasn't genetics. Instead, someone had punched the man, a right-hook to the cheek, just as the roll of family pictures touched the ground. Seeing Amash's curled and smirking lips now, Jack Stern realized he desperately wanted to meet whoever had landed that punch. Shake their hand. Buy them a drink.

More annoyingly, Amash had the uncanny instinct to orient himself in front of the dominant light source. Jack Stern remembered the first time he saw Amash, decades ago. A battered and bleeding jaw. A pounding and paralyzing headache. A

swinging interrogation light. And just in front, Amash's blurry and perpetually balding head asking questions. He was a mean guy — *or used to be*, Jack Stern thought — and you misjudged his amicable country-wide smile and empty holster at your own expense. Jack Stern had seen Amash take down men twice his size, and not only by talking them to death. He looked at the sky and imagined Amash as a fighter pilot, roaring down upon you from the blinding sunlight above, twenty-millimeter cannon rounds carving a path forward, puncturing your fuselage, clipping your wings, and sending you back down to Earth with just enough time to wonder how you lost sight of him in the first place.

As if on cue, the sun punched through a break in the tree cover and shone brightly behind Amash, causing his shadow to darken the car's modest cabin. Jack Stern felt a chill as the world became a blurry and binary thing divided by Amash's silhouette. Behind it, trees and sky congealed into a nondescript mass of green and blue. And in front of it the

silhouette waited, its smirk somehow smirkier.

“What’s new is you called me asking for help with a small thing,” Jack Stern answered.

“I remember that like it was yesterday,” the Amash-silhouette said. “Oh! It was.”

Jack Stern watched the silhouette reach into its pocket and pull out a familiar black notebook. It was inevitable, and one of the two reasons he was here. The other sat next to him, one-hundred-and-eighty pounds of tongue, tail, torso, ears, and drool. *Both of those reasons are on you*, he reminded himself, looking at the dog. He waited. He wanted a drink. He needed to think about what to do next. He needed to stash the dog somewhere. He wanted Amash to get to the point. But he knew that the fastest way forward was to not interrupt Amash’s performance.

The silhouette opened the notebook.
“How many miles anyways?”

Eyes closed, Jack Stern did the math.
From when he had kidnapped — *dognapped*,

he corrected himself — the dog to when his phone had rung, Amash’s name on the display. *At least it wasn’t Cartier*, he thought. *Maybe the new boss has bigger things on his mind.* “I figure just over five,” he answered, checking his phone. It had only one bar of service. There were no new messages.

“Five hundred?” Amash double-checked, not needing the answer. He could see the long day in Jack Stern’s squinty countenance. Lines, themselves like highways, crisscrossed the man’s scalp, underscored his eyes, and narrowed his cheeks.

Jack Stern waited. Almost as grating as the empty holster and ecliptic posturing was Amash’s whistle. A low and guttural thing that never changed tone as it went to its slow, sputtering, and pitiful end. He assumed the hypothetical punch to the man’s face had a part in this, too. He opened his eyes to confirm his whistle suspicion, watching Amash flip through his notebook, each page slower and longer than the last. Amash puckered his lips. Jack Stern prepared for the worst.

There it was. And there it died. Even the dog looked concerned. It whined, large eyes begging Jack Stern to do something. He weighed the pros and cons of bringing symmetry to Amash's face, but not for the dog's sake. They could run this rigmarole after he parked the car somewhere, after he sat his ass in a chair, and after he drank something warm and alcoholic.

"How many of those today?" Amash asked, successfully turning yet another page. The sun dropped further behind the trees that lined the road, themselves forming a canyon whose sunlight spattered green walls now turned darker, taller, and closer, pushing the men together.

"Let's say all five," Jack Stern said, folding his arms across his chest.

"Long day. Legs cramping yet?"

Amash began turning the pages faster. "Alright, let's get to it. That attempted assassination in Atlanta, that was a mess." Another page turned. "The Florida fiasco, one of my favorites, when I pulled you from the swamp. I should have left you to the

gators.” Amash stared at Jack Stern and not his notebook, he was reading the pages from memory. “Here’s consulting for you in Kitt Peak, when I learned you are entirely ignorant of things both microscopically smaller and astronomically bigger than you. This page is that computer thing, which I still don’t understand, but we somehow solved. And here’s the theater homicides. Lots of bodies, that one. Lots of wigs, too. Oh—” Amash twice tapped his finger in his notebook “—and here’s Kansas City, when you burned my bag of money.”

The two men engaged in another visual stand-off, this one much more real. Jack Stern had wondered if Amash would mention the money. *This is a waste of time*, he thought. He turned the keys, sending sparks to the Miata’s ignition coils. The engine revved. His seat vibrated beneath him, and he shifted to first gear still holding the clutch. The dog looked at him, ears drooped, a desperate expression on its face. Jack Stern ignored it. He could use Amash’s help, but did he need it? Was it worth the five-

hundred miles and Amash's petty theatrics? He resigned himself to the answer. He still didn't know why the dog was important, but he knew that it was, and he knew the best decision for him was to find someone he could trust to watch it for a few days, even if that person was Amash, stirring shit long ago petrified. If the man was holding a day's grudge for every dollar burned, there were thousands of years yet to go. Jack Stern just needed to first make due on a favor or two he owed Amash. Amash, who had promised over the phone that it was an easy one, that it was a 'small page from a big book.'

Hearing it at the time, Jack Stern had had his doubts. But here he was. He released the clutch and waited.

Amash's smile glinted brighter than the sun, now lost behind the tangle of branches and leaves that bordered the freeway.

"Kansas City," he repeated. "That one spans more than one page. It's a chapter by itself! Don't worry, that hasn't come due yet."

Amash flipped to the beginning of his notebook, tore a different page, crumpled it,

and tossed it at Jack Stern's chest. It hit him like a twenty-millimeter cannon round, and he was no less annoyed for expecting it. He turned off the car. The dog, confused by the on-again, off-again of the engine, found clarity in the crumpled wad of paper resting, Jack Stern realized, dangerously in his lap. Ribbons of meat and tendons began to show under the shiny, dark blue fur. He grabbed the ball of paper before the dog lunged for it and hid it in his pocket, pushing away the dog's wet snout as it tried to sniff out the case of the missing paper ball.

“I’m waiting for the part where you explain what that presumably gentle giant has to do with it. And with me?” Amash asked.

Jack Stern looked at the dog, its entire body focused on the pocket concealing the wad of paper. He cast his eyes back to Amash, hoping to hook him.

“No,” Amash said, answering his own question. “No. Not for all the pages in all the notebooks in all the worlds will I be your dog-sitter.”

“I will,” Jack Stern said and inhaled. “I’ll owe you.” He exhaled.

“Is that how it works? Quid pro quo quid? What good will more Jack Stern favors do me?” Amash asked. He held up the notebook. Its edges glowed in the sunlight like a religious artifact. “It’s supposed to get thinner, not wider.” He opened it again, magicked a pen in his hand, and began to scribble.

“If that’s a ticket, Amash, I will put in another five hundred miles today,” Jack Stern said. “Expect I’ll pass a few ‘Carol Spitz for Sheriff’ signs on the way out of your town. If it’s still yours?”

“And pick them up for me, would you.” Amash tore the page, folded it, and tucked it under the windshield wiper. “It should be a ticket. You wouldn’t pay it, but I’d have half a mind to arrest you just to watch that smugness count away every minute of what would be a very long day helping Joan solve her crossword puzzles. Eighteen across, three down, seven letters. ‘Jack Stern’ is the clue.” Amash guffawed. “You know, one day you

will find me under those effervescent and pearly gates with my notebook thicker than it is now, I reckon, still waiting for you to settle up. We can weigh it on that great scale in the sky waiting for all of us, next to how many bullet casings on the ground? How many bodies beneath the dirt?” Amash slapped his forehead. “What am I saying? You’ll be waiting for me.”

Jack Stern kept his eyes on the paper beneath his windshield wiper. “You’re not that old, Amash, are you? I hear retirement is peaceful, but lonely. There’s your second quid.” He gave Amash a cautious glance. “How are your joints feeling these days?”

“You haven’t even gotten to the first quid yet. If I wanted a dog, Jack Stern, I’d have myself a dog. Retirement is not about adding more things to take care of, despite what kids these days think.” He looked at the Great Dane, still guarding Jack Stern’s pocket for escapee paper wads. “Especially big things. And it’s cats, not dogs. Cats help joints.” A large truck passed and sent its shadow racing past them. The dog barked.

“What’s five hundred miles in dog time, anyways?” Amash asked, checking his watch.

Finally, Jack Stern thought. “I’m not the one standing around,” he said, reaching to grab the second scrap of paper. The dog watched closely, tilting its head. Jack Stern raised a lazy elbow in case it wanted to make a game of it and palmed the scrap before it could react.

“Point taken,” Amash said. “Not the best place to explain. It’s a small and quick thing for a man of your talents. The Bluffman’s Bar, twenty miles that-a-way. When you stop going uphill, you’ll see a log. It’s hard to miss. I’ll be there before you finish your first drink. And maybe, Jack Stern, make it a coffee.”

Amash began walking back to his vehicle, taking his shadow with him. Sunlight and warmth filled the car’s cabin. “Jack Stern, consultant extraordinaire, indebted man of action—” he turned and pointed “—dog person! What a hoot. A hoot!”

Jack Stern watched Amash heave his body into his truck. How he had ever worked

with someone who used the word hoot he would never know. Some mysteries you didn't solve. He turned on the car and shifted into first gear. The dog slouched into a whining puddle of legs and ears, resigning itself to the small seat, and closed its eyes. "I think he liked you."

Holding the clutch, he read the piece of paper in his hand. *Dog Sitting. One week, if solved tonight!* He grinned and exchanged it with the first one from his pocket. The dog didn't notice. In black ink: 'Impromptu and inconvenient rental of 1994 Ranger.' And in purple ink next to it was: 'Returned inoperable, with seventeen bullet holes.' It went back into his pocket.

And Jack Stern remembered many years ago Amash, like an impotent bureaucrat in the middle of a long day, angrily circling that bit twice. At the bottom was a familiar signature, a large *J* and *S* connected by a small illegible scribble of letters between them. *Good*, he thought, releasing the clutch and pressing the gas pedal. In the list of favors he owed Amash, this was a small page.

The trees reclaimed their shape, but only for a second, before blurring again as Jack Stern's Miata took him and the dog, sixty-five miles-per-hour, toward the case-equivalent of a used '94 Ford Ranger rental.

2

IF YOU SAY SO

Brick-built, box-shaped, and boring, the bar looked older than the river it interrupted. Jack Stern had followed the Missouri, and its eighty some-thousand cubic feet of water a second, for half an hour before seeing a massive tree log engraved with the name, ‘Bluffman’s, est. 1946.’

He turned into a small gravel parking lot demarcated by weeds and mud as the last of the day’s visible light completed its five-hundred-second journey to Earth. There were four trucks of such varying age and manufacture that Jack Stern felt he had driven his Miata into the wrong section of a car museum. His phone vibrated in his pocket. He hesitated, shifted to neutral, glanced at the screen, and frowned upon seeing that a mandatory and silent update must have reset the privacy settings, despite AIC’s tech guru Jonesy’s promises.

Of all of Jack Stern’s co-workers at AIC,

the off-budget government agency that employed him, he tolerated Jonesy the most, but this popup was undoubtedly a setback to the man's reputation. A notification welcomed him to the Bluffman's Bar. According to a Colin from West Palm Beach, whose review filled half the screen, the bar was 'a quaint place to drink like, feel like, and be treated like a local, 2.5/5 stars.' Staring at the three trucks, Jack Stern wondered what kind of local treatment he could expect. He doubted his chances of entering the bar unnoticed, especially with the large canine companion at his side.

The dog roused itself, its body unfurling to a bigger size than Jack Stern remembered after the hours it had spent curled and unconscious in his Miata, and jumped — no, stepped — over the passenger door. He grabbed the leash only to watch the dog lazily stretch forward, its head disappearing from view just as its butt and whip of a tail shot skyward.

Jack Stern looped the leash to the stick shift and, dog trotting alongside, gently

accelerated the car to a spot adjacent to the three trucks. “Dog walkers are overpaid,” he joked. He pulled the keys, thought about bringing his pistol, remembered Colin’s review, and decided to keep it locked in the dash. Leash secured in his hand, Jack Stern exited the vehicle and was relieved to hear the same bones popping and the usual muscles protesting. He stretched and rested against the Miata, waiting to see if his body would hoist high any white flags of surrender. It didn’t, but the respite was brief. The leash turned taut and soon his recuperating and tired body was pulled around the lot by a dog with the curiosity of a puppy a fifth its size. It was easier to let it happen. He changed his mind about dog walkers.

The day had turned humid in its waning hours and in the dusky twilight fireflies flashed like broken Christmas lights. It was quiet. Bluffman’s was either empty or built to keep the country gossip and happenings safe inside. Jack Stern assumed the latter. People wanted a safe place to talk; a window

left open, however, would let the wind and river carry even the heaviest of gossip to unwanted ears, eagerly listening as they sat on their porch. It was easy to imagine their conversation.

“There’s that Jack Stern again. I heard he stole a dog,” one would say, rocking in their chair.

“That’s funny, some fellas from out of town came around yesterday asking about a missing dog,” another would respond, between sips of their coffee. “They had guns.”

“Seems to me a man has every right to get back his dog, I reckon. Ain’t our business to interfere, but maybe it’s moral to point them along.”

“Who steals another man’s dog?”

The dog began to snap at the fireflies, jerking the leash out of Jack Stern’s hand. “Dammit,” he said, trying to catch it under his boot like a wild snake. He gave up and watched the dog gulp another glowing bug, making it two for five in its firefly hunt. Between his crunchy footsteps and the dog’s

snapping, he could just hear the nearby river as it etched itself a deeper and wider path in the rock. He felt old. He felt thirsty.

The dog didn't seem interested in running away. In fact, it kept pausing its firefly game to circle back to him, as if proud. Three for eight now. *Not a good record*, Jack Stern thought, wondering if he could shoot one of the glowing bugs. His lax attitude towards the leash made him realize a part of him wanted the dog to disappear itself behind a tree, and worse, envied it its ability to do so. "Why'd you take the damn thing?" he muttered to himself, knowing the answer. *Because it's important. And you need to find out why.*

Concussed by the long drive, and maybe that earlier punch to the head from when he had taken the dog, he numbly considered following the river's example. Go around the bar, put it in his rearview. Keep momentum. *Call Amash, tell him I've lost the dog*, he reasoned. 'It escaped the leash, and I need you to find it. I don't have time. Dangerous people are coming for it, but I'm going to

get to them first. It should be easy, just look for the glowing stomach.' *And expect your '94 Ranger favor-receipt in the mail.*

To Jack Stern, nothing was more important than momentum. And he had trouble imagining something slowing him down more than the near two-hundred-pound animal now lumbering around the parking lot. *Five for eleven*, he counted.

He had been assigned as one of a two-man team to a surveil op by Cartier, the new foul-mouthed and by-the-book boss of AIC, on the condition that Jack Stern and fellow agent Gideon "work together like a pair of balls, and we'll get that bastard Amiese." Cartier hadn't used the word 'get,' and had also colorfully emphasized the plural part of 'balls' alongside a not vague threat to Jack Stern's continued employment. But when Jack Stern had saw Amiese's men wrangle the dog, something in him, like an activated sleeper agent, had compelled him to step in and take it. So, he did.

A younger Jack Stern would be tolerating Cartier's debriefing in one of AIC's

numerous conference rooms, each as bland and forgettable as the agency's budget, rather than hiding five-hundred miles away in a rural bar. The younger him would have let Amiese dissect the damn thing, gained intel within Cartier's operational parameters and then returned, mission complete, ready to debrief suit and tie after suit and tie and then walk down that long hallway to the next gray room and do it again. But the Jack Stern standing outside in the parking lot now wasn't in a conference room and didn't have a suit and tie for company, instead it was four-legged and busying itself with the flashing bugs. He knew there was no getting off the ride once you were on it, and he had put himself on it seven hours ago with a tranquilized and drooly dog riding shotgun.

He wanted to buy himself a drink, give himself time to think about what to do next, how to do it, and maybe earn a tally in the win column by helping Amash. The younger Jack Stern agreed. Cartier and all of AIC could sit on hold a while longer. He did not consider the notion that he was the one on

hold.

Jack Stern thought of the second piece of paper Amash had given him. His longtime acquaintance had a playful personality, but would still adhere to his own arbitrary rules. *I have until midnight then*, he thought, looking at Bluffman's Bar. Its simple structure protruding ominously into the twilight sky like a stubby clock hand. The sooner he helped Amash, the sooner Amash would take the dog, and the easier the coming days would be.

Amiese, the man he had saved-stolen the dog from, was always tinkering with genetics and technology. Cartier wanted to know the usual whats, whys, and hows, but Jack Stern knew that Amiese just wanted the same thing everyone wanted. More money. More power. More influence. More time. People just wanted more. (Jack Stern was no different, he wanted more to drink.) It didn't matter what machinations they employed to get there, even if they came in the form of a dog, or if he understood why. He would do with Amiese what he did with everyone and

everything: Start at the finish line and walk the race backwards, meet the man halfway.

The dog's snout was leading its tail and everything in between circuitously around the lot, ignoring the fireflies that now mocked its earlier ineptitude. First a tree, then a truck, then another truck, then near Jack Stern and his Miata until he shooed it away to another truck. The dog squatted.

"No, no, bad. Bad..." He stopped. He could feel the hours of driving in his bladder, too. He added big doggy bags to the sixth bullet on his list of Great Dane facts. Come to think on it, that's how his investigations ended sometimes, too. *Cartier would certainly agree*, he thought, checking his phone again. There wasn't a signal. He remembered the earlier review prompt and wondered if marketing companies hadn't got the technological edge over everyone else, including those unbudgeted but well-funded government agencies like AIC that often employed him.

The door to Bluffman's swung open. A rectangle of yellow light cut an outline

against the softer glow of the dying day, and Jack Stern saw emerge within it a figure with long hair. The outline resolved itself to be a woman holding two beers in one hand and the door in the other. A half-step outside, leg raised, she pirouetted to face the inside of the bar. “The only thing historical is your ass!” She let the door emphasize her point. It slammed shut, sealing those inside with her reverberating words. She had surprised the dog, which stood still, and Jack Stern capitalized on the opportunity. He lunged forward and trapped the leash under his boot. The dog barked. Jack Stern grabbed its nape, feeling stupid to have ever let it off the leash, but happy to have it now in his grasp. By himself was one thing, but he wasn’t sure if he could trust the dog around strangers. It was still an animal. He dug his fingers deeper into its skin.

“Oh!” the woman said, startled and turning to face the noise. “Who are you?” Jack Stern wasn’t sure if she was talking to him or the dog. She approached fast, her long legs covering the distance fast. “What a

dog you are! Why, you look..." She trailed her words and mimicked the dog, now sitting on its haunches, by squatting and extending her hands, fingers still encircled around the neck of the two beer bottles.

"Let me see you. Can I pet her? Come on girl, c'mere. Oh, you are gorgeous!" Some beer spilled on the dog but it didn't notice, its priorities were elsewhere.

"Just watching it for now," Jack Stern said, the universal disclaimer of dog-sitters, dog-owners, and those like him residing between the two. Its demeanor was decidedly not dangerous, puppy-like in all but size and mass. He loosened the leash. The dog galloped forward, covering the few feet between it and the woman in one eager stride. He pulled on the leash, but the woman laughed his effort away. The dog was sitting, its tail brooming gravel left and right. "Haven't seen it around people much," Jack Stern nonetheless cautioned. "But be lucky you're not a firefly."

She looked up at him. Her hands still buried somewhere in the animal's folds of

skin and fur, the two beer bottles clinking like wind chimes. “Ha! I’m not, but a few folks might say I have some fire in me.” She kept petting the dog, managing to avoid most of its licks. “I never saw the use for small dogs. Toys! A dog isn’t a toy.”

“Can’t say I see the use for big ones, either.”

The woman gave that comment some thought. It didn’t take her long. “She’s not yours?”

“More of a stray, but I’m looking out for the owner,” he said, blending the truth. The past owner was no doubt looking for him. *How long until they think to check with Amash,* he wondered. It was a gamble that Jack Stern’s near decade split from working with Amash would buffer the now small-town sheriff from anyone who might come looking for the dog after Jack Stern left. *It won’t matter if I’m able to get to them first,* he decided.

“They don’t live long, do they?”

“If you say so.”

“What’s it to them? They won’t know

what they're missing. Neither will we. All those cat-lovers don't know either. Cats! Have you ever tried to get cat piss out of your shoes?" The woman moved her hands from the dog's neck and shoulders to the elongated torso, petting its sides and back. The dog stood still as a statue, barely daring to breathe, concentrating its entire walnut-sized brain on not interrupting her affection. Even its tail had stopped. Jack Stern watched it risk a half-neuron to turn its unblinking eyes toward him. He couldn't tell if it was asking permission or gloating. *Gloating, definitely gloating*, he decided.

The woman sipped one of her beers. "I've always had one you know. Always smaller than this, but sometimes black, sometimes golden, and one time with only three legs, but I've always had one." She stood and the dog rolled onto its back, trying to entice her to pet it more. "Cut from the same heavenly cloth, dogs are."

"If you say so," Jack Stern agreed. "But not cats?"

"Hell no, not cats! Infidelitous things, like

men. You can always trust a dog. Well, most of them, most of the time. Some people never give them a chance, but they're always willing to give you as many as needed. We could learn a thing or two from them. What can you learn from a cat? Think about it. Would the world be better with cats running the show or dogs?" She saw his expression. "I mean it."

"If you say so. I wouldn't know. Neither?" he guessed.

She looked at him, bottle half-raised to her mouth. "You sure don't seem a smart fella, but I can taste a hint of the stubbornness." She drank then spat. "Trust me you, it doesn't taste good."

"I'd say you know more about dogs than people."

She laughed, spraying beer spittle. "The sheriff said you were a smart-ass. Nice to meet the ass. But when's the smart part saying hi? You never had a dog growing up?"

Jack Stern tried to remember the closest he had come to pet ownership. His memory

settled on a uniquely unhelpful and recalcitrant K-9 who mistook him for a suspect during a case in Florida. There were scars on his knee. He wondered when Amash would arrive so the man could explain his gossiping. It was not, Jack Stern thought, too farfetched to assume some aspect of his reputation preceded him. He was confident, however, that it was in circles smaller and more dangerous than those which this woman inhabited. *Amash knows better*, he thought, shaking his head. The woman took it as his answer.

“I mean, you’ve gotta be him. We don’t get tourists this time of year.” She looked back at the bar. “At least not yet. And George closes the bar on Mondays.”

“I’ve got to be who? Amash said what?”

“Whom, I think.” She flourished her arms, then directed her thumb behind her towards the bar. “The great dick-tective. He told me not to tell the others, but why else would he ask us here. Even they can figure that out. Maybe.” Jack Stern had been through less appraising eyes than hers while

being interrogated but held her gaze. The dog watched her arms, hoping her movements portended a future with more petting. “No, you’re him,” she decided.

“If you—” He started, repetitively.

“Say so,” she finished, rolling her eyes. “He wasn’t lying about the car, was he? Looks like a dog toy to me. He didn’t mention this great blue beaut of a dog though. Did he now? Did he now?” She asked the dog in a low-pitched voice while bending over to pet its belly. Jack Stern had to shuffle aside to avoid the wagging tail lashing his ankle.

Spontaneous was his decision earlier to drive and help Amash, and annoyed was his mood right now. He didn’t like being bandied about. He inhaled a deep and calming breath, held it, then exhaled. “When did Amash mention me, again?”

“Does it matter? Whiskey is gone. The drink went for a drink. Sounds like they did, too.” She straightened herself and ran her free hand through her hair, then held the back of her neck. It didn’t take a detective to

know she was irritated or on the cusp thereof. “I needed a good reason to drive here on a weeknight and Amash gave me *you*. So far, it hasn’t been worth it. Well, except for her,” she said, smiling.

“Amash wants me to find stolen whiskey?” He caught himself, processing her drink went for a drink comment, and tried again. “To find drowned whiskey thieves?”

“And we’re all here on a Monday. You think he’d mention your dog.” She shook her head. “A Monday!”

“It’s not my dog,” he corrected. She looked at him as if he were a child. “Stolen booze then? Missing persons? Dead bodies?”

“Maybe. Do the deadbeats inside count?”
He couldn’t help himself. “If you say so.”

She rolled her eyes, finished one of her two bottles, and dropped it near her feet. The dog retrieved it and held it in its mouth. “Shame on me. Good girl,” she said, petting it as she grabbed the bottle, not minding the slobber now encasing it. “I’m going for a piss. Been watering the same tree some thirty years now and got no plans of stopping for

you, the sheriff, any other man, or what they got swinging between their legs.” She walked towards the weeds bordering the parking lot.

“Amash is on the way,” Jack Stern reminded the retreating figure.

“No shit, Sherlock. Maybe by then you’ll have figured out George stole his own damn whiskey,” she answered. “Who cares how?”

“How many deadbeats are inside?” he asked, but she ignored or didn’t hear him. He heard her walk over gravel, grass, what sounded like a thrown bottle landing among many others, and then nothing but the buzz of insects and the faint rush of water. He walked to the entrance of the bar, nearly stepping on the dog as it zigged and zagged in front of him. He had only one question in his mind: *Did the bar have any whiskey that wasn’t stolen?*

Ignoring a CLOSED sign hanging askew from the handle, Jack Stern opened the door. A wall of thick yellow light wrapped itself around him. It felt comfortable. He stepped inside and, despite its size, forgot about the

dog next to him. The door closed behind him, so he didn't see it vacuum away the yellow light spilled on the deck.

Bluffman's was a sparse and dimly lit place. Old, yellow bulbs democratized himself and the three other people at the bar with the same jaundiced pallor. They sat on stools staring at shelves with neatly placed bottles of booze and a sign claiming that 'it's always happy hour somewhere else, but not here, you cheap bastard.' Aside from a shiny antique register and a modest selection of beer taps, nothing more caught Jack Stern's eye. The uniform and simple aesthetic contrasted with tables and chairs, motley in style and haphazard in placement, that littered the customer area. It felt like a home owned by several people, as if the bar's patrons had been forced to bring their own furniture and then abandon it before stumbling back home at the end of a long night's work drinking. Against the far wall, a slice from a tree served as a dartboard, and Jack Stern idly wondered how many years separated the rings in the bulls-eye from the

double twenty, when someone had seen the tree and decided ‘better to cut that down.’ The three men at the bar turned to face the newcomer.

Outside, the Missouri River nibbled its way through sandstone and geology. Inside, conversation hushed to whispers and then to nothing at all. “We’re closed to humans. And dogs,” someone said, appearing from a hallway near the dartboard. *Bartender*, Jack Stern decided. The man patted his hands on his thighs leaving wet imprints. “Private event,” he explained as he made his way behind the bar.

Jack Stern looked at the bartender, then at the three men. Despite being different sizes, each man looked similar in style. They wore long-sleeved shirts tucked inside a belt and rolled to their elbows. Below that, muddied jeans and identical boots looked as much a natural part of them as the whiskey glasses in their calloused hands. Paunchy and sinewy frames showed them as veterans of long days working longer hours outside. There was, he thought, a decided lack of

spurs and six-shooters. He had walked into a time capsule, long ago buried and long ago forgotten. The kind of place that never bothered to replace the broken gears in a clock. He didn't see one on the walls. It was a tempting place for refuge, but he knew that his problems would follow him into the future, compounded with interest, and dig him up. He knew that they'd bring extra fists for the punching and feet for the kicking. Cut down a tree right now and label the outside ring "Jack Stern Absconds with Dog." He just wanted a drink first.

"Amash — Sheriff Amash — told me different," he said, breaking the brief silence and walking to a table, keeping the leash tight. He pulled out a chair and sat down, feeling the past days settle on his body. Quaint, he decided, was optimistic. The dog followed him, not having a choice in the matter, circled five times and flopped on the floor. A new item for the list: Great Danes are as lazy as they are big. He made himself as comfortable as he could in the wooden chair and considered all the asses before his it

too must have berthed away from the eddying waters of life outside, and if any of them had had a dog of a problem like he did now. And if theirs had been this big.

“You know the sheriff,” the bartender announced. “Did he mention the pet fee?”

The other men laughed. Jack Stern nodded. After sitting all day in his Miata, it felt good to stretch his legs. If this box of a bar was good for anything, and he hoped it was good for at least two things, it was a moment’s rest. He aimed to enjoy it while waiting for Amash to arrive and explain what the hell he was doing here.

All he got was a moment.

3

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

“Now if that ain’t the biggest bitch you ever saw.”

Jack Stern’s ass had just hit the seat. The comment came from the bar. The big one, Jack Stern guessed, with a work bag coddled between his legs. The dog’s ear perked. Always the left first he noticed, wondering if animals had handedness like humans and if that extended to their ears. He stretched his left leg and set it upon the dog’s back, feeling the muscles tighten beneath his calf and through his stiff jeans. The dog had heard the man, and Jack Stern worried it would soon vindicate his addition of the first item on his dog list: hates the word ‘bitch.’

The dog shuffled its limbs, preparing to stand. “Shit,” he muttered, leaning forward to put more of his weight on the spine of the animal. It turned onto its legs anyways, sending his boot thudding to the floor. He

remembered the leash, grabbed it, coiled it around his palm, and felt it tighten like a bad handshake. The dog yanked him to his feet. The three men laughed. Jack Stern found himself being pulled through a maze of table legs and chair backs, closer to the blossoming laughter. He tightened his grip on the leash, trying to arrest the dog's momentum, as his chair receded from view. "No, stop!" he said, stupidly. *Isn't that how dogs work*, he asked himself. The leash went slack in his hand. The dog stood a length away from the three men, its head level with their bent knees.

"Whoa, look-it this thing," the third and smallest one said. Near him was an overturned and greasy baseball cap. "Big enough to take dancing, Lawson. Maybe she won't say no!"

"Big enough to play poker, like that picture," the biggest said. He leaned sideways. "Yeah, it's a she," he added, disgusted at his speculation becoming fact. It was the same voice as the one who had called the dog a bitch. The man was short,

but stout. He had a beer bottle of a body that tapered to a pugilistic head defined by squinting eyes and a broad, stubbled jaw that looked like a handhold for a rock climber.

“You’d still lose,” the third joked.

“Naw,” the big one said, laughing.

“What picture?” asked the second, who looked like someone who doggy-paddled through most conversations. “Maybe it wants a drink. You serve dogs here, huh?”

“I serve you three all the time,” the bartender said mid-pour, topping off the big man’s glass.

“To us dogs, then,” said the biggest, raising his glass into the air.

The second hastily followed suit, spilling some onto his hand. He licked it off. “Wait, wait, wait,” the licker said, just as the other two brought their glasses to their lips. “To Lawson, the bulldog. To Ed, the lab. And to me, the cattle dog! To us dogs!” It took a few seconds of contemplation, but all three cheered and drank. The three of them shared their moment while never taking their gaze from the real dog, who reciprocated with

sunken and unblinking eyes.

“This shit is good tonight! Real smooth,” Ed said. He pulled a wallet from his hat and gave Lawson, the bulldog, ten dollars.

“We’re getting the vee-eye-pee treatment! Buying a whole bottle, huh.”

“Cattle dog is a stretch, Jimmy,” the bartender told the second one, the man who had made the toast. “Last I heard, you’re still working the fences and hay.”

Jimmy shook his head, then raised his glass again. “And to George, the poodle!”

Jack Stern didn’t know these four men, but being called a poodle would rile most anyone. The bartender remained unriled, however, and leaned forward to reveal an open palm. “Pay up, bulldog,” he said. The others laughed. Lawson gave him the ten dollars. “See, it’s that easy.” The bartender then turned his attention to Jack Stern and the dog that was still on its haunches, watching and alert. “I was just joking about the pet fee, mister. Looks friendly. She just wanted to say hello, huh?”

“To most,” Jack Stern answered. His past

hours with the dog had been easy. It had been asleep — *tranquilized, but what's the difference* — with its head against the seat rest. It had not moved save for when the wind would catch the dog's cavernous mouth and inflate its features to balloon-like proportions, teeth bared, and cheeks flapping. Gravity had settled the creature lower and lower into the passenger seat until its body resembled less a dog and more a gordian knot of legs, paws, tail, and a heavy head that leaked drool. The creature, for being so large, had curled in upon itself so remarkably that Jack Stern had felt compelled to add it to his list. Now, as the dog stared at the men, he amended his third item from ‘not as big as they look’ to ‘can be bigger and smaller than they look.’ He further anchored his legs, wondering if he hadn’t made a mistake by omitting the word ‘dangerous’ from his list. *Maybe it only likes women*, he thought, remembering his parking lot encounter. He leveraged the leash around his elbow even though the dog had not moved.

“What does she want? Food, water, beer? All of the above?” the bartender asked.

“Start a tab for it!” Lawson jeered.

“I think,” Jack Stern said, pausing as those irrevocable bits that made him *him* conjured a smirk. “I think she wants to know.”

“Know what?” asked Ed.

“Did your friend mean the pejorative or literal?” Of the five men, four knew the word pejorative, and the four that did all knew the one who didn’t. His question was perhaps a mistake, born from his exhaustion and impatience. He pulled on the leash.

“Heel,” he guessed. It didn’t work.

“It wasn’t very nice,” the bartender agreed, disappearing beneath the bar, then reappearing with a bowl. He was pushing his angle of barroom camaraderie. Jack Stern nodded a thanks.

“What wasn’t?” Jimmy asked.

Ed opened his mouth and Jack Stern knew he had made a mistake not defusing the situation. “When Lawson here called her a bitc—” The dog barked, it was deafening

in the small bar. Jack Stern felt the leash yank like a strike on a fishing line. It snapped taut, but his grasp held firm. He pulled hard on the leash with his right hand and grabbed towards the nape with his left. It was a big dog and there was a lot of fur, but he missed. He retreated to yanking back the leash with both hands.

“A bitch,” the man called Lawson finished.

The dog lunged. Jack Stern muscled backwards on the leash and halted the dog’s momentum. Lawson raised his knees. The dog stood on its hind feet, head-to-head with the man, and barked again. It sounded like a gunshot. Jack Stern’s ears began ringing, and the walls ricocheted the outrageous woof back at him and then back at him again. He pulled harder. The dog staggered backwards, spun, and settled on all four paws. Its sunken eyes were now watching him, but Jack Stern saw no meanness behind them. “It really doesn’t like that word,” he said, tentatively testing the leash. The dog relinquished its fight,

dropping its head. He could see the men at the bar consider, reconsider, and then accept the idea. He dragged the sulking dog back to his table confident he wouldn't be hearing the word again tonight.

“It’s a dog. And she’s a she, ain’t she?” Lawson asked, his knees now safely dangling. He picked his ear with his pinky finger. “God damn, that’s loud.”

“Damn thing’s more horse than dog,” Ed joked, half shouting.

“You’re going to have to take that thing outside,” George said, watching Jack Stern loop the leash around the table’s legs. “I don’t care if you know the sheriff.”

“We all saw it. That man picked a fight,” Jack Stern argued. Now that he had found a place to sit and drink, he wasn’t going to leave before taking full advantage of both. He sat in his seat.

“A bit different,” Jimmy said.

“Yeah,” Ed agreed.

“Does this cover the dog fee?” Jack Stern asked, holding two twenty-dollar bills. “It can go to their bottle too, but can you bring

me a drink along with that bowl of water you started?” Seeing the bartender hesitate, he added another twenty, doubling the cost of the Glenfuller’s whiskey they were drinking had he just bought it at a store.

“Leave the dog alone, Lawson, and it’ll leave you alone,” the bartender said, filling the bowl with water, his decision made. “I mean, don’t piss it off on purpose. Not until you settle all debts outstanding and owed to me first.”

Lawson turned his torso towards the bartender. “Enough with the damn tab! You nag worse than a wife. I gave you ten dollars just now. How many times—”

“I took ten dollars,” the bartender clarified. He set the filled bowl on the counter. “Give the dog the bowl.”

Lawson scowled. “Like hell I will.”

“Don’t piss things off on purpose,” the bartender repeated. “Me included. Or your credit is as good as done.”

“Easy to say behind the counter, George,” Ed commented. “You sure about this historical thing anyways? Yours is yours

but I was talking to Jackie and..." He saw the bartender's expression and stopped talking.

"It's a dog, George! You can't pick fights with a dog," Lawson persisted.

"Say it again, then," George teased.

"You know it's been a bad year at Hendriks' place," Jimmy said. "It feels a bit off, right? It ain't tradition! We've been coming here for years. We drink when times are bad, and we pay when they're good. That's just life. Hell, we tip you well enough. You know we're good for it. You're the meanest bartender in town, Georgie!"

Jack Stern had settled back at his table with the dog, seemingly relaxed, next to him. His leash-free hand roamed the table to search for a whiskey glass that wasn't there. He would grab the drink himself but didn't want to disturb the docile dog now stretched out upon the floor, its head resting between two parallel and outstretched legs.

"Letting it get to months — almost a year — ain't right!" the bartender argued. "I

should add on interest. It wasn't so bad, was it Ed?"

"I think you did add interest!" whined Ed.

"No, you just drink a lot. Look at it this way. Once those tourists come — and they will, before we know it — I can be more accommodating. Locals only pricing for one," George teased.

Lawson took a long and lingering sip of his whiskey. "When you're right, you're right. We'll work something out. But I ain't moving from my chair for that thing. Not my chicken, not my farm. You know how it goes."

George took the win. "I am right. And we'll work something out. Like you paying what you owe, not a dollar less or more."

"Just made a ten-dollar dent!" Lawson said.

The bartender passed through the bar's divide carrying the filled water bowl. "And you know what else I'm right about? Everyone who comes in here is thirsty." He placed the water bowl on the ground and

disappeared Jack Stern's wad of sixty dollars into his pocket. He made a show of wiping down the table with a red rag and let a black cocktail napkin flutter to its pitted surface. Loud slurping noises emanated from below and boyish snickering from the bar. The dog was enjoying its water as much as the men were the bartender's ostentatious show for the out-of-towner. Jack Stern pulled the napkin closer to him. He didn't mind being on stage if it meant he was one step closer to a drink.

“See, thirsty. She is big. Great Dane, I’m guessing.” the bartender said, to which Jack Stern nodded. “Seems friendly enough. We welcome all kinds and have had all kinds at Bluffman’s. Oldest building in—”

“Oh, give it a rest! He ain’t on the committee,” said one of the three bodies at the bar. It sounded like Ed, but Jack Stern wasn’t paying much attention. Instead, he was wondering what percentage of water the dog succeeded in lapping into its mouth versus spilling on the floor. Was food the same? How did evolution ever produce such

an inefficient creature? *I probably need to feed it soon*, he realized.

“I bet you haven’t even writ ‘em yet, have you?” The bartender asked, spinning to face the bar. “I tell you, those judges want words from customers. They eat ‘em up. You might even get published! It’s part of the game. Think of it as a love letter to the bar. We can even talk about your tabs some, in exchange.” Laughing, George left his patrons to ponder the idea, taking his conspiratorial and squinty-eyed look with him. He turned to Jack Stern. “You look thirsty, too.”

“And how much is one letter worth for our tabs?” Lawson asked from the bar. “Half off?”

Near Lawson the bottle of Glenfuller’s beckoned, its golden contents a glowing elixir in the bar’s dim light. Jack Stern noticed it was still not yet half empty. It was time to find out if the bar had that second thing. “What you’re already pouring,” he said, hoping the camaraderie would expedite a glass appearing in front of him.

“You got it.”

Jack Stern glanced at the door, wondering where the hell Amash was. “What committee?” he asked absently.

“Don’t,” Lawson complained from the bar. “Just don’t.”

The bartender, now back behind the bar, grabbed the bottom of the bottle, but Lawson had his fist around the neck of it. “He just helped you buy it,” George explained. Lawson’s fingers tightened around the bottle’s neck. “I’ve had occasion to raise my prices of late. Would hate for it to happen again,” George threatened.

Jimmy chimed in, raising his glass. “And those prices will be missed!” He drank. “Come on, Lawson, we can always buy another.”

Lawson held fast. He glanced at Jack Stern. “Whiskey drinker, are you?”

“As much as anyone,” Jack Stern answered, unsure if this was him being treated as a local or stranger. He held up two horizontal fingers. He glanced at the door again, willing Amash to appear and amusing

himself at the idea of a barroom brawl. The man had ideas, not entirely unfounded, about Jack Stern bringing trouble with him wherever he went. Amash had once accused him of going through life with a devil on each shoulder, and Jack Stern felt the weight of them now.

“Whiskey’s whiskey,” Lawson said, letting go of the bottle.

George grabbed it, a snifter glass, and walked to where Jack Stern sat. He poured a generous serving, keeping his eyes on Lawson the entire time. George snickered as the liquid touched the rim of the glass and then added a modest portion to the second glass. “In case the sheriff’s drinking whiskey tonight.”

“Last I checked, he’s more a beer man,” Jack Stern said. No one said anything. *Fuck it.* “To dogs,” he said, echoing the earlier toast. All four men looked at him. He ignored them. He wasn’t going to wait. He brought the glass to his lips. It was delicious.

“To dogs!” someone echoed. “Big dogs!”
“Dogs playing poker!”

“Drinks lost and found!”

“To Bluffman’s!” the bartender added, ushering the camaraderie forward sans drink.

The three men took their sips and Jack Stern his second, then third, then fourth. The whiskey tasted as good as the day felt long and tonight it was far better than it should have been. A fifth sip; aches faded as his body absorbed the liquid warmth. The bar turned silent as a church. The men it harbored felt not young but younger, and it was enough that each dared not to speak lest they interrupt the drink as it furthered its palliative course through heavy limbs and creaking joints.

Jack Stern opened his eyes, put down his glass, and checked his phone. No new messages or voicemails but it still had no service. *Shit*, he thought. He remembered, however, that it had picked up the annoying review prompt in the parking lot. *Maybe one of their trucks acts as an antenna*, he joked to himself, wondering if he wasn’t just being paranoid. Putting the phone back in his pocket, Jack Stern felt his age again, aches

returning. He knew there would be hell to pay, but he hoped to pay it a little later. Cartier could wait. Amiese, he figured, had little choice but to wait. The man should be clueless as to Jack Stern's current location. He sipped from his glass again. *They can wait*, he convinced himself. *They can all wait.*

Except for the man named Lawson at the bar. Jack Stern heard him stand, kick his work bag aside, and dig the heel of his boot against the wall. He looked as if he had not a care in the world, resting his elbow on the bar behind him, and Jack Stern believed it. Lawson's hefty but muscular paunch, secured by a wide leather belt, was bracketed by the less burly backs of his two friends now chatting with the bartender. "How is it?" Lawson asked Jack Stern.

The man was trying too hard to keep his territorial posture nonchalant. "Good," Jack Stern answered, wondering, but not worried, if his toast had had the opposite effect of what he intended.

"Kentucky whiskey."

"I really wouldn't know," Jack Stern

replied. The man held his stare. It was aggressive and annoying even though whiskey softened the hit. “But thanks,” he added, wanting the man named Lawson to join his friends’ conversation with the bartender.

The dog barked, stood, and knocked over the water bowl. It was staring at the door. Jack Stern secured the leash in his hand knowing the dog could easily drag the table if it needed to. The others in the bar followed the dog’s gaze as the door to the bar opened. Amash’s figure cut a blurry silhouette against the dim moonlight outside.

“Of course,” Jack Stern said.

The sheriff walked forward, nodding at each of the three men at the bar. “Thanks for coming, fellas. You too, George. I’m sorry to inconvenience you like this, but it’s for your own good!”

“I don’t mind helping you provided you help me. How about that paperwork?” George asked.

“Maybe tonight. Likely tonight. Let’s say tomorrow!” Amash said. “Everything’s on

my desk and the ink's wet.”

“Whatever you say, sheriff, so long as you don't put it off until you no longer work for this town.”

“I appreciate you saying the town, and not ‘us’ there. Can’t be too entitled these days,” Amash answered. He whistled his way to Jack Stern’s table and sat. “Couldn’t see your Miata behind the truck, thought you missed my favorite bar in town. It’s the only bar in town,” he clarified.

“Miata?” Lawson chuckled.

“Real cozy,” Jimmy said. “I wouldn’t even fit!”

“But then I remembered Jack Stern’s eye don’t miss much,” Amash said. He paused, adjusted his empty holster, and sat in the chair opposite. “And if it did, his nose would smell the whiskey from miles away and lead him home. You booze hound.”

Jimmy laughed, happy to assign another dog breed to another person for a future toast and Jack Stern resolved to not give Jimmy the chance. He handed the sheriff his drink. “Courtesy of the bartender.”

“Courtesy of you,” the bartender corrected.

“Good boy,” Amash replied, taking the drink. “More a beer guy, but sometimes the week calls for the good stuff.” He compared his modest pour to the one in Jack Stern’s glass. “Thirsty tonight, are you? Where’s Jackie?”

“Going for a piss,” Ed said.

“Another walkabout,” Jimmy added.

“Out back,” George contributed.

“No surprise there. Hope she didn’t muddle our clues, but I s’pose it doesn’t matter,” Amash said. He extended his open hand to the dog. “You just needed room to stretch, huh?” The dog sniffed the weathered palm and Amash returned his drink, a fraction shallower, to the table. “A bit strong for me tonight, but if that’s not smooth, then I’m not the sheriff.” He leaned forward and dug his wizened knuckles into the dog’s fur.

“I can get you a beer if you’d prefer,” George said. He watched Amash pet the dog and decided it was no less friendly than anyone else here tonight.

“Let me finish this one first,” Amash answered. He turned to Jack Stern. “I don’t see any tags on the collar, lucky I don’t know the city’s code better. Vaccinations and what not.” His fingers moved behind the droopy ears.

Jack Stern didn’t know who was enjoying this more, Amash or the dog. He flipped an imaginary coin in his left hand, clapping it against the wrist of his right. Heads, Amash. “Dog person, Amash?”

Amash ignored him. “That’s a big collar, I’ve never seen one like this, but she’s a big dog.” He tugged on the collar. “A little too tight, I’d say.”

“Sheriff, that dog just attacked Lawson,” Ed said.

“It did. Lawson called it a—” Jimmy started, before Ed smacked his shoulder. “Right. He called it a *bee i tee cee aitch*. And it walked up right to him.”

“It did,” George agreed.

“And lunged at me!” Lawson finished.

Amash was still petting the animal. “This dog? This sweet thing? Is it true Jack Stern?

Where'd you find this thing?"

"It ain't a sweet thing, sheriff. That's what we're trying to say," Ed pleaded.

Jack Stern spoke. "We've been through this. That man, Lawson, started it. The dog has been trained to react with hostility when it hears that word, I think." Seeing Amash's skepticism, he added, "I wouldn't call my bluff. I'm staying unless the bartender will provide me with a refund."

"Okay. You're not joking," Amash decided, after studying Jack Stern's face. He looked at the bar and the people gathered by it. "The way I see it, gentlemen, no one says a particular word, and no one gets lunged at. Easy. Applies to humans as much as it applies to dogs!"

"I agree with the sheriff. Watch your cursing," George said, settling the matter.

"Heard you already found the whiskey," Jack Stern ventured, changing the topic. He recalled both what the woman, whose name he now knew to be Jackie, had said in the parking lot as well as the previous toast.

"Maybe I can be on my way soon. We'll call

it a favor repaid in full.”

He was joking, but Amash took it the wrong way. He stopped petting the dog, which opened its eyes wide with wonder at the curse that had befallen its world. “You might remember some retirement plans of mine going up in smoke. You see fellas, Jack Stern here doesn’t have time for anyone but himself. Now—”

“You forgot to switch the bags,” Jack Stern interrupted. The countless election signs he had seen littered across front lawns and roadways came to mind again. He wondered how Amash had so wasted his money as to make a small-town sheriff’s salary so vital. *It probably is less about the money and more about Amash’s pride*, he speculated. The man tended to be more abstract. Feelings were his compass to the world. To Jack Stern, they were merely things that got in the way when something needed to be done. He gave the dog a glance.

“Who buys two bags that look the same!” Amash exclaimed. “They didn’t know what

they were looking for! I still remember the smell and that—” he took a heavy breath “—that damn song. Now, I don’t need this job, but I’ve earned it. And if you can help me keep earning it, Jack Stern, by solving a simple case of missing booze, then I swear by all the whiskey in this world that I’ll see to it that you do. Make no mistake, if there weren’t a reelection around the corner, I would not have called you.”

“But you did.”

“Y’all go back,” Ed said. Jack Stern and Amash remembered their audience, all four of which were rooting for the conversation to cross the border from friendly quipping into bickering and beyond. If they were going to be here on a Monday night, it might as well be an entertaining one.

“What was in the bags?” Ed asked, giving the discussion a push in the back towards the bickering and beyond.

“Money or drugs, I bet,” Lawson said. “Wait. Is he that fella you tell us about, the guy who—”

“Kicks ass and likes his privacy?” Jack

Stern finished for him.

Amash leveled a gaze at Jack Stern then stood, theatrically holding an envelope for all to see, a giant stop sign for everyone in the bar. He flourished it like a magician. The earlier tension vanished. Even Lawson closed his mouth and relaxed his posture. “It’s no longer a missing persons case.”

“You found them!” Ed exclaimed.

“Dead?” Jimmy piped.

“My whiskey?” George asked.

Jack Stern glowered. His whiskey glass hit the table harder than he intended and a small amount splashed to the ground near the dog’s feet. Its nose immediately began a thorough investigation of the droplets.

“Missing persons, Amash? You said whiskey. Drinks. Bottles. Booze. Spirits. I don’t have time for something like this!” Lawson’s laughter filled the bar. “Dammit!” Jack Stern said. He retreated to his glass, annoyed at his own brash foolishness.

Amash shook his head. “What? No.” He looked at the dog slurping the small spill. “Is that dog old enough to drink? How do dog-

years translate again? Never been the best at math. Seven? Eleven? You still owe me a dog story!”

“Tear another damn page, sheriff,” Jack Stern said, hoping Amash would get the hint. Everyone diverted their gaze to the dog. It had laid down near where the whiskey had spilled and was trying to tease out any that had escaped into the wood grain. Danes are dumb, Jack Stern decided, adding it to the list, number eight. He was learning more about his—well, *what is it*, he asked himself, *a hostage or captive? A bargaining chip?* He ran his hand down the front of his face, digging his thumb and middle finger into the corners of his eyes, massaging them. Amash had told him once that people did it because it slowed their heart rate, calming them, something about a nerve.

“You know why people do that? It’s because of a nerve called—” Amash began.

“Shut up,” Jack Stern said, rubbing harder.

“All that water on the floor and it tries for the whiskey. Good girl! You know,

there's more blood and drink in these floors than—" the bartender paused, playing with a red rag "—wood?" he finished lamely.

"Blood?" Jack Stern asked, before realizing he didn't care.

Amash stopped the bartender before he began what, based on the man's deep intake of air, hinted to be a long anecdote. If there was a chance for a story to be told, then Amash would do his best to be the one telling it. He'd usurp the opportunity from anyone. Even, Jack Stern remembered, a poet laureate. "According to myth—" Amash began.

"Fact," the bartender interjected.

"To myth," Amash asserted. "This bar was the scene of many fights. Some of them quite important 'round here. Picture the Hatfield and McCoy feud, but add gallons more blood and spite. See those red dish cloths? Legend says they soaked up so much blood they became permanently dyed red. Around here, there are a few that keep a rag in a shoebox, thinking their Pappy's blood is on it. No different than a medal." Amash

looked at George and grinned. “Or so some purport.”

“The women got tired of all the laundry. All that blood,” Ed agreed.

Amash stared at Jack Stern with a gleeful expression on his face. *No wonder he likes it here*, Jack Stern realized.

“You could catch a fish with a blood-soaked fly, so much of it went into the river,” Jimmy added.

“Has good taste,” Lawson said, then grunted. He was looking at the dog still trying to lick its way through the porous, whiskey-wetted wood.

Jack Stern supposed he and Lawson shared the same thought, rather their tongue than the dog’s, but rather a dog’s tongue than wasted on the floor. He had another sip from his drink, bringing the snifter’s volume to a somewhat more modest but still full level, and tried to remember the last time he had tasted Glenfuller’s. “I don’t disagree,” Jack Stern said, wondering if ‘likes whiskey’ should make his growing list. *Why not?* Added, but with an asterisk.

“Fellas,” Amash said, raising the envelope higher. “As I was saying, we’ve found some evidence. And if Jack Stern can decipher the metaphor, I’ll say that it is as we thought, a case of negligent homicide.” The dog hiccupped. Drool had puddled around its still outstretched tongue deep enough that an air bubble travelled and then popped. The bartender grabbed one of the red rags that pervaded the bar and soaked it. Amash, unperturbed by another hiccup from the dog interrupting him, continued talking. “Jill called me earlier this morning. She was fishing her spot and I quote, ‘wasted a glance at a shimmer.’”

“Don’t sound like Jill,” George said.
“I left out the curses and sexual metaphors.”

“Ah,” came a chorus from the bar.
“Did she say what lure she was using?
Any fish on the chains?” Lawson asked.
“Was she in a good mood?”

“Jill was her usual upbeat and profane self,” Amash confirmed.

Lawson laughed. “She had a good day

then. Bet she was using my lure. I made her that goldtie fly last week. Had to drop it off with her, it's why I was late to the town meeting. Say George, would flies count towards my tab?"

"No," the bartender replied. "But maybe we can sell them in the bar and split the proceeds." He threw the damp rag at Jack Stern. It landed on the table. "When you get a chance," he said, nodding towards the dog and its drool puddle.

"She was on her favorite rock," Lawson surmised.

"Like I said, her spot," Amash said. "Listen, I admit to not looking real hard, because what are the chances, but—" Amash pulled a stack of photos from the envelope and grinned "—shall we commemorate the dead?"